

THE BEAR HUNT

by
Gene Caesar

Sure enough—bear tracks! Here was Wilbur's chance
to get even with his smart-acting city cousin.

It was the day before Thanksgiving. We were figuring on our relatives arriving by noon—Uncle Walter and Aunt Stephanie and Cousin Marion. I didn't especially like any of them then, but I'd been waiting for them ever since summer, thinking up ways I could fix Marion. Because my cousin, who wasn't a girl but a boy with a girl's name, really invited fixing. He wasn't even a full year older than me, and he was smaller at that. But he dressed and acted like a miniature minister and went around talking like a schoolteacher. I'd never heard him laugh, and I'd never seen him scared. I didn't care whether he laughed or not, but after that time in August when he'd made a fool of me in a diving match, I'd have given anything to see him scared.

"You been studyin' hard on somethin' all mornin'," Dad said. "What you up to, Wilbur?"

"Nothin'," I insisted carefully, because for some strange reason he seemed to like my cousin and take his side all the time. "Just thinkin' maybe I'd take Marion rabbit huntin' this afternoon."

"You doubtless got somethin' else in mind. You remember, boy, your cousin ain't had all the nat'ral advantages you got. How'd you like to live in a Detroit apartment, hafta look for a park somewheres just to set your foot on the ground? I know Marion's a cold one, but you give him a chance for once! You hear me?"

After Uncle Walter's new car had pulled into the yard, we ate lunch. Aunt

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Stephanie worried and fussed for an hour or so about how dangerous hunting could be, but Marion and I got ready anyway. Aunt Stephanie insisted, though, that Marion wasn't to touch firearms and in her opinion boys ought to be able to have just as much fun outdoors and enjoy nature and all that without shooting guns. Marion didn't even stick up for himself. It seemed to me that with him, agreeing with grown-ups was a way of pretending he was one of them.

"Walter! You forgot the hand warmer," Aunt Stephanie suddenly remembered. "Go get it."

"Hand warmer!" I acted real polite and curious. "Is it somethin' like a bed warmer?"

"It's carried in the coat pocket, so it should help keep the chest warm as well," she explained. "We just bought it. I should think that, living out in the cold so much, you'd have one too, Wilbur."

"No, ma'am," I told her sadly, and all the time Uncle Walter was carefully following the directions on the package about filling and lighting the thing, I stood close and asked fascinated questions like "What'll they think of next?" pretending not to see the look Dad was giving me. Finally I ducked back to my room. "I almost forgot to bring my compass!" I gasped. "It's a long way out to the brush piles, too—clear across the west pasture."

Dad cleared his throat in a way then that meant if I didn't shut up and stop putting on an act it wouldn't be rabbits I'd get that afternoon, so I just waited quietly until Marion and his hand warmer were all ready. Then I led the way along the fence and on across the open fields to the edge of the scrub oak Dad and I were clearing. At the first mound of brush, I searched the snow for tracks.

"There's a bunny in there now," I told Marion. "If your hands are warmed up enough, you get up on top and jump up and down real hard. I'll get him when he runs. I'd jump him out myself and let you do the shootin', 'cept you musn't touch firearms."

I lifted the old 20-gauge to my shoulder and held it there, but I wasn't really waiting for any rabbit. I was waiting for Marion to go crashing down through the sharp-clipped oak branches. I didn't really want to see him get hurt. I just wanted him to yell or cry and get that frozen look off his face. But he ruined it by walking around the brush pile first.

"If those are the tracks of the rabbit entering," he told me, "then these are the tracks where the rabbit left."

"No," I argued. "There must be two bunnies in there."

He shook his head firmly. "Those tracks are the reverse of these."

He had me there, so I shrugged and

went on to check a half-dozen brush piles before I found one that really had a rabbit in it. Then I lifted the shotgun and waited again. "Come on," I said to Marion. "Jump him out o' there."

He stared at the mound of branches a moment, then simply pulled a long stick from the edge. Instead of climbing up, he merely poked and prodded a few times. The rabbit went out the other side, and I didn't see him until he was far out of range.

"I wish we had a good beagle," Marion surprised me by saying.

"What do you know about rabbit hounds?" I demanded skeptically.

"Oh, I've read a lot about them, from the library, mostly." His voice suddenly turned close and confiding. "If I could keep a dog, I'd know just the kind I'd want. Did you see the article last month in—"

"Up here," I reminded him, "a fella doesn't hafta read books and magazines to find out about huntin'."

"No, I suppose not." His voice had turned back cold again. "But I don't really think this is a very sporting way to hunt rabbits—forcing them out of their lodges."

Now every fellow I know jumped rabbits out of brush piles. Probably every farm kid who ever lived jumped rabbits out of brush piles. And my city cousin didn't think it was sporting. But I went on trying to be nice to him.

