

# A BOY AND A BEAR IN A BOAT



DAVE SHELTON

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Dave Shelton



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For Pam



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## Stepping Aboard

“Welcome aboard,” said the bear, standing and turning to face the boy. He had been holding the boat steady as the boy got in. Now he released his grip on the wooden jetty and pushed them out into the water and the boy felt an unsteadiness beneath his feet.

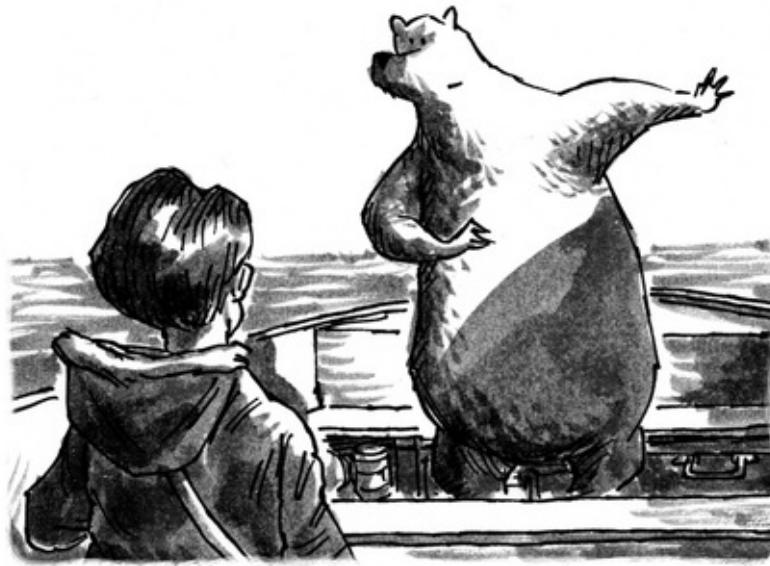
“Hello,” said the boy. The rolling of the boat put a tremble in his voice.

“Where to?” said the bear.

The boy wobbled back to the rear seat, concentrating as the hull rolled and bounced beneath him. He half sat and half fell onto the hard wooden bench, bashing his wrist painfully against the edge as he landed.

“Ow!” he said. “Just over to the other side, please.” He waved his unabashed hand vaguely out across the water without looking up.

“Right you are,” said the bear.



The boy stowed his bag beneath his seat. He found a gap in the jumble of junk already taking up most of the space there and then pushed quite hard to persuade the bag into place. There was a small crunching noise. The boy looked up guiltily towards the bear, but it seemed he hadn't heard. He was sitting on the front seat fitting the oars into place. He dipped the blade of one oar into the water and pulled on it briefly, turning the boat to face away from the jetty. The boy felt the boat wobble and then settle, and the insides of his stomach did the same. The bear took a look over his shoulder and squinted into the distance. He made a small low noise. Then he reached forward, dropped the blades of the oars into the water and pulled back on the handles in a long, easy movement, setting the boat into motion.



“Away we go,” he said.

“Will it take long?” said the boy.

“A little while,” said the bear.

Away from the shade of the jetty they were in the full glare of the sun and the boy felt itchy hot. He took off his coat and scrunched it up on the seat beside him. He looked at the bear. He was a big bear and the boat was only a small boat. When he leaned forward at the start of each stroke it was as if he were lunging towards the boy, reaching out to grab at him. And the boat pitched and rolled and bounced as if the world had become unfixed. It was a little unnerving. He would be glad to get where he was going, back on firm ground again. He looked past the bear, out over the water ahead of them.

“You can’t even see it from here, can you?” he said. “I thought you’d be able to see it.”

“No, it’s quite a way,” said the bear.

The boy leaned back and raised his face towards the sun. He closed his eyes and played with the colours of darkness he could see by pressing his eyelids more or less tightly together. He liked the greeny blue the best, but it was difficult to hold on to for long. He yawned and lolled his head forward and his eyes fell open again.

He watched the bear. It was a reassuring sight. He rowed as if it were the most natural movement he could make. As natural as walking, or breathing even. He had a steady, casual rhythm and seemed to be making almost no effort at all but the boat sped along just the same. The boy closed his eyes again and listened to the rhythm of the oars.

*Splish, splish, splish ...*

It was rather calming. And the boat was only gently rocking now, soothing rather than unsettling him. He leaned out over the side of the boat and looked down at the water, watching through half-closed eyes the dancing patterns of sunlit ripples. Then he trailed his hand in the water and made patterns of his own. The water was cold, but pleasingly so. He pulled his hand back inside the boat and yawned again. Without realising it, he had pulled his legs up onto the seat so that he was lying on it, curled up to fit the space. The sunlight on the water was too bright for comfort, so he moved his head back inside the boat, resting it on his bunched-up coat. He looked at the weave of the fabric, picked out in detail by the sunlight. He felt the warmth of the sun on his skin. He listened to the oars, steady as a heartbeat, and the gently lapping waves. He felt the sway of the boat beneath him, rocking like a cradle.

