

The Mean Old Man

BY WAYNE POULSEN

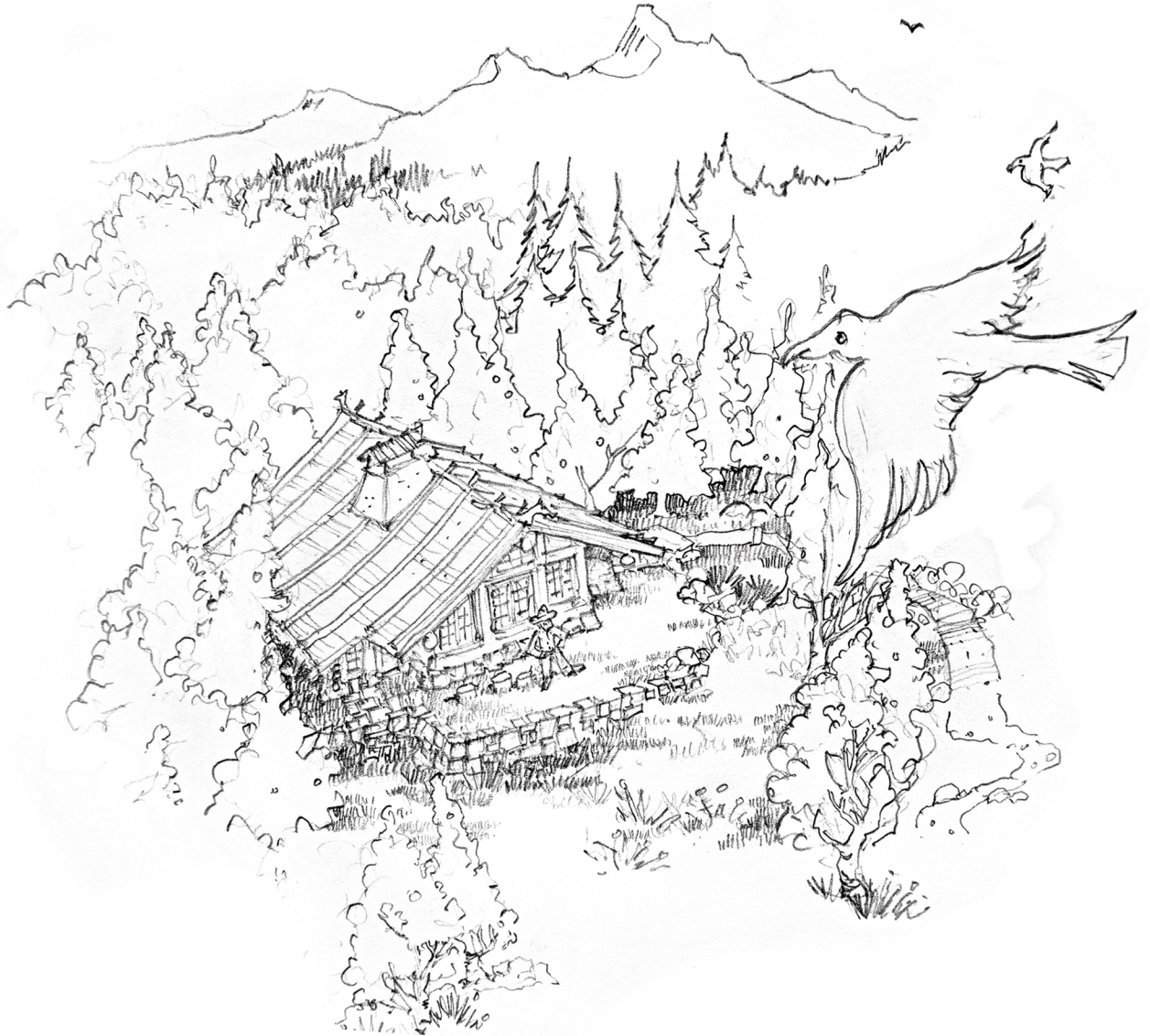
*T*his book is dedicated to Lavinia, with all my love.

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nce upon a time, there was a stingy old man who lived in a log cabin high up in the mountains. He was known as a stingy old man because he had lived far away by himself for so long that he had forgotten how to share himself and his things with other people.

