WEEKEND *PERSONAL ESSAYS*

PERSONAL ESSAY

Dogman

// BY EMA BEKIC

At my arts boarding school in Northern Michigan, we could leave campus only twice a week, for maybe two or three hours at a time. Otherwise, we were stuck between two small lakes, surrounded by towering white pines and empty log cabins. With only the waves, the birds and one another for entertainment, it was a summer camp that doubled as a school. And when you're that isolated, fun means the woods: the abandoned cabins, the firepit half a mile down a steep hillside and the backroads blocked off with a measly sawhorse.

One night in mid-October, in the spirit of spooky season, a few friends and I snuck out after curfew to the woods behind the visual arts building. Back there stood an abandoned wooden fort and a rotting rope swing. It had rained all day, so we crouched on soaked leaves inside the fort and exchanged ghost stories, the kind with jumpscares and footsteps from unknown visitors. The birds that usually filled the pines had gone quiet. I was about to begin my tale when we heard footsteps outside.

One of our friends was supposed to meet us later, so naturally, we assumed it was her. We called her name through the gaps in the boards. Nothing. Then, a bright glow appeared outside, which we figured was her phone flashlight. We exchanged a look, stood up and ducked out to ask why she was ignoring us.

It wasn't a flashlight. It was two bright lights, small and round, the orange of a dying campfire, floating eight feet off the ground. Then we heard the breathing.

Quiet at first, steady, then wetter and faster, like a dog panting after a long run. Nobody moved. Somebody's hand found my sleeve and held on. As my eyes adjusted, the darkness around the lights came into focus. It was a face. A long snout, black lips pulled back, fur matted slick with rain. A dog's head on a man's body.

I ran. I remember grabbing whoever was closest and bolting up the hill to the main road, and behind us, the soft padding of something tracking us through the leaves, twigs snapping. None of us looked back.

We didn't stop until we reached the safe glow of the street lamp. Only then did we turn around. The ember eyes hung between the pines, watching. The creature unhinged its jaw, tilted its head back and howled, a sound that scraped the inside of my skull like metal dragging along pavement. Then we were sprinting again, all the way to our dorms.

We never talked about it. At breakfast the next morning, we discussed our homework and who was dating whom. Our friend, the one who was supposed to meet us, said she'd fallen asleep before curfew and never left her room. Nobody said anything. We looked at our eggs.

But every night after that, the howls came through our windows, long and low, each one a little closer to the visual arts building. And every night, we pretended they were coyotes.

That lasted until December, when our English class was assigned a project on Michigan folklore. Four of us sat at one library table, half-listening to one another, until my friend went very still. The color left her face. Without a word, she turned her laptop around.

There was a drawing of a tall figure in a treeline, a dog's head on a man's shoulders. Beneath it, a caption about sightings across the northern Lower Peninsula, dating back more than a century. And there, in the picture, were the eyes. The same ember eyes that had followed us home: Dogman.

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ILLUSTRATION BY BEA TRENTO

PERSONAL ESSAY

The Berenstain (Bernstein) Bears

// BY ABIGAIL BERNSTEIN

This was the year. I could feel it. It was March 2023, and the Jewish holiday of Purim was fast approaching. Purim celebrates the Jewish people's victory in the ancient Persian Empire, surviving Haman's plot to annihilate them. It has since become tradition to dress up in costumes in celebration, commemorating the motifs of hidden identity in the story. My family had started doing group costumes for Purim a few years prior, and I had decided that this year, our first Purim in our new home after moving from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia, we were blowing it out of the water.

As a little kid, I loved the Berenstain Bears books. Their family was just like mine: a Mama, Papa, Sister, Brother and baby Honey. Their name was even the same as ours, despite a slight difference in spelling. One day at school, it hit me: we should do the Berenstain Bears as our costume this year! I ran home excited about the prospect and surprised I had never thought of it before. I proposed the idea to my family over dinner, and the decision was unanimous: this year we were to be the Berenstain Bears.

I scoured Amazon for hours trying to find the perfect outfits. I found pink overalls for my Sister Bear costume (topped with a pink bow, of course) and green ones for my younger sister as Honey. For my dad (as Papa Bear), we found a yellow plaid shirt and blue denim overalls. My brother already owned a red shirt and blue pants, so that made it easy, and for my mom I hunted for the perfect blue polka-dotted shower cap, which we poked holes in for the ears. Everyone wore the bear ears I ordered, and I painted our noses with black eyeliner from the drugstore. My vision was complete. Our costume was a huge success in the community, and we even ordered Berenstain Bear stickers to put on our Mishloach Manot: a traditional Purim food gift given to friends and family.

