

The Life of Life

Duncan Pacey

The tiny krill battled the onslaught of ocean currents, frantically kicking his five pairs of even-smaller swimming legs to remain within his favoured forest of seaweed.

His small, beady black eyes observed the ever swaying seascape as a range of comb-like filters lashed about in search of a new meal.

His hardened thorax gleamed gently, lit by the bioluminescent nature of his interior organs. Two antennae darted about here and there, almost as if waving in friendship and solidarity to his fellow krillmates who were swimming away nearby.

A flash in the corner of his vision roused his attention, as a shimmering wave approached his very favourite seaweed grove.

And then, with a grotesque chomping sound and an explosion of air bubbles, he vanished.

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The herring swallowed its latest meal with joy, though her face remained unmoving and emotionless. Around her, a thousand fellow fish mates swam in perfect unison, aligned at the ideal distance so that any nuisance prey who might seek to jump away from their mouths might be caught by someone else's.

Her sleek, silver scales bounced what little penetrative light made its way to the lower reaches of the ocean, reflecting off a hundred more bodies like a torch shone in a mirror maze.

As her prey began to digest, she opened her mouth once more, starting anew the filter feeding process to which she was accustomed.

However, a disturbance at the head of the school roused her attention. The panic-stricken forward cluster of the group was darting out the way of an approaching troublemaker. She followed suit, knowing it didn't matter the predator that came, only that there was one.

Her body twisted and contorted, dashing with all its strength to stay with the group and avoid the pink streak that encircled them.

Then, with a grotesque chomping sound and an explosion of air bubbles, she vanished.

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Rather chuffed with her catch, the salmon removed herself from the feeding frenzy with a figurative, though still entirely insulting, belch.

The meal was to mark the beginning of her long journey back to where her life began in the first place: A quiet freshwater river in a picturesque and altogether pleasant forest.

Along with some of her companions she swam for the coast, occasionally stopping to hassle yet more unwitting schools of dinner.

Though it took many miles of determined swimming, the salmon finally reached an estuary she had only seen once before in her life, and began a careful ascent up the river that flowed into it.

The sensation was unlike that of what she was used to. Ocean currents could be strong, daring to carry away anyone who was foolish enough to be caught in their madness, though still they were nothing like this. It was almost dreamlike the way the stony land she swam over suddenly became mountainous and tormented, with stalwart boulders and other rocklike structures rising into the air at regular intervals upstream.

The salmon did not remember the rapids and waterfalls quite this way from when she was first spawned, as swimming the other way was certainly a much easier task.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted a male, possibly of similar age. He was handsome, sleek and powerful, gracefully dancing up the unyielding torrent of water as if he had practised it many times before.

She flashed him a glance of intent, and he glanced back. They both knew why they were returning to their birthplace, and she intended to have her pick of the crop before any other females got there first.

As she too leapt up the waterfall, a strange figure by the shoreline roused her attention. A creature, with a body shape that was entirely alien to her, was standing by the riverside watching her fellow salmon slink upstream.

Hesitantly she went to leap past, nodding in an acknowledging gesture so that the thing may see her as polite and, thus, leave her alone.

However, with the swipe of a mighty claw, a grotesque chomping sound and an explosion of water droplets, she vanished.

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The bear almost roared with satisfaction, the refreshing taste of blood and river water seeping down his powerful throat.

Shaking off some of the excess water from his thick, black coat, he turned away from the river to trudge through the forest in search of a more peaceful dining location.

He passed through familiar sites, gleefully walking through the trees, remembering a thousand different stories. There was the tree where he first tasted honey, the carcass of the desecrated beehive long gone; though with lingering scratch marks from his battle to enter it still linger in a surreal, almost beautiful scar. Nearby was a cluster of bushes he frequented, as their sweet berries gave him great pleasure to forage on quiet, sunny afternoons.

Up the hill a ways there was his den from the previous winter, carved by his own paws into the hillside, though largely now filled with dirt, leaves and small forest creatures. Ah, small forest

creatures – he took note to return at a later date to see if there may be a meal waiting beneath the debris.

The salmon had stopped floundering now and resigned itself to an early grave. Or perhaps it had perished already, it did not matter.

The bear circled his way around a more dense section of forest, with bushes and trees almost intertwined with each other so to suggest that no bears should pass through.

As he came to a clearing he noticed some objects pinned into the dirt. Strange they were, made of a foreign material that stuck out like an unwelcome guest in the rainbow of forest colours. The creature that sat at the centre of the clearing aroused his attention the most.

It seemed to have multi-coloured fur, though with large patches missing on the face, neck and hands. How unwell it must have been to suffer so. The bear gave an acknowledging grunt, as though to mark his peaceful approach to the sick, scruffy creature so that it would not be startled.

However, as it saw his valiant stride drawing closer, the thing seemed to scurry aside, rummaging through the forest floor for a large stick.

As the creature presented its stick to the bear, there was a grotesque banging sound and an explosion of smoke and light. And with that, the bear's vision went black and his life vanished.

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Derrick still held his breath, his face a curious mixture of tomato red and ghostly white. The rifle drew lifeless again, as though it had never been fired in its life. The only indication a shot had been loosed was the gentle trail of smoke dribbling out its barrel and the slumped, black figure of a bear at the other side of the clearing.

Finally he sighed loudly, uttering a curse of disbelief beneath his wavering breath. He lowered the barrel of the rifle slowly, his mind flush with adrenaline-induced panic. As his breathing calmed his nerves, the sounds around him began to come alive again, as if an old radio was slowly being tuned properly.

The forest was thick with the beautiful sounds of birds, gently chirping and twittering with each other like a gabble of old women. He could hear the distinct sound of leaves shuffling and twigs snapping as something unseen scurried off in fear of the commotion. He could hear the faint sound of a waterfall cascading over boulders, eternally crashing and thundering into the stream below. Finally, he could hear the obscenely loud sound of his heart thumping in his ears, needlessly providing enough blood flow to his body to escape a bear attack without realising the attack was over already.

Derrick stood stock-still, staring at the bear. He suddenly realised he wasn't sure what to do in this situation. He was out hunting feral pig and deer, and had not prepared himself to deal with the corpse of a bear. Should he leave it where it was? Should he alert someone of its presence? Should he skin it for its pelt?

It was only now that the notion of hunting alone the forest seemed like a rather foolhardy one.

Deciding there was little he could do if he wanted to, Derrick swiftly moved back towards his campsite with the goal of packing it away. Empty handed he would return home, as he suddenly felt the urge to see his wife and new-born again after facing such fear.

He hurriedly unpinned the luminescent orange tent from the ground and chucked them in a semi-neat pile elsewhere, though a rustling noise from behind roused his attention.

Still hyped by the adrenaline, he spun round.

With a huge claw, a grotesque chomping sound and an explosion of flesh and deep crimson, Derrick's vision went blank and his life vanished.