He also had a silly way of saying to himself “Well, if I made every-thing for myself, why can’t other people do the same?!”



*H*e was a lonely old man and he was not bothered much by other people, only, perhaps by the mice and other little beasties who lived around his house.

These mice were the first to notice how stingy he was. They would tiptoe around the house at night, very quietly cleaning up the left-over crumbs of food from here and there, except sometimes when a bad little mouse would stage a noisy raid on the old mans favorite bag of chips.




The old man chased the mice and the mice hid and played games to make fun of the old man. They enjoyed living a little bit dangerously but every now and then the old man caught one of them and that was not a very happy ending for the mouse. Still, the mice liked the old man as they talked among themselves and told their little ones about their thrilling adventures and their close escapes.



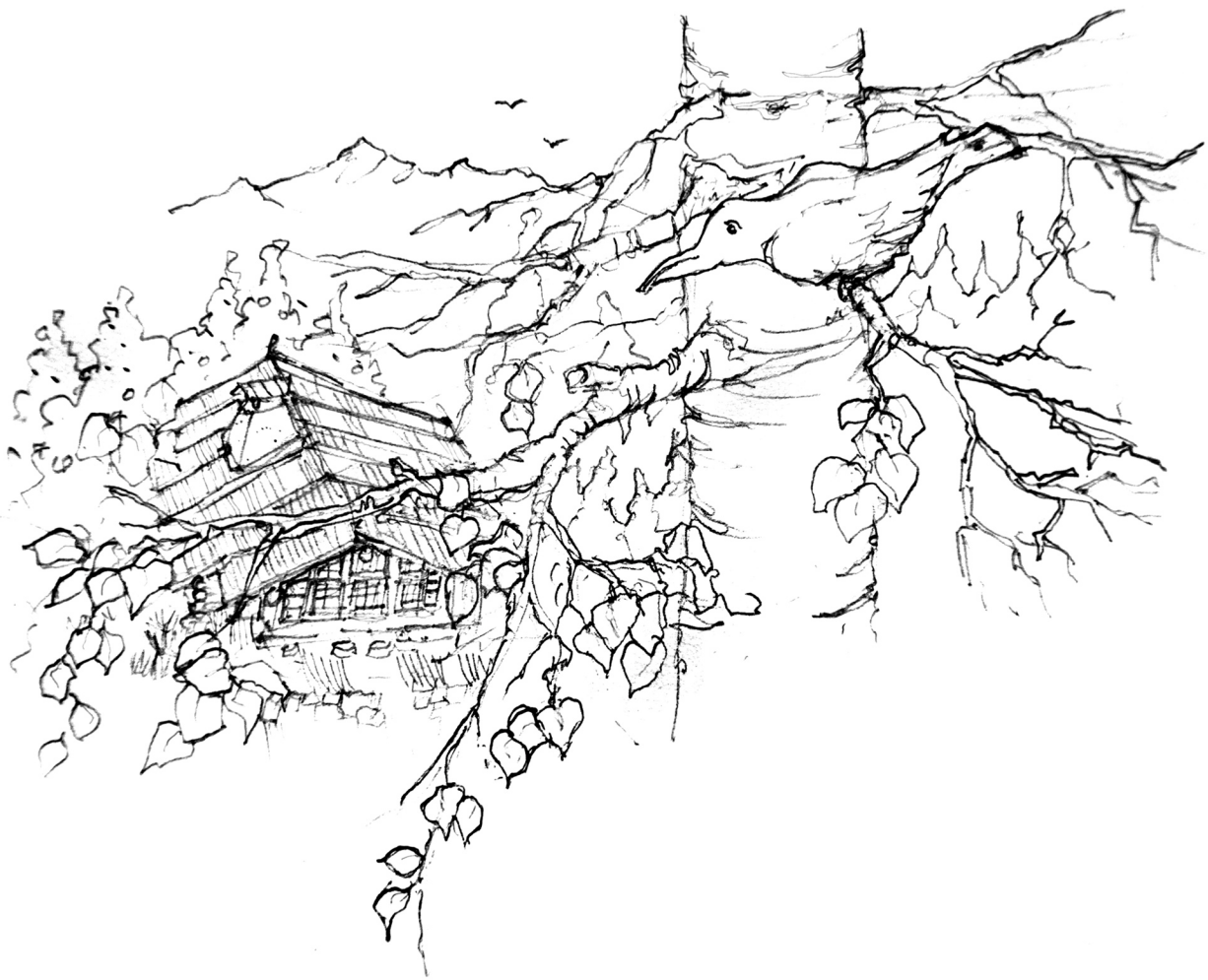
Sometimes, too, when they chanced to go outside the house the mice would talk to other animals and they would often tell them about the stingy old man.