He closed his eyes.







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## Unforeseeable Anomalies

When the boy opened his eyes again he couldn't think for a moment where he was. But then the faint taste of salt on his lips, the smell of damp fur and the sound of oars dipping into water – *splish, splish, splish* – all helped remind him. And then his bleary eyes focused and he saw the bear.

Oh, yes.

He sat up, shrugging off a tatty blanket that had been draped over him, and blinked hard twice. Then he looked past the bear. There was still no sign of land ahead of them. But there was no sign of the land they'd set out from behind them either. In fact in every direction all he could see was sea and sky.

He looked at his watch but it showed exactly the same time now as it had when they had set off. He held it to his ear but it was silent.

"It's stopped," he said, sleepily.

The bear looked at him, as if noticing him for the first time.

"Good morning," said the bear.

The boy stared at him with wide, awake eyes.

"What?" he said.

"Good morning," said the bear again, a little puzzled.



"Morning?" said the boy.

"Yes," said the bear.

"It's morning?" said the boy.

"Yes," said the bear.

"So ... it's tomorrow?" said the boy.

The bear considered this.

"Well, no," he said. "Obviously it can't be tomorrow, can it? It's today. It's always today, isn't it? But, yes, it is the today that was tomorrow yesterday. If you see what I mean."

“So I slept all night?” said the boy. “I thought I’d just had a nap.”

“Oh no,” said the bear. “You were asleep for hours.”

“But,” said the boy, frowning, “doesn’t that mean we should be there by now? I mean, you know you said it would take a little while, but I thought you meant an hour or so, not a night. So shouldn’t we be there? Or at least be able to see it by now?”

“Oh, I see what you mean,” said the bear. “Well, yes, normally we would have arrived by now but unfortunately there were ... unforeseeable anomalies in the currents and we had to adjust our course a bit. So now we’re running a little behind schedule. Sorry.”

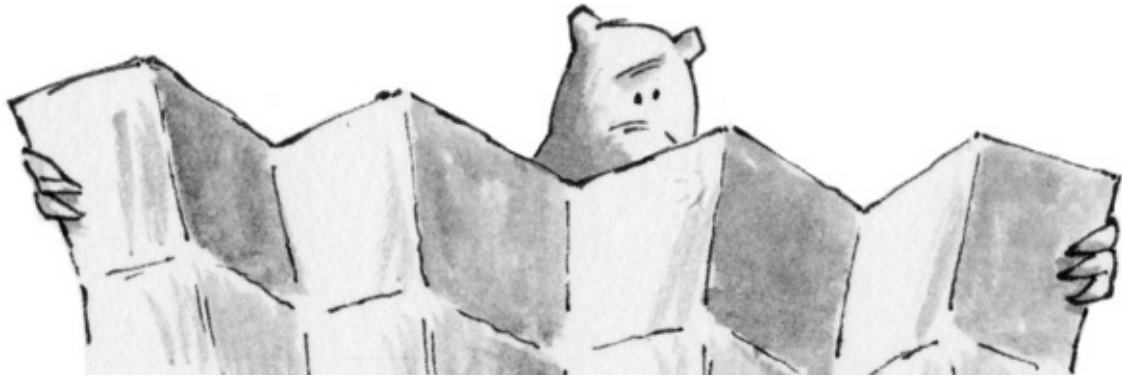
“Oh, I see,” said the boy. He didn’t see at all. “But are we *nearly* there?”

“Not really, no.”

The boy’s face fell.

“But everything is in hand,” said the bear. “Don’t worry.”

The bear stopped rowing, pulled in the oars and, with a little difficulty, took out from under his seat a large, battered suitcase. He opened it up and took out a folded-up piece of old, yellowed paper. He rather clumsily unfolded it and then held it in front of him as if he were reading a large newspaper. The side that the boy could see was unmarked, except for a few smears of dirt and a squashed bug, but one corner had flopped over so that the boy could see just a little of what was printed on the other side. There was a corner of blue with a grid marked over it and numbers along the edges. So at least the bear had a map. That was reassuring.



The bear examined the map closely. In fact, the boy could see, from his side, a bump in the paper where the bear’s nose was pressed against it. The bump moved about a bit and the bear hummed and mumbled to himself. Then the bear folded up the map (which took him three attempts), put it back in the case and took out a telescope. He put it to his eye and looked out across the sea ahead of them, and hummed and mumbled some more. Then he put the telescope away and, with a little more difficulty than it had taken to get it out, put the case back beneath his seat.

