

Waking a bear

BY RYAN MILLAR

I awake in an irritable haze. Strange sounds pop and crackle in my ears, and light and pain spasm behind my eyes. My guts are a mess. I struggle for a moment to open my eyes, but can't – my eyelids are glued shut with crust. Heroically I push them on.

Man, this hangover feels epic. I am exhausted. And dizzy. And hungry. As I stretch I feel an overwhelming craving for salmon. Or rabbit. Or berries. Wha- where am I? This isn't my bedroom! This isn't my bed! These aren't my furry arms, or my beclawed hands – Oh shit, I think, I'm a monster. Some sort of man-beast! Maybe a werewolf. Maybe it's a full moon!

Nope. That's not it. It's daytime. I lumber to my feet in a panic, and, there, on all four legs, it hits me: I'm a bear. A fucking bear! Fuck! Panic hits me like a brick in the nose.

My second thought is upbeat. This is awesome! This is totally bad-ass! Images of me rampaging through the streets of Baltimore flash through my mind – no line-ups, no jostling on the sidewalks. The next instant a rush of conflicting ideas crowd my hungover, bear-like brain.

Desperate for something to keep me from puking, I focus on my surroundings. I realize: this isn't my room, or a park bench or some sort of woodland; I'm in the bear habitat at the Baltimore Zoo! It was just last Sunday I took my nephew here. That was a good day. He really liked the monkeys. Usually he cries at least once when we spend the day together, but not Sunday. Shit, that was just what, well last night was highball night – Wednesday... so, three days ago. I hadn't been to the zoo in years, and then all of a sudden – twice in one week. Once as a person and once as a fucking bear! What are the odds of that?

The zoo looks a lot different in first person, from the inside. I throw my head back and a huge roar blasts from my massive, muscular jaws.

Having emitted a pleasantly satisfying roar, I take a better look around my environment. I can clearly take stock of my situation: a cage. But a nice cage, much bigger than my apartment. Like a giant terrace. And hey! A pool! This is the big-time, I knew one day I'd have a place with a pool. I lumber out of the cave entrance and rub my belly on the artificial stump to the right of my cave opening. I believe the correct term is 'mouth', as in 'cave mouth', but at this point, who gives a fuck? I'm a bear.

As I twist my neck to look upwards I feel the strange sensation of all kinds of new different muscles at work. It doesn't affect me, but I do notice. I look at the sky. It is newspaper ink gray, as it is morning, and this is Baltimore. I guess I'm not hibernating. Do bears even do that anymore? Did they ever? Is it possible to sleep for months at a time? I hope so; I feel like a sack of shit.

Wait. Back up. What happened last night? Last thing I remember I'm buying a last round of shots at Madison's. Then there was me looking for a cab. Then nothing – blackout. Next thing I know I'm here. A bear.

Wait, what's 7 x 6? 42.

42!

I'm a bear that can do math. I'm going to be rich! The richest bear in all of the animal kingdom! If I could just get out of this cage.

Weeks have passed, and the novelty is wearing off. Actually it's worn off entirely I would say. In fact it wore off very shortly after that first morning, which I spent dividing my time between roaring, standing on my hind legs, and standing on my hind legs and roaring. I also did some simple multiplication but I've realized that novelty actually won't get me very far. This isn't the old

days of the travelling tinker and the snake oil salesman. Nobody is gathering behind the barn to watch a bear do math. Which is total bullshit: I actually think I'm quicker with my times tables as a bear than I was as a human. Explain that to me, science.

But I bet people would want to see that. And even study me, smarter as a bear than I was as a human. But I would need to market myself. And that'd be tough. A bear doing math is much easier to wrap a mind around than a self-promoting bear trying to promote said math skills.

Since then I've been sleeping more and more and growing listless and irritable. I imagine that part of the irritability is a naturally-occurring part of my new-found bear disposition. But part of it is definitely all those tests they've been doing. Usually they knock me out, but the weird thing is, when they do that I can still hear them. As if my consciousness is floating around, even while I sleep. To make matters even more bizarre, I can't understand what they're saying. It's like watching a foreign movie without subtitles. Based on my sleeptime out-of-bear exam observations they're fairly concerned about me. Well, zoo staff, that makes it unanimous. I haven't been this concerned about me since Mathilda broke up with me and I got so drunk at Dave Tanner's party that I pissed myself in the basement.

That was a long time ago – I was 17, I'm 28 now. I don't know what that is in bear years, or even if such a thing as bear years even exists.