"All right, we'll go after some big white rabbits," I suggested happily and agreeably, because all at once I was getting a new idea. I'd take him back to the big swamp, where there weren't any paths. I'd slip off somehow and leave him lost there until he got so frightened he started shouting for help. Then I'd find him and tell him to stop acting like a baby. "They can run twice as fast as regular rabbits, and they don't hole up in brush piles, so goin' after them oughta be sportin' enough."

Motioning for him to follow, I started on through the oak ridges. Suddenly, halfway through the scrub oak, I grabbed Marion's arm and pointed. Directly across a clearing ran a series of big tracks—some almost round, others like a barefoot human footprint. There was no mistaking that trail. And all at once I realized this was my chance. It was perfect! "Bear tracks!" I gasped.

"Honestly?" He sounded fascinated. "I've never seen them before."

"Shhh!" I hissed, lifting my shotgun like we could expect a charge at any moment and trying to see his face out of the corner of my eye. Fascinated wasn't the way I wanted him to sound. I was just bluffing, of course. I'd seen bear tracks in our woods before, and I'd asked Dad why didn't he take his deer rifle and follow them. He'd explained that the only time a bear goes wandering around in winter is when he wakes up

hungry. Food is hard to find then, and it takes a lot of it to fill him up, so he walks maybe twenty or thirty miles in a single night. There might be bear tracks in our woods, Dad had told me, but chances were the bear that had made them was somewhere in the next county. All of which suited me fine, since I didn't particularly want to meet any bear. All I wanted to do was throw a scare into Marion. "If you're 'fraid to come along," I offered hopefully, "you can follow our tracks back easy enough. But I gotta hunt this bear down and shoot him!"

"Why?" he wondered.

"Why?" I gave him the look you give a little kid asking something silly.

"'Cause it's dangerous havin' hungry bears prowlin' around in winter. This bear could break into our barn tonight and kill every cow we got. Or even worse. Maybe some kid'll be goin' to school and not have any gun along, and this bear'll be lyin' up waitin' for him. This isn't the *Detroit* zoo where they feed the bears reg'lar, you know!"

I turned away from him and began following the tracks in a crouch with the gun ready. But instead of heading for home like I wanted him to, he stayed right with me, nonchalantly dragging along the stick he'd used for poking the rabbit out. "Why don't you get your father, then?"

"There ain't time now. If you're scared, you can go back."

"If what you say is true," he argued, "neither you nor any other twelve-year-old boy would be hunting a bear without having your father along."

"Listen! Up here a fella has to do things like this. A fella has to grow up in a hurry up here."

"Those tracks are probably a week old, Wilbur."

"It snowed yesterday, didn't it?" I reminded him. "This bear trail's so hot, it's smokin'!"

"Besides," he pointed out knowingly, "whatever size shot you're using for rabbits isn't going to kill any bear unless you're right on top of him."

I was so surprised that he knew about such things that I almost couldn't think of an answer. "I know it," I explained, "but there's no time to go back, so I'll have to take him at close range, no more than twenty feet or so. All that worries me," I turned his smartness right back on him, "is what you'll do, seein' a bear close up for the first time. Our only chance is to take him by surprise. So try to walk quieter and stop bangin' that stick."

"You're making more noise than I am, Wilbur," he argued right back.

It was clouding over again as we crossed the last ridge, with the swamp-edge cedars dark green just ahead, and I made the hardest try yet at frightening Marion into turning back.

"When he charges us," I whispered, "I'm

gonna hafta shoot for bone and break him down, then put a finisher in him.

This is just a single-shot gun, so I'll hafta load up again on the spot." I took a shell and stuck it between my teeth.

"How do you know this?" he demanded.

"I been bear huntin' ever since I was a kid," I muttered.

"Humph!" he said.

I turned my back on him and pushed on through the cedar boughs. I was still certain the bear was somewhere in the next county, but not quite certain enough to like the idea of following his trail much farther. I'd counted on Marion getting scared and giving up, so I could go on and just sit down out of sight for an hour or so, then come back and tell him the bear had escaped me.

"If you're gonna break out screamin' or get in my way or anything, I don't want you along," I snapped at him. "A wounded bear at close range'll prob'ly drive a city kid like you right out of his mind. I don't want any trouble."

"I can keep this up as long as you can."

Raging because he wouldn't quit and let me quit, I rushed along that wandering track as fast as I could force my way through the swamp. In great rambling arcs, I followed its twists and turns. I was getting deeper into that labyrinth of marsh and water and tight timber than I'd ever been before, but I

didn't worry too much about it at first, because we could just track ourselves out easy enough.

But the wind kept rising until it was making a sound like a train going by in the distance, blasting us with gusts of fine snow now. I knew what I had to do—give up and turn back. But each time I was about to stop, I winced at the thought of what he would say and the knowing look he'd have on his face. So I kept right on following that track.