They told their stories to Mr. Mole and then to Mrs. Shrew. They said “The old man has so many nice things, plenty of food and lots of leftover crumbs, but he does not want to share them; he is so strange!”



t went on like this, it seemed, for a long time. The other animals talked too. Mrs. Shrew was pushing soft earth up out of her hole when she saw young Miss Chipmunk, and they got to talking. And it wasn't long before Miss Chipmunk told her handsome cousin Squirrel about all she had heard.

Young Squirrel was very conceited and he scampered up to the top branches of the pine tree where he sat preening his tail and chattering to any other animals who would listen.



Then Mrs. Fox was digging in the ground for grubs when she encountered Mr. Mole just emerging from a tunnel and they also shared the story of the old man.

Mrs. Fox thought that the story was funny and that evening when she went back to her den with a mouthful of food for her family she told the story which she had heard from Mr. Mole to Mr. Fox and the circle of little kit foxes as they lay in their warm cubbies all around the walls of their den.



And so the story spread.

Mr. Coyote was howling it to the moon and the dark winged raven brothers cawed it back and forth as they sliced the air up high with their dark shadows zippering and dappling the forest below. The robins tweeted, the hawks called it out to the mountain tops and the bees buzzed it.

The great-antlered elk heard it and shook their heads wisely, even the fat deer and the mountain sheep paused in their browsing to lift their heads and listen.







One day a great old bear heard this tale which was carried songlike on the wind. This story interested him because he was wise in the ways of bears and of men, and he considered it thoughtfully as he rambled slowly around the mountainside eating fresh berries and clawing open old logs looking for tasty termite colonies.

The old bear decided that it was again time to call together a council of the animals.



Old Mr. Bear sat down at his place in a circle of the other animals and said, “I am sad that this old man who lives with us here on this mountain is so stingy. He is one of us, but he does not act like it. He does not share.

Perhaps the problem is that he does not know that he is one of us”. “But”, he said, “I have a plan”.