Surprisingly, being a bear hasn't caused me nearly the amount of duress and angst you might expect. In fact, I feel I'm being pretty Zen about the whole thing. Taking it in stride and on the chin. Sure I miss my friends, but I don't miss work. Sure I wonder how the Orioles are doing, but I think I can guess, and so maybe its better I don't know. Wow. I'm so sage. I've grown up a lot. I'm like a philosopher, an animal Buddha.

Things have settled into a pretty sweet pattern here. This is a typical day for me:

Get up. Lay around. Eat some berries and dig in the dirt. Trainer gives me a salmon. I eat it head and all. I used to be a pretty big sushi fan, so not much has changed there. Except for the head and bones, I suppose. Sometimes it's a dead rabbit or something. I used to be squeamish about eating rabbit. Ever since my mother tried to feed me some when I was little. No Bugs Bunny for me ma, I would say, crying.

Now I eat it all. Head, ears, fur, carrot... I'm a bear. I do bear things.

Well, shit's gotten really really crazy. I still can't understand what the zookeepers (or are they veterinarians or what) are talking about, but today I got the biggest insight into their concern. They seemed to be doing a mammogram. Or a sonogram, or echograph. An x-ray. I saw it. So here's the news: I'm pregnant.

That's weird, because when I was human, I was male. I mean obviously I'd already clicked to the fact that I had a bear vagina, but still. Oh, by the way, I have a vagina now.

I never had bear sex. And in fact, there's no other bear here in my habitat, which means... well, I don't know what it means.

The knowledge that I'm pregnant kind of freaks me out. As a guy in my 20s, my greatest fear was pregnancy. Of course I wasn't worried about getting pregnant myself, but on more than one occasion, I woke up next to a girl I only vaguely remembered going to bed with the night before, and wondered if I had really pulled out in time. Not the most responsible form of safe sex, but I had somehow emerged unscathed.

Or had I? Perhaps this pregnancy was some sort of karmic come-uppance. Like if you're a surly layabout who beats his kids, you might come back as some

defenceless animal that gets eaten by his mother. The thing is, I didn't die – and the fact that I became a bear is pretty great. The captivity part is not great, but the roaring and lumbering I like. I also like the lack of privacy a little bit. I mean this is as close as I'm ever going to get to being famous. I have families of paparazzi around during opening hours, and an around-the-clock entourage.

Perhaps I was such a wonderful human that I got to come back as a bear, instead of a turtle or insect. Only my burden to “bear” (ha!) is this pregnancy thing. And the cage.

If I'm being completely honest, the drunken, anonymous one-night stands happened, maybe twice tops. It seems like an awful lot of trouble for the universe to go through to concoct this fucked-up bear pregnancy thing on the basis of a couple drunken mistakes.

Hey! New thought: maybe I'm like the mother Mary of bears and this is like an immaculate conception. That would be awesome. If my cub is a bear Messiah, that'd be rad. I have no idea how that would play out, if all the other bears would flock to him, or if he'd be eventually persecuted by humans for some sort of bear uprising...

I don't know maybe it doesn't make sense, but who knows. I sure would be proud though, if that happened.

OK. Now I'm getting nervous. My belly's getting bigger, and I'm sleeping and eating a lot more. And worrying. Parenthood, right. Single mother? Me? Never would I have thought of that. But here it is. I can feel it happening.

So, I have a bear cub now. It's a lot of responsibility. I thought it would be more painful giving birth, but now that I'm a bear I figure I could chew my hindquarters off with only mild discomfort, so it wasn't that bad. Mentally I've named him Rex. Sometimes I think of him as Barry, because it makes me laugh – softly, inwardly and in a mothering way – but laugh nonetheless. It does nothing but increase my warmth, my pride, my sheer devotion to motherhood and my bear-son. In fact everything I do is in service to my child.

He's my flesh and blood. And now, there's no way I'd consider leaving, and going back to my old life as a human loser. I am more than a zoo denizen, I am mother of a whole other being, and that gives me reasons to live; I have much more reason to live here than I ever did out there, grinding my soul down working tech support, and getting drunk at a succession of cheap bars full of cheap humans. Sure I miss my nephew – but he was not my son. Barry is my son.

So now I know: what they say about maternal instinct is true. It comes naturally, no matter how unprepared you might be: for being a bear, for having a vagina, for giving birth to another bear and living in a zoo – it doesn't matter. Once the instinct kicks in, and once you learn to listen to that instinct, it just unfolds like the most natural thing in the world.

Also: what they say about getting between a mother bear and her cub is true. Don't. Do. It. I would fucking kill you. End your life without a thought. And then, afterwards, I would not be sorry. In fact, if your camera flash is annoying him, I may terrify the fuck out of you. But more than likely I would just turn him around and shepherd him through the mouth of the cave, into the pleasant darkness at the back, and we would take a nap. Just the two of us.