I was taking a shortcut across a pothole when it happened. I'd probably crossed a dozen of the frozen little snow-covered ponds, and I never thought to wonder why the bear had circled this one. His trail was plain and clear in the trampled marsh grass of the slope beyond, and I was just heading straight for it when the ice suddenly gave way beneath me. My shotgun went flying out of my hands, and I fell sideways and sank completely under. The shock was like nails being driven right through me. The water was so cold it seemed to burn. I got my head up and tried to stand, but, although the pothole wasn't more than a yard deep, there was soft muck underneath, and I was scared sick as I kept sinking on down.

"Get hold of this!" I heard Marion yell, and I twisted frantically about until I could grab his rabbit-poking stick. While he braced himself and pulled hard, I got one foot free at the bottom, then the



other. Falling forward and breaking more ice, I scrambled on up the snow of the bank.

"Are you all right?" he wondered, crouching beside me, and for once the grown-up sound of his voice was good to hear. He'd fallen through behind me. He was soaked, too, up to his waist anyway.

"Yeah," I told him, trying to keep my teeth quiet, but I was a long way from home all right. The wind was stabbing through my wet clothes everywhere. I knew I had to do something, to get warm somehow, but I was too numb to think straight. I just watched as Marion went after the shotgun, cautiously raking it in bit by bit with his stick, then carrying it over. "What'll we do now?" he wondered. "Get out of the wind and get a fire going somewhere." We'd freeze before we could get back to the house.

I was wondering if he could possibly be as cold as I was and still talking so calmly. Forcing myself to my feet, I led the way back to a thick stretch of cedars. The wind was screeching, and the snow was like white fog by the time we got there, but we forced our way on until we found a tiny clearing where the boughs almost met overhead. There was plenty of deadwood around, but I could hardly hold onto my knife as I began whittling some sticks. Making a fire seemed an almost impossible job from the first, and it seemed completely impossible when I

dug what was left of the matches from my pants pocket. All but two had their heads scraped off, and even though I blew on one for a long time and tried to be as careful as I could about scratching it, it just fell apart too.

"Oh, no!" I moaned. I was afraid even to try the one that was left, and I didn't have to bother asking my cousin if he had any—one look at his face and I knew he didn't. I don't know how long we just crouched there without saying anything, each of us waiting for the other to admit that all we could do was go ahead and make a try at getting home through a storm in wet clothes. But suddenly Marion was fumbling in his coat pocket, then sliding his new hand warmer out of its little cloth sack.

"Something must burn in it to make it warm," he reasoned. "Let me try."

I gave him our last match and then bit off my breath as he pressed its head tight against a woven-wire thing that had to be some sort of wick. The burst of flame came so fast it surprised us, and Marion looked as nervous as I felt, guarding the match in his cupped hands. But then the sticks I'd whittled caught. Our fire sputtered for a long time, hissing on the snow, but all at once it flared up, and we both began piling dead branches on. At last we could just crouch close and soak up that wonderful heat.

After a while we thought to get our

boots and shoes off and wring out our socks. We propped them up on sticks, and my jacket too, then just tried drying the rest of our clothes on us, keeping that fire roaring and staying as close to it as we dared.

"You know?" Marion suddenly decided. "It's nice here!"

I was surprised to hear him say it, but he was right—it was nice there.

"Yeah!" I agreed, and there was more I had to say, even if I couldn't look at him while I said it. "It was all my fault. I wasn't really huntin' any bear, just tryin' to get you scared. The bear that made those tracks is prob'ly somewhere in the next county."

He could have said a lot of things, but he didn't.

"I never really been bear huntin'," I stumbled on, in a hurry to get it all out.

"The only live bears I ever saw were the ones that come to the township dump at night and you go watch 'em from the car with the headlights on. And even the tourists see those."

"I'd like to see them sometime," he offered.

"All that stuff about a bear eatin' our cows or attackin' some kid—I never really heard of one doin' anything like that around here. I got it out of a movie called *Rogue Bear* or *Grizzly Terror* or somethin' like that. All that business about shootin' for bone to break him down and then puttin' a finisher in

him—it was from the same movie. I never really hunted anything but rabbits and partridge, and most o' the time I miss a partridge when one flies up. You can't even hunt deer up here till you're fourteen, not even if your dad wants to let you. It's the law."

Marion didn't let the silence last long enough to get uneasy. "By the time you're fourteen," he suggested, "maybe my mother won't be so afraid of guns, and I can come up here deer season."

"Sure, it'd be great!"

We were by that fire for two or maybe three hours, and if it was like magic to be comfortable and warm after going through the ice of that pothole, it was even more so to be comfortable with my cousin, to feel so warm toward him, after the way things had been such a short time earlier. We talked and talked, and I think he told me things he'd never told anyone else, because that's just what I was doing. Then all at once we realized that the wind was letting up and the air was clearing.

