

Chapter 17

Blair Bear

It was Mother MacBear's idea that the bears from Glen Bear should stay at Blair Bear for the week that still remained before the day when the haiku contest would be decided. There was clearly not room for them at the Den, whereas there was lots of room - lots of rooms, in fact - at Blair Bear. Grizzelda could not quite remember how many bedrooms there were. She thought it might be forty-four.

But Grizzelda's first reaction to Mother MacBear's suggestion was to burst into tears. She had to explain what she had never told anyone: how the wallpaper was peeling, the roofs leaking, and the carpets threadbare.

Mother MacBear was very tactful. It is doubtful whether anyone else could have handled the situation as helpfully as she did. She talked to the bears from Glen Bear and she talked to Grizzelda and she talked to the bears again and she talked to Grizzelda again.

She was able to tell Grizzelda not only that the bears would not mind at all the state of the house, but also that they were fully expecting to pay for their lodgings in Bearloch.

At this Grizzelda burst into tears again. Now her distress was caused by the instincts of generations of Grizzlies, who had always thought hospitality their lordly duty. Much as she needed the money, it was painful to think that Blair Bear should have to take paying guests.

Mother MacBear's stroke of real genius came at this point. The bears from Glen Bear would not pay for their stay. But they had a week in Bearloch with nothing to do except perfecting their haiku. They could imagine nothing more fun to do to pass the time than to repair and redecorate Blair Bear.

It turned out that as well as being haiku addicts they were also all DIY enthusiasts. With a hundred and fourteen paws at work the job would be done before Grizzelda could even count the rooms.

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Blair Bear was as remarkable inside as it was out. The front door opened into a magnificent great hall with a huge fireplace. On its walls hung portraits of ancient Grizzlies marrying and dancing, feasting and feuding, tossing the caber and playing the pipes.

The rest of the house was a vast labyrinth in which even Grizzelda and Grizzlette sometimes nearly got lost. There were rooms Grizzelda had not entered for years, and even one mysterious turret she had never visited at all. She had been told about it but kept its secret to herself and declared it out of bounds to the bears.

But no other part of the house was neglected by the busy paws of the fifty-seven bears. They bought up all the paint and all the wallpaper, all the tiles and all the curtain material, all the linoleum and all the furniture polish in the shops in the village.

For four days they worked, laughing, chattering and singing all the time. Not since the great parties of Grizzelda's youth had the house been filled with so many happy people. "Jolly," she said from time to time. "What a hoot!"

As if the house were not enough, they also tackled the overgrown gardens. They tore down the creepers that were smothering windows and growing into rooms through holes in the walls. They scythed the lawns and hacked paths through the shrubbery. They rediscovered the fountains and the croquet lawn.

The Macbear bears and Grizzlette helped and found it enormous fun. For Grizzlette it was a tonic after her ordeal. The others noticed she was less stuck up, more at ease with them. At least she no longer complained that Bearloch was dull.

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One afternoon Grizzelda was fishing at her favourite spot. The sun was sparkling on the loch. A more peaceful prospect could not be imagined.

She was reflecting on how her life had changed: a good friend, a house rescued from decay, full of delightful guests. No longer need she struggle alone to keep up appearances.

Grizzelda was tearful with happiness. At the same time, she felt again the happiness she had always found in solitude on this spot. In her discovery of new happiness with others she did not want and did not need to lose the happiness of being alone with the water, the sky, the sun and the sea gulls.

Grizzelda had never joined the craze for writing haiku. She had too much else to think about. She did not take a haiku notebook when she went fishing as many of her neighbours now did. But now, without effort, without expecting it, a haiku came to her, a haiku that simply was her state of mind at that exquisite moment of happiness.