

ID #13

Dagny McKinley  
Ginger Gehres, "Pawtrait of a Black Bear"



### 1<sup>st</sup> Prize Award

Ma held Benson's hand as they walked to school. The other kids had gone ahead because Benson, as usual, had lost one shoe. Ma smelled death before she saw it. The sole of the bear was still, a pebble wedged under one long black claw. The eyes, wide open, stared beyond this world.

Ma's stomach grumbled. They hadn't had fresh meat for, well, Ma had lost count how long it had been.

"C'mon Ma, I ain't never seen a bear up close before," said Benson.

"Depending on whether or not the maggots got to it, we might have a good supper tonight."

Benson slipped his hand into Ma's and pulled her over to the bear. Benson bent down, touched the tip of one claw ready to run if the bear moved.

"He's dead," Ma said.

"How'dya know for sure?"

"Let's roll him off the road then you can look at him. Pa don't need no more trouble about us poaching meat."

Benson got to one side of the bear and helped Ma roll him over into the ditch and then into the bushes.

"Are we going to get in trouble?"

"Not if no one sees us."

Despite the smell, Benson pushed his fingers into the thick fur of the bear before tenderly resting his hand against the bear's leathery sole, his hand no more than a quarter the size of the bear's.

"What happened?"

"Car must have hit him. Hopefully his bleedin ain't ruined the meat." Ma flipped open the knife she carried everywhere with her.

"Hold his leg open," Ma directed. Benson struggled with the weight but didn't give up. Ma started skinning the animal.

"Do you think it hurt?"

"Shhhh," scolded Ma.

Gravel crunched as a car approached, slowed down then pulled over.

"Shit," said Ma. There was blood on her hands and no denyin' what she was doin'.

Sheriff Brown rolled down his passenger side window.

"Aren't you two supposed to be in school?"

Benson scooted behind Ma.

"Yes, sir," said Ma as confidently as she could holding her hands behind her back.

"You know it's illegal to harvest meat from road kill?"

"We're hungry and he's dead."

The sheriff sized Ma up. "Watch you're tongue, Eleanor. I know it's been a long winter. The truck's coming to pick up this bear soon so you and your brother better hurry. Then get to school. I'll be checking."

Ma nodded.

"I find out you've been killing animals out of season and I have to fine you," said the sheriff as he turned back onto the road. As soon as he was gone, Ma got back to cutting out enough meat to feed the family. If she made a stew, she could stretch the broth for some time.

"Benson, get over here. We gotta hurry."

Benson reluctantly returned to Ma's side. "Do you think it hurt?"

"Did what hurt?" asked Ma not looking up.

"When the bear got hit?"

"Why are you asking? Here, wrap this up good," said Ma handing Benson the bear's heart and the cloth she had wrapped a couple of biscuits in for their lunch.

"Does death always hurt?"

"How'm I supposed to know? Probly depends on how you die."

"Do you think dying hurt Momma?"

Ma sat back on her heels and looked at Benson. She opened her arm to let his small body curl up next to her.

"Momma died quick. She weren't alive enough long enough to feel anything. Her heart stopped and she was gone. It was just us left with a lot of hurt."

"I miss her," said Benson, his voice cracking. He hadn't cried once since Momma died. There was no time to cry when you had to survive.

"Do you want to say a prayer for this bear?"

Benson placed one hand on the bear's side.

"Ma?"

"Yeah?"

"I know it ain't fair you got to be my Ma now, but I'm glad it's you even if you are my really just my sister."

"Close your eyes now."

"How old was Momma?"

"Twenty seven."

"How old are you?"

"I guess I'm nine now. Close your eyes."

Benson did. Ma's hand was warm, the blood sticky between them.

"Bear, thank you for your life so we might eat. We won't forget you."

A tear rolled down Benson's cheek.s "I won't forget you, Momma, I promise."