

Editor's Note: This piece of magical realism by William Thompson is the third installment in the Parks and Profit series, which explores the complex relationship between profit and parks historically and in present-day. The story of Felix speaks to the critical tension between preservation and providing “a good show” for tourists in national parks that negatively affects bears, like Bear 148, and other wildlife.

The bear was drunk again. He slumped in his chair, head hanging, a long lick of saliva reaching down from his graying muzzle to meet the widening spill on the table.

Not many beasts frequented the canteen, but Felix came in most days after his shift. The place wasn't built for four-leggeds, as Felix liked to point out, especially after his fifth or sixth pint. Hector would come in from time to time, clattering across the scarred, wooden floor to stand at the bar and demand whisky-mash that Omar served him in a wide bowl. Hector was a bighorn, and he and his herd worked the Park gate. But most of the beasts employed by the Park spent off-hours at the Magpie, its troughs, low tables, and wide double-doors being more amenable to a four-legged clientele.

"Lots of beasts don't like two-leggeds, anyway," Felix would say, peering up at Omar, who ran the canteen.

"Yeah," Omar would respond, trying not to grimace. "And why is that?" Omar, of course, knew what was coming.

"The stink," Felix would roar, then heave with laughter, sometimes slapping a massive, black-furred paw on the table. He had wrecked three tables that way.

"Jesus, Felix, take it easy," Omar would say. "I don't need you busting up the furniture again."

Omar often had to kick Felix out at the end of the night. "I got to go home, Felix," he would say. "I got a wife and kids, you know. Why don't you go down to the

Magpie? They're open till dawn."

Felix would belch, growl, and sigh, but he would go, peaceably enough, lumbering out into the night.

Occasionally, Felix wouldn't show at the canteen for days, and Omar would start to wonder. He liked Felix, in spite of the bear's rough humour and sometimes implacable moods.

"Felix the moody; Felix the unpredictable. That bear was going to get himself in trouble one day..."

"Have you seen Felix," he would ask one of the rangers, not wanting to sound too concerned.

"Saw him up at Horseshoe Lake yesterday. Posing with some tourists. My god, that guy is such a ham, but people love it."

Felix the ham, thought Omar. Felix the moody; Felix the unpredictable. That bear was going to get himself in trouble one day, Omar was sure.



“Campigna national park bears caught picnicing” by Su Westerman is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0



Trouble came that evening in the figure of Ernie Trimble, the Park Warden. He slammed into the canteen, pausing only long enough for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Then he spotted Felix in his corner, the bear’s head nodding over his pint.

“Felix,” called Ernie, winding his way through tables of drinkers.

Omar watched from behind the bar. It was a Tuesday evening in June—off-duty rangers, a few maintenance people, and a road repair crew. The regulars cautiously ignored Ernie, but the road crew watched curiously.

Felix raised his head to peer up at the Warden. “Evening, Ernie,” he said in a growl.

“Where the hell were you this morning?” asked Ernie, glaring. “You were supposed to be up at Athabasca Glacier. I choppered in a group of American visitors. And you were supposed to be there. I sent you a goddam memo and everything.”

“Got delayed,” said Felix.

“Doing what?”

“My job.” Felix’s voice had dropped into a deeper growl.

Omar wiped down the bar, one eye on the conversation as he started filling the ice buckets. As the Warden, Ernie had the last word on everything that happened in the Park. It was also no secret he didn’t like working with beasts.

“And what exactly does that mean?”

“Hikers that come up here want the whole experience. You know, they want to get to know the wildlife—photos and stories to take home.”

Ernie’s face was reddening. Felix continued to peer up at him.

“It means,” said Felix, slowly. “I met a group of German hikers on my way up to the glacier. They clearly wanted a show.”

“Show—what show?”

“You know. They were hiking. Not paying attention—like most two-leggeds. There’s me, walking along, minding my own business. Hikers that come up here want the whole experience. You know, they want to get to know the wildlife—photos and stories to take home.”

“What the Christ did you do, this time?”



A park visitor and a park ranger view a bear warning sign at Glacier National Park, 1958.
National Park Service photograph by Jack E. Boucher: Negative Number WASO-CO-3295-
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Ernie was beginning to froth. His glasses were steaming up. Perhaps it was the heat of the room, but Omar figured it was the heat boiling off Ernie’s face. By this

time, Omar had abandoned any pretense of cleaning the bar.

Felix lifted his mug and took another slug. He sat back, belched, and looked up again at Ernie, who stood, continuing to glower, his nostrils flaring.

“I gave them a scare—just a little scare. The whole routine, you know—stood up, like a two-legged, woofed, then charged. I took my time. Wanted them to get out of the way if they could.

“One of them must have seen too many movies, though. He climbed a tree. I did some growling and scratching, then just hunkered down and stared up at him—the moron. Stayed there for an hour. Wanted him to get lots of photos and have a good story to tell his mates.”

Ernie continued to glower and blow. “Listen to me,” he said, finally, measuring his words. “I don’t want you taking that sort of initiative anymore. It stops, now. I don’t want you acting the wild animal for the tourists. It’s not good for business.”

“That so.”

“You’re damned right. This is a National Park, not a goddamned Adventure Preserve. You want to act the wild animal, then go work at a preserve. As long as you work for me, I tell you where to be and when, and you do as I tell you. Just read your contract. It’s all there.”