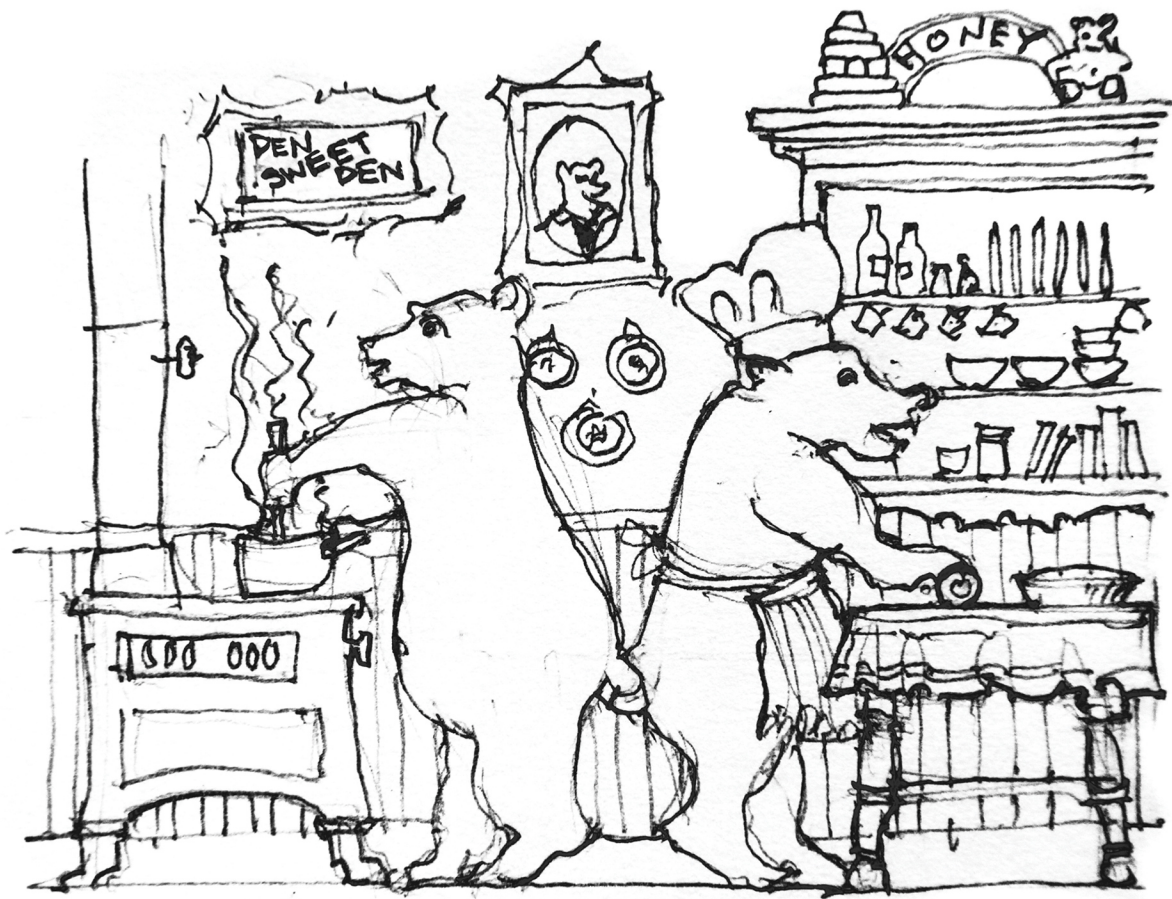
*H*e motioned for all the other animals to lean in closer together, and they huddled so close that the smaller animals and birds were crowded onto the heads and shoulders of the larger ones, and the blue jay and the camp robber perched on the antlers of the elk.

Then the old bear, who also knew a thing or two about log cabins, whispered his plan to the gathered animals of the mountain. It was a fun plan and they were delighted. They all agreed to help, and they waited.

*T*hey waited for some days, for the rising of the next full moon when they knew that the old man would be returning from town with a bag of groceries for his kitchen and books and candles and other strange sundries which old men keep around their houses.

Now! in the days while they were waiting each of the animals and birds went out around the mountain side to gather just the kinds of foods and sweets that they might place on their own table.