“Is everything all right?” said the boy.

The bear shook off a slight frown and turned a smile in the boy’s direction.

“Oh yes,” he said. “Absolutely tickity boo.”

The boy assumed that “tickity boo” was a good thing.

“Just need to keep an eye on where we are. Don’t want to run into any sea monsters, do we?” said the bear.

The boy was a bit alarmed by this until he realised that the bear was joking. At least, he was fairly sure he was joking, though he chose not to ask.

“And are we nearly there yet?” said the boy.

“We’re well on our way,” said the bear.

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The boy shivered and picked up his coat.

“By the way,” said the bear, “did you happen to bring any food with you?”



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## Breakfast

The boy hadn't been hungry before the bear had mentioned food but now he was ravenous. He freed his bag from beneath his seat and set about the food that he had brought with him. He ate both his sandwiches (cheese and pickle, one of each), one bag of crisps, a banana and three of his favourite fizzy blackcurrant sweets that turned his tongue purple. And he drank a bottle of ginger beer.

The bear ate too. He took out a large, scratched and dented metal lunch box from under his seat and extracted from it one small triangular sandwich (with the crusts cut off) and ate it with great delicacy in many nibbled bites, savouring each one.

A strange smell wafted over to the boy.

"What was in that?" he said.

"Broccoli, sherbet and gooseberry," said the bear. "Delicious!"

"That's a good big lunch box you've got," said the boy.

"Oh yes," said the bear, contemplating its contents once again. "I'm not really a big eater but I like to bring along plenty of sandwiches just in case."

"Just in case? In case of what?"

"Oh, you know," said the bear, daintily selecting another sandwich. "Emergencies."

"And," said the boy, as casually as he could, "do you have a lot of emergencies?"



“Oh, you know, a few,” said the bear brightly. “They keep life interesting, don’t they in emergencies?” He took a small bite from the sandwich. “Mmm ... anchovy, banana and custard. Yum!”

When he had finished, he put the lunch box away and set back to rowing, away from the nothing-at-all that lay behind them and on towards another lot of nothing-at-all ahead of them.

*Splish, splish, splish ...*

It wasn’t that the boy was worried exactly. He was sure that the bear knew what he was doing. Well, fairly sure anyway. He would just have been happier if he could have seen land. Or another boat. Or anything, really, that wasn’t sea or sky. There weren’t even any aeroplanes or birds or clouds to look at, which was a bit odd. And a bit boring.

Idly, the boy dunked his empty pop bottle into the sea and brought it up full of sea water. He turned it over, watching the thin torrent of falling water catching the light and listening to the glugs and splashes that it made. Then he did it again.

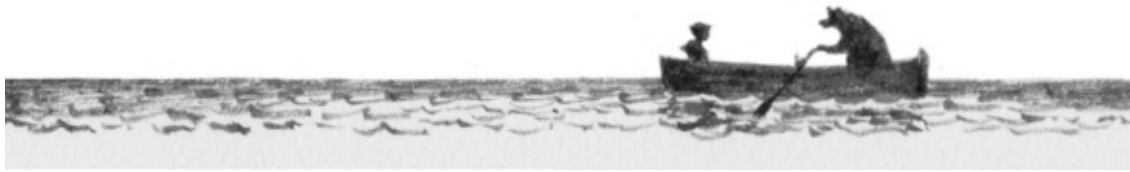
Twice was enough, it turned out. It wasn’t that interesting.

He sighed and contemplated the bar of chocolate in his bag. He loved chocolate but, on balance, decided not to have any just now. He would save it for later. In case of emergencies.

The bear was singing to himself as he rowed now, in a sweet, high, quavering voice. It reminded the boy of his gran singing hymns in the kitchen while she did the washing-up. The bear sang so softly that the boy could make out neither the words nor the tune, but it was clearly quite jolly, whatever it was, and that was rather reassuring. The bear certainly seemed to enjoy his work, grinning as he sang as he rowed. The boy decided not to disturb him with any of the questions he would like to ask. Instead, he took a look around. That didn’t take long. Outside the boat was the same view in every direction. Inside the boat the



wasn't space for very much that might be interesting to look at. The bear kept the bottom of the boat absolutely clear (he had even been careful to gather up his sandwich crumbs and put them in an old treacle tin that he used as a bin) and anything that might be worth looking at was stored under the seats in a jumble of shadows. It was a mess, and rather a boring one, just old tins and packets and boaty things, and no toys at all (apart from, curiously, a small yellow plastic duck).



The boy stood up, rather unsteadily, and stretched his limbs. He would have liked a walk but had to settle for shuffling round in a tiny wobbly circle in the cramped space between the rear and middle seats. He shuffled and scuffed and wobbled, and then, frustrated and bored, sat back down and sighed quietly. Then, when the bear failed to notice, he sighed loudly.

