

from *Voices from the Middle*

Bear in the Family

by Ben Mikaelson

1 **A** knock on the front door brings Nicky, our dog, to her feet. Behind her, rising more slowly, is Buffy, our ten-year-old, six-hundred-pound black bear. Visitors seldom venture this far up the mountain. Our rustic log cabin, nestled up a winding canyon, is miles from the nearest paved road.

2 Nicky growls softly, and I praise her for alerting me. Buffy, however, lumbers¹ over to the big arched door and stands up. He wraps a large paw around the elk-antler door handle and swings the thick panel open with an easy tug.

3 Today the visitor is a neighbor wanting to borrow eggs. Towering seven feet tall, Buffy blocks her entrance. As usual, the elderly lady comes armed with a marshmallow. Buffy licks it gently from her hand and moves aside. She tosses another treat to our dog.

4 It's humorous when Buffy opens the door to a stranger. The occasional proselytizer² or salesperson can barely remember his or her name with a mountainous unchained bruin³ looming over them. They do not see Buffy as I do—as a young, innocent child.

2. What is the writer's attitude toward his subject?

1. **lumbers:** walks heavily.

2. **proselytizer:** a person seeking to convert others to his or her religion.

This child came to us ten years ago. Harboring an insatiable⁴ fascination for bears, I jumped at the chance to care for a young cub returned from a research facility. My wife Melanie agreed to help adopt this creature we had never met.

Before picking up our baby, we read dozens of books on bears and secured necessary licenses. I built a sturdy chain-link facility around two sides of the house. Our Buffy would have a spring-fed pond, a playground, a den, and plenty of running room. Finally, we were ready—we thought.

The twenty-pound, sixteen-week-old rascal who joined our family caught us unprepared. The first night, I lay in bed listening to his haunting cry, a lost, mournful little sound. I crept out and sat near him in his den. After a few minutes he crawled on my lap and sucked the pads on his front feet, voicing his fear with a high-pitched clucking sound. I began to hum and rock him. When he finally fell asleep, I tucked him into the straw.

The first six months that Buffy lived with us, I rocked him to sleep every night. I spent hours feeding him, playing with him,

1. What details does the writer use to set the scene in the first few paragraphs?

3. What details from this point to the end of the selection make Buffy seem like a child?

3. **bruin:** a bear.

4. **insatiable:** unable to be satisfied.

4. What are some of the words the writer uses to show the passing of time in this and the following two paragraphs?

observing him. At first, every utterance⁵ and gesture puzzled me. Because Buffy's muscle structure and coordination resembled that of a human, his play was very humanlike. Emotionally the puzzle was much more complex.

One moment he would stand and shake his head playfully at a neighbor's Angus bull. The next moment he cowered⁶ behind me at the sight of a small bum lamb.

9 Originally Buffy nursed from a bottle. When I tried to wean him, he refused to switch over to solid foods. Melanie solved the problem by substituting water. Buffy took one suck and angrily threw the bottle across the pen. Then he ran to retrieve it and sucked hopefully. A second time he flung it. By that night he had abandoned his beloved bottle.

10 I often learned things about Buffy the hard way. His long, anteater-like tongue was never fully appreciated until one day during a play session. With a piece of candy in my mouth, I blew gently into Buffy's face to watch his nose twitch. In a blink, Buffy snaked his long tongue to the very back of my throat, licked my tonsils, and stole the candy. While I gagged, my wife howled with amusement.

11 Our friendship with Buffy grew painfully slowly. His distrust made him reclusive.⁷ I realized that friendship depended on us somehow joining him in his world. That opportunity came all too soon.

12 On a midsummer's evening, I discovered a wild male black bear tearing at Buffy's

pen. He had nearly broken down the gate. I shouted and threw rocks until the bear lumbered off; then I crawled in with little Buffy. The cub's tiny front feet pumped out from under his fuzzy rump as he ran frantically in circles. Fear quivered in every bawl. Finally he slowed and stared at me. Shaking, he clambered⁸ onto my lap and hugged me. I found myself crying. What instincts had caused a bruin to almost kill my Buffy?

We cuddled for a long while, Buffy nuzzling and hugging me. When he finally slept, I moved to set him down. He awakened and clung to me. I slept with him that night, cementing our friendship. Overnight we bonded and became family. Overnight I became his guardian, not only his provider.

We began treating Buffy as if he were a child. We allowed him in the house. I cradled him in my arms on horse rides. To this day, our horses show no fear of the giant bear. He plays with our dog. The cats rub against his legs. He even accompanies us to town. . . .

Although we have become Buffy's parents, my wife and I share different relationships with him. When Melanie visits, she's an oversized toy to Buffy—one which he prefers over . . . his precious feeding dish. On the other hand, my visits are a visit from "Dad." I'm the one who defines the rules and fixes things when they go wrong. . . . I feel very privileged that Buffy has allowed me into his world. I hope never to betray his trust.

5. What does the incident described here teach the writer about Buffy and about himself?

5. **utterance:** a sound made by someone; speech.

6. **cowered:** huddled in fear.

7. **reclusive:** solitary; shut away from others.

8. **clambered:** climbed clumsily.