Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Moon Bear

Written by

Gill Lewis

Published by

Oxford University Press

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and in certain other countries

Text © Gill Lewis 2013
Inside illustrations © Mark Owen 2013
The moral rights of the author and illustrator have been asserted

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-279353-9
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.



The First Storm

My grandfather and father were Bee Men. They could talk to bees. They understood them and their ways.

On moonless nights, they would climb the smooth bark of the Bee Tree to collect wild honey. The bees told them everything: where to hunt for wild game, when the forest fruits had ripened, and when the rains would come.

Grandfather always told me that we could learn much from bees.

On cool winter evenings when the rain would funnel up from the valleys and spit and fizzle in the fire, I'd pull a blanket around me and sit close to him.

'Tell me the story of Nâam-pèng,' I'd say.

Grandfather would smile. 'Nâam-pèng? Who's he?'

'Nâam-pèng, the bravest bee.'

'Pah!' Grandfather would say. 'He was only a small bee. Hardly worth a mention.'

'Please tell me,' I'd beg. 'Tell me the story of Nâam-pèng.'

Grandfather would wrap a betel nut in a leaf, and chew it slowly. 'Ah, well,' he'd say. 'Ah well.'

I'd pull my knees up under my chin and stare into the fire and watch the flames leap and dance and tell the story too.

'Long, long ago,' Grandfather would begin, 'when the world was bright and new, a Great River came flowing down from the White Mountains. This river brought forests filled with tigers and elephants, moon bears and sun bears, clouded leopards and marbled cats, mousedeer and macaques and weaverbirds and . . . ' Grandfather would take a deep breath, ' . . . so many animals, I would not live long enough to name them all. These forests reached up to the sky and caught the rain clouds in their branches, and soon there were many rivers flowing into the Great River, all of them teeming with fish.'

'But a monster came, didn't it?' I'd say. I loved this part.

Grandfather frowned and nodded. 'But one day a monster came. Tám-láai came in the dark before the dawn, striding through the forests, eating the animals and trees, spitting bones and pith onto the ground. He devoured anything and everything in his path. The animals ran and flew and swam for cover deeper into the forests, but still the monster came, tearing up the ground and drinking up the Great River so it became no more than a trickle, and the fish were left flapping and dying in the mud. By the end of the day, there was only a straggle of trees clinging to one small mountain. "Please leave us this forest," the animals squawked, and hooted and barked

and squeaked. "It is all we have left." But still, the monster was hungry. He pulled himself up to his full height . . .'

When Grandfather got to this part, I would stand up and flap my blankets, throwing giant shadows out behind me. I'd take a deep breath and roar, '"I am Tám-láai. I am Tám-láai and I dare anyone to stop me."'

Grandfather would pretend to cower. 'All the animals hid together. Not even the tiger or the bear were a match for this monster. But just as Tám-láai reached to tear the nearest tree from the ground, a small bee flew out from the forest and buzzed in front of Tám-láai's face.

'"I am Nâam-pèng," said the bee, "and I will stop you."

'The monster caught Nâam-pèng in his paw and threw back his head and laughed. "You?" he cried. "You are so small. Your sting would be no more than a pimple on me."

'Nâam-pèng buzzed inside his paw. "I am Nâam-pèng and I will stop you."

'Now when the other forest bees heard Nâam-pèng speak out so bravely, their hearts filled with hope and courage. Could they be as brave as Nâam-pèng too?

'Tám-láai bared his teeth and held Nâam-pèng by the wings. He stared deep into Nâam-pèng's eyes. The sky darkened all around them. "You are nothing, little bee, nothing. It was not your bravery that brought you here, but your stupidity. Is there anything you wish to say before I crush you with my paw?"

'Nâam-pèng quivered in fright but he looked the monster in the eye. "Tám-láai . . ." he said.

'"Speak up," roared the monster. "I can hardly hear you."

'"Turn round," said Nâam-pèng. "You must turn round."

'"Turn round? Me?" snorted Tám-láai. "As it is your final wish . . ."

'The monster turned.

'Before him swirled a huge black cloud. A storm of angry bees filled the whole sky, from end to end, blotting out the sun.

'Tám-láai crumpled to his knees.

'"I may be small," said Nâam-pèng, "but I am not alone. Did you not hear the bees?"'



Chapter 1

I scooped a handful of small stones and closed my fist, crushing the sharp edges deep into my skin. *Stay awake, Tam. Don't sleep. Don't sleep.*

I looked across at Noy lying on the rock ledge beside me. His head had flopped forward into his arms and he was breathing softly. I wanted to wake him. It was dangerous to sleep in the forest. Sleep loosens the souls and lets them wander. They could be coaxed away by spirits while he was dreaming. We wouldn't want our souls to wander far tonight.