We put out our fire, and I picked up the shotgun and led the way on to the next open swale. I can still remember the way everything looked in the dead silence—fresh with new whiteness that lay unbroken on the ground and frosted every tree. It was a funny feeling but a good one—like all that had ever happened had been erased, chalked out, with time starting over again—and right

then I could laugh about the fool thing I'd done as though it had happened years earlier when I wasn't old enough to know better.

But then I remembered something else that had been erased, and I didn't feel so good, because I had to admit to Marion that, with our tracks gone, I wasn't sure of the way back.

"You brought your compass," he reminded me.

"Yeah." I'd brought it only as a joke. "But I don't know which way we came after we got into the swamp. I just went where that bear trail went."

"Aren't there any landmarks we could look for?"

I shook my head. "It's just a big tangle. One pothole or rise looks just about the same as another." I tried to keep my voice as calm as his.

"Well, let's think about it a minute." He marked a patch of snow with his stick. "Say this is the house, and this is north. Which way did we start out?"

I drew what I could for him with the shotgun butt. "West across the pasture, then north through the woods. But the swamp makes a big elbow here, and it goes on and on for miles. We could be anywhere in it."

"Where's the road? And what's over here?"

"Way south." I drew it in, too. "And this is the big woods between our farm and— Wait a minute." I was relieved to

be the one having an idea for a change, even if he'd made me think of it. "If we just head southeast, it looks to me like we'll hafta come out someplace where I'll know where we are!" I tested the idea by drawing lines from every possible spot we could be, and they all hit the farm or the road or the woods. "Yeah!"

We started right out, checking the compass every fifty yards or so. We'd been hiking for maybe a fast fifteen minutes when we pushed into a thicket and ran directly into the giant footprints of the bear again.

"Look!" It was spooky there in the failing light. A cold tingling began climbing my spine.

"This can't be where we came in," Marion said the same thing I was thinking. "Our tracks would be here, too. Do you suppose these were made *after* the storm?"

All at once I didn't have to suppose anything. Because in the shadowy line of brush ahead, a big piece of the shadow moved.

"He's there!" I gasped. "Right there!"

"Where?" He acted like he half thought I was making things up again.

"Shhh!" I turned and tried to make him see I really meant it.

Then suddenly he did see, and the old frozen look on his face melted fast. His eyes got big behind the glasses, and his mouth came open like he was trying

to say something and couldn't. I was almost too frightened to turn and look, but even more frightened not to—and there was the bear, standing up facing us.

I remembered the shotgun in my hands, but I couldn't even get it to my shoulder. My arms were heavy and dead. I really felt more like running than shooting, but right then I couldn't do either one.

"You b-b-better not miss!" Marion stuttered. I'd wanted to scare him, and I'd sure done a good job—almost as good as I'd done on myself. "This stick isn't v-v-very sharp."

There was an abrupt snapping and crashing. Like a great black-dog shaking itself after a bath, the bear sent snow and branches flying as he fought his way clear of that tight, tangled thicket. I could see all of him then, and he seemed the size of a horse—a giant dark shape blotting out everything.

The shotgun went off by itself in my hands. A patch of snow a few feet in front of the bear's forepaws exploded. He let out a snorting, woofing sound, whirled to one side, and padded off.

We stood there silent for a long time, and we didn't say much of anything when we finally thought to keep going. It was long past supper time when we got home, of course, and once again I was glad to have Marion along. He did all the explaining, and he did it just right. He

didn't lie about anything, but he left out everything that made the whole mess my fault.

I knew Dad would get the real story out of me later. But that evening he let it stand the way Marion told it, because Aunt Stephanie was upset enough already.

I got along fine with Marion after that and I guess Aunt Stephanie did some backsliding on her notions, too, because Marion did come deer hunting

with us later, just as he'd hoped, and season after season after that. And before long, of course, we could joke about our bear hunt and admit to ourselves that the bear wasn't charging us, just trying to get away, and probably twice as scared as both of us put together. But even so and even now, if I look back on that Thanksgiving holiday when snow was whiter and bears were bigger, I find myself laughing and shuddering at the same time.

Comment

1. Why does Wilbur decide to take his cousin Marion rabbit hunting?
2. Why does Marion take the hand warmer with him?
 3. *a.* At the beginning of the story, why does Wilbur act the way he does toward Marion?
 3. *b.* In what ways does Wilbur consider himself superior to Marion?
4. What does Marion do or say to show Wilbur that he isn't so ignorant of "country knowledge" as Wilbur thinks he is?
5. Later what makes Wilbur confess that the bear hunt was phony and apologize to Marion?
6. What do you learn about Marion from
 - a.* his reaction to Wilbur's confession?
 - b.* his explanation to their parents as to why the boys returned home late?
7. How are the two boys changed by their experiences during the bear hunt?