In addition to our costumes' overall success, Purim was memorable for another reason. As it turns out, my dad had scheduled an appointment with the post office for us to pick up our renewed passports that day. After hearing the traditional text, Megillat Esther, commemorating the Jews' salvation from Haman, we were off to the post office. The catch was: we were still dressed as bears, and most people didn't know that it was Purim. We walked in and received odd looks. People were scared; they whispered and pointed. I felt like we were on display. We took a number and waited to be called up. The lady at the front desk shouted "Bernstein." We hurriedly ran over to the desk to pick up our passports, and as I watched the people around us, I came to this conclusion. These onlookers must think we've deluded ourselves into believing we are the actual Berenstain bears. Either that or furries. I ran out of there, mortified, with my family at my heels.

To this day, this is one of my favorite Bernstein family moments. The sheer ridiculousness of walking into a post office dressed up as bears. The brilliance of our costumes, the execution and my deep-dive Amazon searches to find the perfect outfits. That Purim was, without a doubt, one for the photo books.

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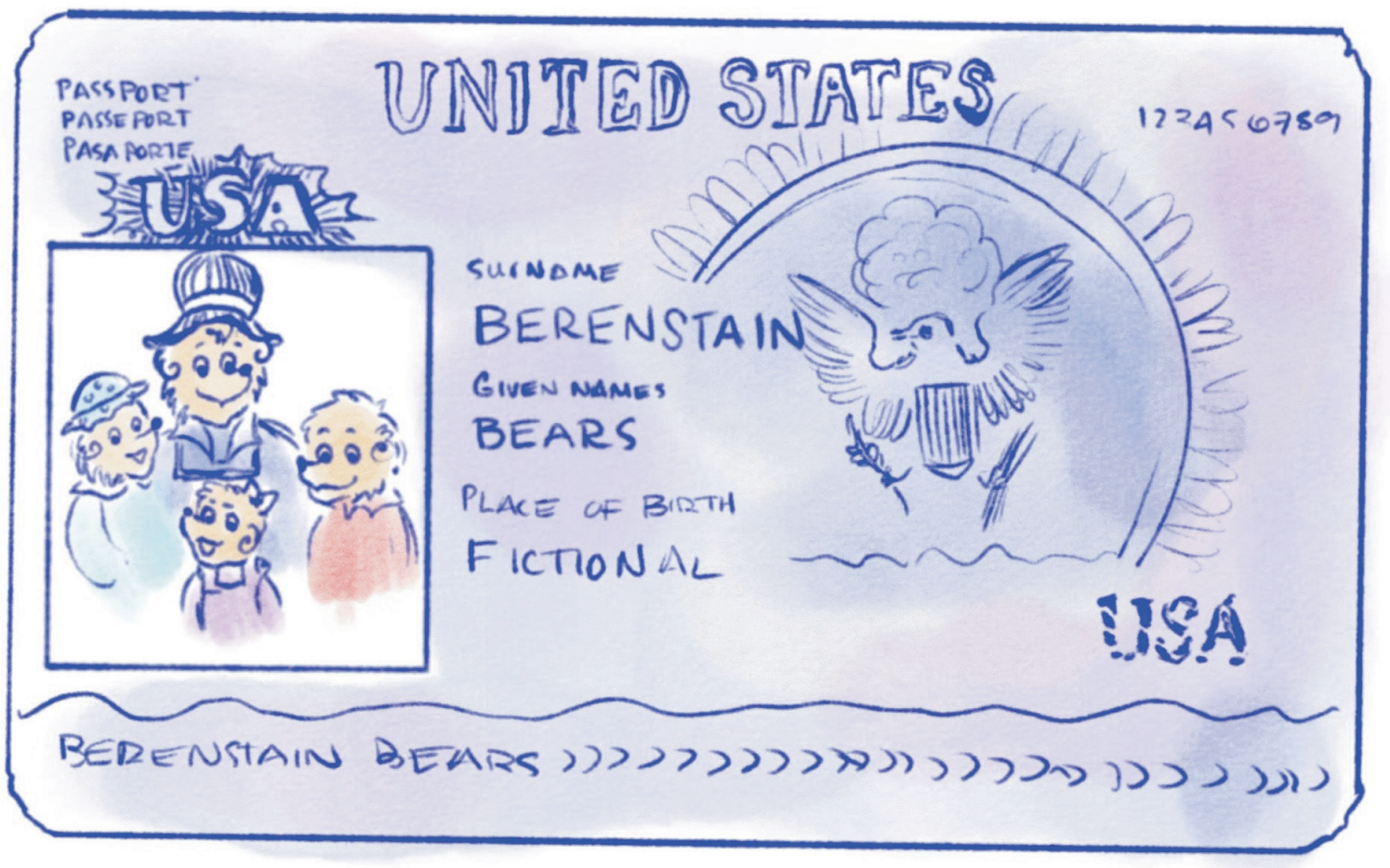


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE ALTSCHUL

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

LAST-MINUTE COSTUMES