I rubbed my eyes and breathed in deeply, filling my lungs with the cool night air. Above, the moon had traced an arc across the sky. We had been waiting all night. The bright star of the Dragon's Tail had risen above the tree

line. The forest was dark and still. This was the dark before the dawn. The dark when spirits walked.

I wriggled forward and peered down from our high rock. Moonlight reflected from the wide pools below the waterfall, the ripples spreading out in perfect circles of bright, white light. The sweet scent of moth flowers drifted across the water. The whole forest was deep in sleep. Maybe Noy was wrong. Maybe it wouldn't come tonight.

I stared into the folds of darkness on the far side of the river.

In the deep shadows between the rocks and boulders, a darker shadow was stirring. I twisted a loose piece of forest vine though my fingers and watched. Despite the coolness of the night, my palms ran slick with sweat. I could feel the blood pumping through my hands. I swallowed hard. Below, some fifty paces away, the shadow moved. It formed, gained shape and stepped out into the moonlight.

I jabbed Noy in the ribs. 'Wake up!'

Noy's head jolted up. 'What?'

'Shh!' I said. 'It's here. It's here, now.'

Noy wiped the sleep from his face and leant out. He looked down to the river and gripped my arm. 'Where?'

'There.'

Moon Bear

The shadow rose up on its hind legs and sniffed the air.

I held my breath.

A bear. A huge bear. I'd never seen one before. It was taller than Pa. Taller even than the chief. The crescent of white fur on its chest was bright against the dark fur of its body. It sniffed the air again, its small round ears twitching in our direction. It was a bear of the Old Stories. A Moon Bear. A Spirit Bear. Crop Eater. Man Killer.

Right here.

Right now.

I pressed myself into the rock. We were downwind, wrapped in shadow. The thunder from the waterfall drowned our noise. Yet, as we lay still and hidden, I wondered if this bear could sense us somehow. Did she *know* we were here?

Noy tensed up beside me. I could hear his breath, soft and shallow. I could feel him watching too. The bear dropped onto all four paws and leant forward into the river. She dipped her head low and drank, gulping the water, her ears swivelling backwards and forwards.

I breathed out slowly.

Noy leant into me. 'I told you she would come.'

I looked down to the river.

The bear was thin. She'd eaten our crops and broken into the feed store. She'd put fear into all the mothers of the village. Yet no one had managed to catch her. Grandfather said she was clever, and dangerous too if she had cubs. I thought of Ma. If she knew I was here trying to take a cub, she'd kill me.

'D'you really think she's got cubs in there?' I said.

Noy nodded. 'Your grandfather says she must be feeding cubs, otherwise she wouldn't risk coming so close to the village.'

No one had seen a bear for years. Grandfather said they'd been hunted into the deep forests. But he'd seen one once when he was young. He'd seen a bear push a man down and tear off half his face. Bears were more feared than tigers.

Noy grinned, his teeth white in the darkness. 'We'll get a hundred US dollars for a cub. Maybe more. Just think, Tam,' he said, 'not even my brother could find this den. We'll walk back to the village like men. I can't wait to see my brother's face when he sees *me* bring back a bear.'

The bear sniffed the air again and set off, jumping from rock to rock, using the river as her path down to the village fields.

Noy thrust a small flashlight in my hand. 'Go!' he said. 'Go now.'

'I thought we were going in together,' I said.

Noy shook his head. 'One of us has to keep watch.'

I tried to press the flashlight back in his hand. 'I'll keep watch,' I said. 'You go.'

Noy scowled, his face half hidden in the moon-shadow. 'I found her. I found the paw prints in the mud and the claw marks in the trees, so that means you go and get the cubs. Besides,' he said, as if deciding the matter, 'you're smaller and will fit between the rocks.'

I glared at him. We were born the same night, under the same moon. We were twelve rains old. People said we shared our souls like twin brothers. Yet Noy was the chief's youngest son. He always got his way.

'Go on,' said Noy giving me a shove.

'What if she comes back?' I said. I looked along the river. It was a long straight stretch, stepped in waterfalls. The bear was swimming away from us in one of the deep pools.

'She'll be ages,' said Noy. 'There's a hundred dollars waiting for us in that cave.' He leant into me, his mouth curled in a smile. 'You're not scared are you?'

'No,' I snapped.

'So go,' he said. 'If I see her coming back, I'll warn you.'

I held the flashlight between my teeth and gripped the vines in my hands. I scowled at him. This wasn't about a bear at all. It was about Noy wanting to get one up on his brother.

I lowered myself into the river gully and stood on a rock and listened. I strained my ears into the darkness. A light breeze sifted through the canopy of leaves above. Frogs chirruped from the slack water and puddles at the river's edge. I knew I wouldn't hear a bear. Grandfather said you never hear a bear. They walk like spirits through the forest. You cannot out-run, out-climb, or out-swim it. You must become still. You must become like a spirit too.

The river was low. The rains had yet to come and fill the river gorge with tumbling fast water. I stepped across the domed rocks to the far side, to the deep shadows of the bear den.

