

Chapter 18

The winning haiku

The closing date for entries in the haiku contest came. For several days people had been delivering their haiku to Wompy's house, but quite a few left it to the last day.

Everyone was allowed to enter one haiku only. Many of the Bearloch animals entered, as well as fifty-five of the bears from Glen Bear.

Shilly Bear and Shally Bear, the remaining two of the fifty-seven bears, failed to deliver their haiku in time. It was a shame, because they each had several quite brilliant haiku, but they could not decide which to enter and so missed the deadline.

"Silly Shilly," said Shally to Shilly. "Silly yourself," said Shally. Then, to make up for missing the deadline for haiku, they composed a tongue twister that they went round Bearloch chanting:

Silly Shilly, silly Shally,
Silly silly Shilly Shally.
Shally's sure that silly-billy
Shilly's sillier than Shally.
Shilly's sure that silly Shally
is the more doo-lally wally.
Silly Shilly, silly Shally,
Silly silly Shilly Shally.

People got so irritated with this ditty that on more than one occasion Shilly and Shally only narrowly escaped being thrown into the loch.

*

An entrant who almost missed the deadline was Grampa. He was still debating whether to be a judge or to enter the competition himself.

He had spent a whole week seeking and writing haiku, partly to avoid the conservationists, but mostly because he was determined to write the prize-winning haiku. He spent much time out in his fishing boat letting himself become aware of what was all around him. "Simple as porridge," he often muttered to himself.

In the end Grampa had dozens of haiku and spent a whole day deciding which to enter. He knocked on Wompy's door five minutes before the deadline for all

entries. Thrusting his chosen haiku into Wompy's hand, he said, "Are you sure I can't be a judge too?"

Wompy stamped both his hind feet loudly: "Absolutely no way."

"But supposing I don't win? Then I'll wish I'd been a judge, drat it! Couldn't you tell me whether I've won and, if I haven't, then I can be a judge."

"But by then there'll be no judging to do," said Wompy.

Grampa, sadly, found this unanswerable. Usually, in the end, Wompy was unanswerable.

*

The winners were to be announced at a big party held at Blair Bear. People gathered on the newly mowed great lawn in front of the house and marvelled at its transformed appearance. Sandy MacSeal's jazz band was playing, raising everyone's spirits.

Food and drinks were served in the great hall. Some of the bears from Bear Glen had been busy cooking a magnificent spread - smoked salmon, raspberry dumplings, honey cakes and all the other things people in Bearloch like best. Aztec and Darling were serving the fizzy drinks. Somehow the drinks seemed exceptionally fizzy when served by those two.

"Not so much fun as the glof tournament," said Bobby-in-the-Bar to Fat Fiona the postman's daughter.

"Food's better," she mumbled, her face stuffed full with gooseberry fool and death-by-chocolate pudding.

*

At a suitable moment, when everyone had collected food and drink and returned to the lawn, Wompy stood at the top of the steps to the porch.

Grizzelda had found a huge gong that in Blair Bear's heyday had been used to summon people from the remotest corners of the house to the dining room. Wompy now used it to attract everyone's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "this is a very special day for us all, a day that will be told in stories of Bearloch for generations to come, the day when the first Bearloch haiku contest reached its exciting conclusion.

"There has been excitement of a different kind in Bearloch in recent weeks, too much for the liking of some of us. Today we are gathered to celebrate everyday life in Bearloch, the wonder that is always there to be seen if we would only notice it.

All of us who have written haiku have discovered this, not just those who will now be pronounced the winners.

"I have the names of the winners and their winning haiku in these seven sealed envelopes. To open the envelopes and to announce the winners I shall call on our especially honoured guest, Professor Roulette Pondicherry from the University of Cheshire."

There was clapping as Professor Pondicherry skipped up the steps in a state of obvious excitement.

"What an incredibly gob-smackingly portentous privilege..." she began, while Aztec and Darling shouted "Yes, yes!" and "Wow-eeee!" several times.

Eventually she opened one envelope. Wompy had decided there would be six runners-up as well as one overall winner. "In seventh place," announced Professor Pondicherry, "is Snoddy Bear."

One of the bears from Glen Bear mounted the steps amid much cheering. He read out his haiku:

From the ghost train
everything else
looks ghostly too.

In sixth place came another bear from Glen Bear, called Molly Bear, with this haiku:

A bleak skerry
colour bursts from the rock
pink-flowering thrift.

In fifth place came yet another bear from Glen Bear, called Solly Bear, with this:

The sea laps lazily
boats at anchor yawn
a summer snooze.

By now some of the audience were beginning to fear that bears from Glen Bear would carry off all the awards. It would not be surprising, since they had been writing haiku for years, whereas in Bearloch no one had written a single haiku until the contest was announced. But still there was a feeling it would not be quite fair for

bears from outside Bearloch to win all the awards. Bobby-on-the-Beat began to wonder whether things might turn a little nasty.

He need not have worried. After downing a glass of very fizzy lemonade, Professor Pondicherry energetically announced that in fourth place was Beth MacBear with this haiku:

Shimmering yellow
a bright column of moonshine
islands so still.

In third place came Bobby-round-the-Bend (uproarious cheering!) with this:

Thistledown drifting
an old badger's blank face
mind wandering.

Excitement was mounting, and Professor Pondicherry had no difficulty reflecting this in her voice and deportment. She started dancing around and waving her arms as she announced that in second place was Grampa MacBear. She almost knocked his stick from under him as he climbed up beside her to read out his haiku:

On a sun-struck rock
a cormorant
hangs out its wings to dry.

Among the rest of the clapping and cheering, there were especially loud cries of "Wow-eeee!" "Out of this world!" and "Superlatively awesome!" from Aztec and Darling. Grampa suddenly found himself warming to the conservationists. Even if they couldn't write haiku, they could certainly recognize a brilliant one when they heard it.

The atmosphere was so thrilling that Grampa felt no regret at not making it to first place. It felt just as if he had.

Professor Pondicherry was now in a quite frenzied state as she turned to the last envelope and held it up for all to see before opening it. "In first place, the overall winner of the first Bearloch haiku contest ..." she began, fumbling with the envelope. She was now so excited Wompy had to open it for her.

"The winner is..." Professor Pondicherry was still sufficiently in control of her mind to know that a pregnant pause was needed here.

"The winner is... Mrs Grizzelda Grizzly!"

"Grizzelda Grizzly! Grizzelda Grizzly! Grizzelda Grizzly!" shouted Aztec and Darling ecstatically, and soon everyone was shouting the name, over and over, and looking round for her to appear.

Grizzelda was overcome with more emotions than she could possibly have named. She could only make it up the steps with Mother MacBear beside her. Professor Pondicherry, jumping up and down with hands outstretched to greet her, was too much for Grizzelda. She was unable to read her own haiku. Wompy stepped in to read it for her.

Why was it Grizzelda's haiku that won? Because it makes the best possible end to this story:

After something happened
the blue calm of the loch
and one bear fishing.