The bear looked up.

“Are you ... bored?” said the bear. He seemed rather puzzled by the idea.

“Well, yes, a bit,” said the boy.

“Bored?” said the bear. “How can you be bored? I don't understand it. Out on the sea on a beautiful day in the best little dinghy in all the world – what could be better?”



“Arriving?” said the boy, but the bear took no notice.

“Bored, eh? Well, I suppose you'd better try the complimentary on-board entertainment then,” said the bear.

“On-board entertainment?” said the boy, smiling expectantly.

“Oh yes,” said the bear. “You'll love this.”



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## On-Board Entertainment

It wasn't going well.

"I spy," said the bear, "with my little eye something beginning with ... um, let me see ... He looked all around, frowning. Then he looked upwards and smiled. "... S," he said.

"Sky?" said the boy wearily.

The bear looked almost shocked. Then his grin returned, wider than ever.

"That's right," said the bear. "You know, you really are very good at this."

"Thanks," said the boy, without enthusiasm.

"Your turn," said the bear.

"I spy with my little—"



"Hoy, now, you've got to have your little eye open if you're going to spy anything."

Wearily slumped on the rear seat with his head in his hands, the boy opened his eyes halfway, staring up from under furious eyebrows at the bear. He began again, his voice bored and flat.





“I spy with my little eye something beginning with S.”



“Oh, I know,” said the bear. “Hang on ...” He furrowed his brow in concentration, rolled his eyes up to one side, down at the deck, up to the other side, scrunched them shut, opened them again, tapped his foot, scratched his head, scratched his bottom, scratched an ear, muttered to himself, waggled his jaw, hummed a little. The boy half expected smoke to come out of his ears he seemed to be thinking so hard.





“Is it ... oh, no, hang on ... er ... oh, I know, it’s ... um ...”

All the eye rolling and scratching and tapping and wagging stopped for a moment and the bear looked blankly at the boy.



“Um, what did you say it began with again?” said the bear.



“S,” said the boy. *Like everything we’ve spied for the last hour*, he thought.

“Oh yes. S. Hmm, that’s a good one. Let’s see now ...”

*Oh, for goodness’ sake*, thought the boy. He looked out of the boat at the rippling water. He stared at it hard. Then he stared at the bear. Then he stared at the water again. He fixed the bear’s gaze and then nodded in the direction of the water. The bear looked at him blankly. Then, slowly, a smile arrived on his face, creeping over it like a reluctant dawn.

“Sky,” said the bear.

“No.”

“It’s not sky?”

“No.”

“Oh. I was so sure it was sky. And it definitely begins with S?”



“Yes.”

The boy nodded at the water again. Trailing his hand in it. Splashed it about a bit.

The bear had an expression of mighty concentration again but clearly wasn't taking the hint. In desperation the boy began to sing, softly, under his breath.

“A sailor went to sea, sea, sea ...” he whispered.

The bear looked around him, squinting and frowning.

“To see what he could see, see, see ...” sang the boy.

The bear looked confused.

“But all that he could see, see, see ...” sang the boy, jabbing a finger towards the water.

The bear closed his eyes and shook his head, as if trying to dislodge a thought that had gotten stuck somehow.

The boy sang louder.

“Was the bottom of the deep blue sea, sea, sea.”

He was almost shouting by the end, leaning forward and staring hard at the bear in exasperation, pointing at the water with one hand and miming a wave-like motion with the other.

“Sea?” said the bear uncertainly.

“Yes,” said the boy, slumping where he sat as if exhausted. “Well done.”

“Oh goody! My turn again,” said the bear. “I spy with my little eye something beginning with S.”

“Sky,” said the boy.

“Crikey!” said the bear. “You really are very good at this, aren't you? Have you played a lot before?”

“A bit. Look, Bear, do you think, if we're going to play, that we could maybe change your rules a bit so we can spy things *inside* the boat as well as outside?”

“Ooh no, that would make it much too hard. Besides, I don't know how to spell most of the things in here. Come on. Your turn.”

“But ...”

“Come on, just a few more rounds. I really think I'm starting to get the hang of it now.”

“But ... Oh, OK.”

The boy looked around, just in case, but all he saw was sea and sky.

“I spy ...” he said.

He leaned over the side of the boat with his arms up on the edge and his chin resting on the backs of his hands.

“... with my little eye ...” he said.

His head slumped forward, as if he no longer had the energy to hold it up. He gazed down along the side of the boat to the water.

“... something beginning ...” he said.

There was something written on the side of the boat, painted neatly in delicate joined-up writing, clear enough to read even upside down.

“... with H,” he said, a note of surprise in his voice.

He looked at the bear. The bear was smiling.

“*Harriet,*” said the bear.





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