What if there was another adult bear inside? What if the cubs were big enough to fight?

I glanced back up the steep ravine. I couldn't see Noy but I knew he was watching me. Maybe this would be one dare too far. I switched on the flashlight. Its light gave a

dull yellow flickering glow, barely enough light to see. It was Noy's brother's and I guessed Noy hadn't asked to borrow it.

I edged my way into the entrance to the den. A low tunnel sloped upwards, deeper into the rocks. The ground beneath was damp and earthy. The rock walls were cool to touch. I felt my way forward. The narrow passage opened out into a small cave, just big enough to fit a bear. It smelt clean and fresh as if a channel of air flowed through from the outside.

I shone the light around the empty space. The cave floor was strewn with dry leaf litter and shredded twigs and branches. The soft earth was hollowed and coated in a layer of black fur where the bear had lain curled up, asleep. I traced my fingers through the dry leaves and could feel the warmth from her body still in the ground.

I jumped.

Something had moved.

Something squirmed beneath my hand.

I shone the light downwards. Half hidden in the leaves, a black shape stretched out a stubby paw. Small eyes blinked in the torchlight. A bear cub, no bigger than a piglet, nuzzled towards me, poking out its flat pink tongue. I stared at it. The mother must have been starving to leave it here, alone, unguarded.

It wriggled onto its back, showing the crescent moon of white fur on its chest. A whorl of white hairs above the crescent looked just like the evening star.

I couldn't take this bear cub. Could I? It was still feeding from its mother. It was much too young.

I stared at the cub. A hundred dollars. Fifty dollars for Noy's family and fifty for mine. It was more than Pa could ever earn selling honey and bush meat. Maybe we could even buy a buffalo.

Somewhere outside a gibbon called into the night. It sounded far, far away. Deep inside the cave, it was quiet and still, sealed from the outside world. The cub was safe in here. Held. Protected.

Maybe I'd tell Noy there was no cub. It didn't seem right to take it.

But a hundred dollars! We'd never get this chance again.

The gibbon called again, a high alarm screech. Something had rattled its sleep, but I felt strangely safe inside the curved walls of the den. I ran my finger along the soft belly of the cub.

Another screech, more frantic this time. A warning.

I jolted upright. My heart thumped in my chest. Noy's warning, a gibbon's call.

Moon Bear

The mother bear was coming back.

I grabbed the cub by the loose skin at the back of the neck and groped my way along the passage. She shouldn't be back. Not yet. Noy said she'd be a long time in the fields. Why had she come back so soon?

I stumbled out of the cave into the hard black body of a bear. I tripped and sprawled on the rocks, losing my grip on the cub.

The mother bear spun round. She bent her head and snuffed her cub, glaring at me with her small dark eyes. She was so close I could feel her, smell her, and hear her breath. Her lips peeled back to show the yellowed canines in her jaw.

I wanted to press myself into the ground and become rock too.

I closed my eyes. *Become spirit. Be still, be still, be still.*

I waited for bear teeth around my skull.

But nothing happened.

I opened my eyes. The bear was standing on her hind legs, her attention fixed on something in the valley. She sniffed, the tip of her nose reaching high into the air.

'*Uff!*' she grunted. A warning from deep inside her chest. '*Uff!*' She dropped down and picked up the cub. It

dangled from her mouth by its scruff, its paws curled beneath it. The mother bear leapt across the river into the shadows and was gone, leaving only spreading rings of light where her feet had touched the water.

Noy crashed down from the rocks above and crouched beside me, his face pale in the moonlight. 'I thought you were dead.'

I tried to sit up but my arms and legs were shaking.

'Come on,' he said. 'Before she comes back.'

I shook my head. 'She's gone. She heard something down there. It scared her.'

Noy stood up and looked down towards the village. 'Maybe my brother's out with his gun already.'

I pulled myself up beside Noy and clung to him. We stood side by side, straining our ears into the night.

A rumble sounded from far away across the mountains.

'There's something else,' I said. 'Listen.'

Noy frowned. 'Thunder?'

The distant rumble grew. It rose up from the valleys. The groan of engines rolled out across the still night air. The echoes sounded hollow, bouncing across far hills where

loggers had already started to clear the forest.

It was a mechanical grinding, tearing through the night.

Noy gripped my arm and turned to stare at me, wide-eyed in the moonlight.

There was no thunder.

This was no storm.

Noy ran his hands through his hair. 'They're coming, aren't they?' he said. 'They're coming to take us.'

I felt sick and hollow deep inside.

They shouldn't be here. Not yet.

Maybe if the rains had come early, they wouldn't have made it this far. Maybe their trucks' wheels would still be sliding and spinning in thick mud far below. But there had only been two days of hard rain. The long dirt road winding up from the great Mekong Valley was dust dry again. There would be nothing now to stop them.

The soldiers and their trucks would be here before the dawn.