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The Bear Chased Us. Then We Chased the Bear.

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The bear chased us. Then we chased the bear.

I was 7. Brent, 9. The bear's age, unknown.

The two of us, behind my house, running from the bear, then at it.

That we chose to chase a black bear is confusing, its weight several times that of mine and Brent's combined, the length of its claws shorter than the sticks we were holding, yet somehow more menacing.

But we did. We chased it. Not for long. But for long enough to convey that eating us would be a chore.

To be fair, this sort of thing wasn't outside of my character.

At 4, I begged my father to take off my life jacket at the pool even though I didn't know how to swim, then I ran away at full speed and dove into the deep end.

At 5, I begged my father to let me push our shopping cart at Zellers, then I ran away with it at full speed and smashed it into a glass cabinet full of cameras.

At 6, I begged my parents to let me go bicycling on my own, then I rode as fast as I could and crashed so badly that my head, face and limbs were covered in blood. An old man stopped his car and took my bloodied body to my home. When I regained consciousness, I found myself sitting on the couch in our living room, facing the window, wailing at full volume, with my mother tending to me on my left and Brent's mother, Mary, tending to me on my right.

Time and again, I threw caution to the wind. But I rarely did so with Brent (chases of black bears notwithstanding).

Though just two years my senior, he was, in many ways, my protector. The only person I trusted and felt safe with. A true friend.

When I got sick and couldn't go out to play, he was the one who acted like a clown on my lawn, making faces and falling down to get me to laugh and lift my spirits.

When I saw a bottle of beer in his refrigerator and asked for a sip, he was the one who reminded me that my family didn't drink, then called for my mother, who appeared at his door seemingly out of thin air and yelled at me to come home.

When I fell flat on my back from high in a tree, he was the one who knelt by my side as I regained my wind, allowing me time to marvel at the plywood haphazardly strewn on the branches above, that, somehow, had lacked the structural integrity to keep me aloft.

Though he, too, was only a child, he was there for me, no matter the circumstance.

And my mother credits Ron.

Brent and his mother, Mary, had lived with Mary's parents in Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia before becoming our neighbors. This was in the early 1980s when Brent was a toddler and Mary was a single mother in her 20s. Her friends, in an effort to set her up, had convinced her to attend a singles dance in the Valley. That's where she met Ron. They hit it off, fell in love and moved to Lower Sackville, next door to us, where Ron worked construction and Mary was a nurse.

Ron was a good role model for Brent. He was strict, gave Brent responsibilities and spent quality time with him. They went fishing, off-roading and snowmobiling together, and Brent always pitched in and helped out whenever Ron removed the roof panels from his T-Top Trans Am.

And as Ron was generous with Brent, so, too, was their family generous with us.

When Ron and Mary had a barbecue, my parents were invited. When Ron and Brent watched “Revenge of the Ninja,” I joined them, too. When Brent’s family had dinner, I was welcomed to stay — gushing to my mother after one meal that I had just eaten the “best food ever made” — only for Mary to explain to my mother that the “dish” she had served was a box of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese with slices of boiled hot dogs, confirming forever I was a child with great taste.

Over and over, Brent and his family were warm, neighborly and genuine. And that mattered. Especially for us, a family of immigrants settling into our first home and hoping for the best.

The houses around us in our suburb of Halifax were small, single-story bungalows filled with young couples and single parents who couldn’t afford a house in Cavalier, the “nice” part of Lower Sackville. To Ron and Mary’s right was Joyce, a foster mother whose husband worked in security. To our left was Maureen, a single mother who worked in an office. Across the street was Shelley, an office worker at the hospital, and Brian, a government employee who looked forward to snow days because he got paid time and a half to plow trails and paths.

But the one characteristic all of our neighbors shared, without exception, was skin color. White. Different shades, sure — some pale, some paler — but the overwhelming impression was that of uniformity.

And we three, my parents and I, were the exception. The ones who stood out. The ones everyone knew, even if we hadn’t previously met.

There was a reason, for example, that stranger — the old man who found me when I crashed my bike — was able to so quickly determine which house I belonged to. There was no uncertainty.

And although all of our neighbors were polite and kind, it's equally fair to say we weren't welcomed with open arms — the prevailing sentiment was never, "We're so happy you're brown!" This is something I became more aware of and attuned to as I grew older, as the agreeable tolerance people show toward children gave way to the slurs, and worse, they direct at preteens.

That was never an issue with Brent and his family. Our friendship with them was real. The interactions weren't forced. There was never a sense that they said one thing to our face and another behind our back.

And that may explain why Brent and I spent so much time together. He was the one person with whom I felt truly accepted.

We would walk to school together every morning and play on the same soccer teams. In the winter, we would grab our sleds and head to Dead Man's Corner. In the summer, we would hop on our bikes and disappear for hours, often returning home covered in mud. And every Halloween we would go trick-or-treating together, always making sure to visit the Trekkie couple on Grennan Drive first, lest they run out of full-size Oh Henry bars.

For me as a child, it was the best sort of friendship, with no conversations about race or differences entering the equation. None of the conversations that looked for and found me as I got older. None of the conversations I could ward off from others as long as I had Brent by my side. The two of us. Together.

And then he left, moving to Newfoundland in 1990.

Ron and Mary had married, Ron had adopted Brent, and Ron's hard work had led to better employment elsewhere.

A good outcome, to be sure. I was happy for my friend. But sad for myself.

And then, before he left, we encountered the bear.

It was autumn. We were in the greenbelt behind our homes, playing with sticks, a short distance from the path. There were leaves on the ground and a freshly felled tree.

And then, like magic, there was a black bear behind us. Some 20 feet away. Just staring in our direction.

We froze. Stared back.

Until it twitched and lurched forward.

And we started to run. As fast as we could. With the bear on our heels.

Onto the path, then up a small hill, until we reached the hill's peak and realized the bear had stopped running — no longer in chase. Tired, undoubtedly, from the bellyful of children it had already eaten. Leaving us on the peak and the bear down below with no clear advantage (save its size and strength and claws and instincts and head-to-toe general bear-ness).

So we stared at it again, and it stared at us. And then, in unison, we raised our sticks high, let out primal screams, and charged down the hill. Straight at the bear. As it turned and ran and disappeared into the woods. Leaving us as the victors. The sore-throated champs. The invincible duo.

For the bear had chased us, but we, too, had chased the bear.

As we had always done.

Warding it off.

With Brent by my side.

The two of us.

Together.