



## Stark's Reality

### No Happy Ending for the Three Little Bears by Thom Stark

Once upon a time there were three little bears. Their names were Eenie, Meenie and Miney and they lived in the campgrounds in Yosemite Valley. The people who visited the Park thought it was cute that their mother had taught them how to beg treats from campers and steal food from their tents and cars and picnic tables and they would smile at the shenanigans of the three little bears and their mother.

But the mother bear was an irritable ursine and she wasn't at all afraid of the humans with whom she and her cubs shared the Yosemite campgrounds. Sometimes, when she was feeling grouchy, she would growl at them and, when they surprised her, sometimes she would swipe at them with her razor-sharp claws. People started calling her "Swatter" and they stopped smiling at her antics.

In 1993, Swatter swatted a camper and the nice people at the Park infirmary had to sew his neck back together for him. It took 40 stitches to close the wound. For Mike Sinley, who was the Park Superintendent back then, it was the very last straw. Swatter had to go. Sinley sent a team of Park Service wildlife biologists with orders to send her to the big campground in the sky, but he left it up to them to decide what to do with her cubs, Eenie, Meenie and Miney.

Kate McCurdy was on the team that sent Swatter down for the big sleep. Now 34 and in her tenth year at the park, the tall, redheaded McCurdy remembers that she and her teammates accepted Sinley's decision to euthanize Swatter. But they just couldn't bring themselves to put the three little bears to sleep, too, so they buried Swatter's carcass in Little Yosemite Valley and left the orphaned Eenie, Meenie and Miney in the tree where they'd taken refuge, to live or die by the law of nature.

It was a compassionate decision, but perhaps not a wise one. After her mother died, Meenie was never seen again. The sisters, Eenie and Miney, became campground cubs. They went into the family business, stealing food from careless or stupid humans, and in a short time they grew up and had little ones of their own.

Miney, who made her home at the base of Glacier Point, was destroyed in 1998, along with her two cubs. Like her mother, Swatter, Miney had become what McCurdy calls a "problematic" bear: unafraid even of firecrackers and rubber bullets, accustomed to thinking of human campgrounds as her personal territory and increasingly ready to defend that territory by aggression.

On Thursday, Eenie, the last survivor of the three little bears, had to be put down. Eenie had used up all her second chances. McCurdy and her fellow wildlife biologists had already captured her eight times over the years. Six times before, Eenie had been relocated to the deep wilderness, only to reappear in the Valley within days, always tired, hungry and adamantly determined to reclaim her territory.

Eenie's death sentence was actually passed back in May of 2000, but, as McCurdy ruefully admits, "she was a very sneaky bear" and Eenie managed to delay her day of reckoning for over a year, until time ran out.

Starting the afternoon of Sunday, the 10th of June, 2001, McCurdy and her team of three biologists and one intern worked for almost four days to capture the wily Eenie and her two 5-month-old male cubs. About 2:15 am, Wednesday morning, June 13th, they finally treed the three fugitives in Lower Pines campground.

Eenie and her cubs stayed in their tree until Wednesday evening, around 9:30 pm, when the elusive bear evidently decided the coast was clear enough for her to descend. It wasn't and Eenie was hit with a tranquilizer dart the instant she set paw on the ground. She would never be allowed to awake.

"I have the best job in the Park Service," McCurdy confesses, "except when it's the worst job in the world." Her green eyes bright with unshed tears, she continues, "It's standard operating procedure when we euthanize a bear that we don't talk to one another the rest of the day. We go home early and get drunk, instead. It sucks and we hate that part of the job. But it's better that (we biologists) do it than to leave it to the park rangers."

Before McCurdy and her team took the last of the three little bears for her final ride, they used her sleeping body as bait to lure her cubs into custody. The first of the little ones fell into the biologists' net near midnight. His brother was captured about two hours later.

Unlike their mother, the cubs escaped death by lethal injection, at least this time. Instead, the two boy bears, officially known as tag numbers 2090 and 3824, were transported to Rancho Cordova, where they were turned over to the California Department of Fish and Game to spend the next six to eight months in a wildlife refuge. Next winter, when they are old enough to take care of themselves, they'll each be fitted with radio collars and returned to the Yosemite wilderness.

"We tried this strategy with an orphan cub for the first time last year," McCurdy explains, "and, so far, it seems to be working. We can track him by his collar, so we know he's still alive and still in the Park, but nobody's actually seen that bear since. We take that as a hopeful sign."

McCurdy is determined to get across to Park visitors the message that they ultimately share in responsibility for the death of bears like Eenie.

"That bear locker is in your campsite for your food," she says, "not for your firewood. When people have food in their cars or their tents or leave pizza from the snack bar out on their picnic tables, I have a hard time blaming the poor bears for yielding to temptation."

After all, they're only human.