“This is a National Park, not a goddamned Adventure Preserve. You want to act the wild animal, then go work at a preserve.”

Omar stared. The room had gone quiet. The regulars were now openly watching Ernie and Felix—waiting for the explosion.

Omar had worked in the Park long enough to know that you had to watch yourself around beasts. You had to treat them with respect. Some of them seemed like children, but you couldn't treat them that way. But neither were they human, and it was dangerous to make that mistake. And here was Ernie, trying to push around a two-hundred-kilogram black bear, as if Felix was a new kid in the Park, wet behind the ears from the city.

Felix lifted his mug and took another long drink. He raised his head, shifting his muzzle as if to catch an elusive scent. "My contract says I'm supposed to engage tourists whenever I see them. That means, if I run into a party of two-leggeds, I give them a show. So don't act like you can just tell me what to do. Read my contract yourself. My rights as a Park employee ain't no different than any two-leggeds."

Ernie looked as if he were trying to come up with a response.

"And, Ernie," said Felix, quietly, "don't call me an animal. It's rude. That's a word for two-leggeds, not beasts."

Ernie stared down at the bear for a moment, his face now unreadable. "Fine," he said, at last. "I got another party booked for a tour on the icefield this Thursday at 2:00. You're on the schedule, so be there."

And Ernie left the canteen. The sigh that came with the Warden's departure was almost audible.



Athabasca Gorge, Alberta. Photo Courtesy of William Thompson.

Omar heard the news a week later. It was Jenny Chan, one of the senior rangers who told him.

“Must have broken his back in the fall,” she said, watching Omar as she picked up her rye and water.

“Jesus!” said Omar. He was shocked. “Who found him?”

“Those new kids—Charlene and Jason. They had a party on the Mt. Edith trail. Charlene spotted him. She was the one who called it in.”

“Jesus!” said Omar, again.

“Yeah,” said Jenny, taking a slug from her glass. “Poor bastard. Those kids never had the chance to even get to know the old man. It was their first tour, too. And they find the body of the Warden at the bottom of a slope.”

That evening, the canteen filled with off-duty staff. The talk was all about the death of the park warden. The mood was somber, but Omar also felt uneasy as he filled pints and walked from bar to table, table to bar.

Felix came trundling in part way through the evening. He headed for his usual table—the corner table that always stood waiting for him.

Omar walked over carrying two pints. “How’s your day, Felix?”

The bear grunted, accepting one of the pints with a massive paw. Omar set the second pint on the table.

“Terrible thing about the Warden, eh?”

The words were out of Omar’s mouth before he could stop them. He felt his heart give a sudden lurch as Felix peered up at him.

“Yeah,” he said. “Terrible thing.”

“Jenny said he fell—must have lost his footing on the scree and fell. More than a hundred metres, she figures.”

“Ernie always thought he was better at climbing than a mountain goat—the stupid shit. Always thought he was better at stuff than beasts.”

“Maybe,” said Omar, and he walked back to the bar.

He watched Felix the rest of that evening, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Felix drank his usual ten or twelve pints, exchanged stories with some of the rangers, and got up to leave as Omar was closing up.

Perhaps that was it. Perhaps it was that Omar didn’t have to kick Felix out of the canteen that night—something made him wonder. Omar thought about it later, but he was never sure.

“Big day tomorrow?” asked Omar, watching Felix as he headed for the door.

“Not too bad,” said the bear, pausing in the door. “Got my usual rounds, then a big American party is supposed to arrive late afternoon. Should be interesting.”

“No doubt,” said Omar, putting chairs on tables. “Maybe you can tree one of them. You know, give them a show.”

Omar didn’t know why he said it. It might have been a joke, but it didn’t come out that way. His heart began to thump painfully in his chest, and he took longer than necessary to adjust the chair. Finally, he looked at Felix.

“It was that bestial movement once again, forcibly reminding Omar that Felix was a beast; he wasn’t just another Park employee, another human.”

The bear had turned and was facing Omar, his head raised, his muzzle swiveling, as if to catch a scent. It was that bestial movement once again, forcibly reminding Omar that Felix was a beast; he wasn’t just another Park employee, another human.

Then the bear snorted and huffed, opening his great mouth, jaws gaping to show the double row of strong teeth, a dark tongue, and a throat that seemed to open wider and wider—impossibly wide, as if to swallow the world.

Omar stood, rooted, staring into that open maw, as deep as the night sky. It grew and stretched, filling his field of vision, the teeth more like snowcapped peaks, framing a universe to which he didn’t belong. He felt caught by the presence of something alien, something unknowable, akin to the rocks and the trees and the


Felix – NiCHE


waterfalls. He was going to fall into it, or it was going to engulf him. Powerless, he stood, shrinking and cowering, as he was reduced to something that crawled, that hid and crouched in narrow spaces, its only thought to preserve the frail spark of life animating its frame.




Omar clutched at the edge of the table, doubling over, and gasping for air. His body shuddered—something like terror gripping him from head to foot. And when he was able to look up once again, Felix was gone, vanished into the quiet darkness, leaving behind nothing save a musty scent, a trace of something wild, that drifted for a moment, until it, too, vanished into the night.

Feature Image: Mount Edith Cavell in Jasper National Park, Alberta. Photo courtesy of William Thompson.

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