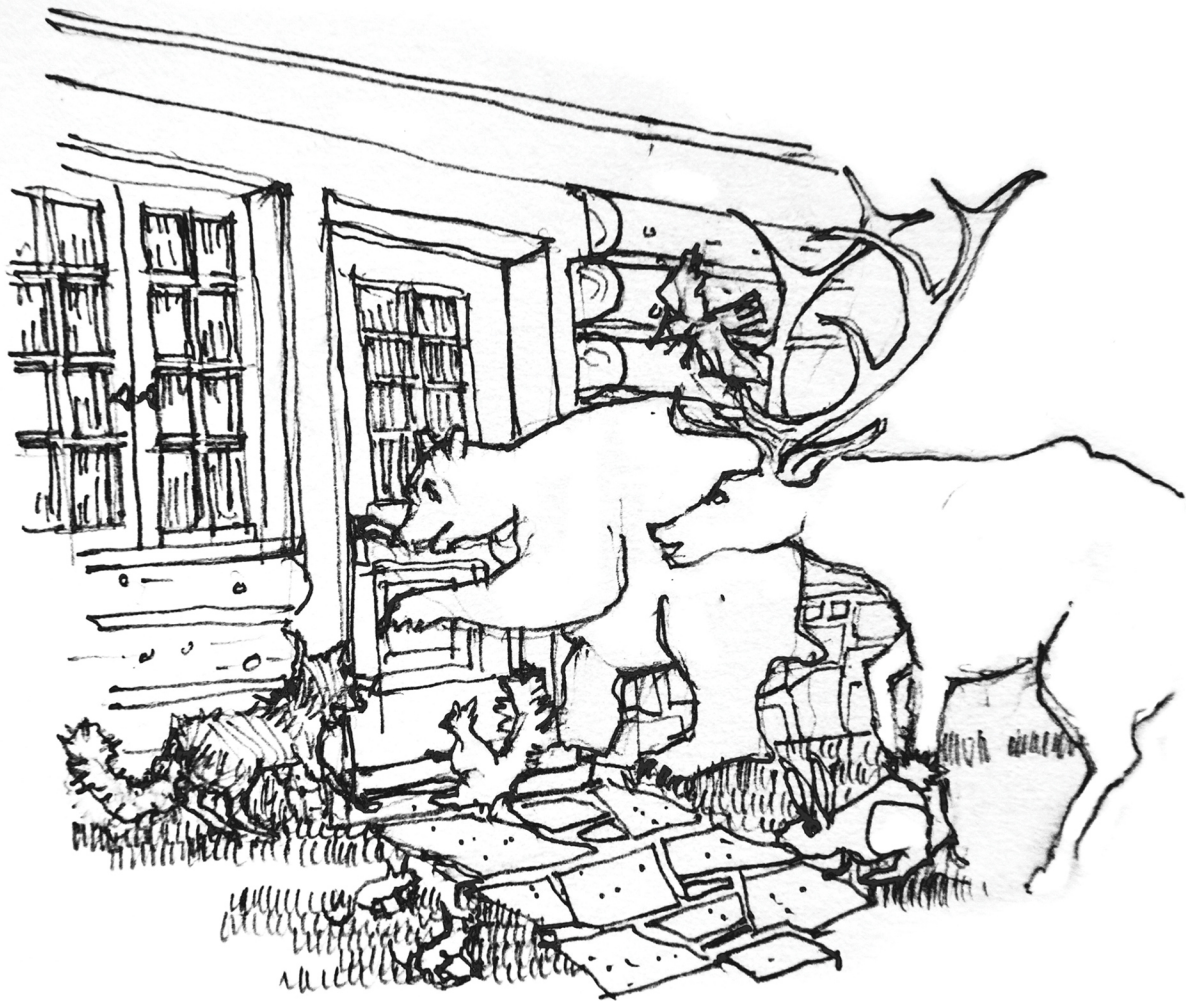
The mice collected seedpods from the milkweed, Mrs. Shrew collected the juiciest roots of tender young trees. Mrs. Fox collected a basket of pretty little quails eggs, and Mr. Coyote brought a hunters satchel of tender young bunny rabbits. The squirrels brought cheeks full of delicious acorns and pine nuts. The elk bought bunches of sweet smelling grasses, the deer brought little bags of the nutty buds of the mountain Gambel Oak, the robins brought delicious worms and, not least, Mr. Bear brought a big jar of jam and his most tasty berry preserves.





Of course the crows brought their delicacies too, collected from the roads and rubbish heaps, but the less said about this, the better.

The animals came with all of their delicacies and sweetmeats and presents all together, and stored them, while they waited, in Mr. Bears den for safe keeping. Finally, on the appointed evening, they carried their collected treasure up to the door of the old man's cabin.



The bear had been helping all the other animals and he was the last to arrive with his jars of jams and jellies. When he arrived he hushed the other animals as he walked slowly up to the door of the old mans cabin in his gruff and deliberate way and, after a short pause in which he examined the lock, he pulled down firmly on the lever and, lo, the door stood open.

Noiselessly, Mr. Bear stepped into the house, inviting in all of the animals with their baskets and their foodstuffs.

In the light of the rising full moon the animals set about transforming the deserted cabin into a harvest festival of tasty food and décorations drawn from the natural artist's gallery of the forest. They hurried to place all of the decorations just so, to be ready for the moment when the old man would return from town. They even lit a jolly fire in the fireplace and they were just finishing when they heard his tired footsteps plodding up the path.

The old man trudged up to the house, his old hat pulled snugly down over his head against the evening chill. He did not see or hear anything unusual until he opened the door and stepped inside to be greeted with the warm fire in the fireplace, the festoon of woodland decorations around his poor interior and the dinner table piled high with wholesome treats and surrounded by all his animal neighbors from the mountainsides.



The old man just stood stonily as his lips twisted in a strange smile, and then, as if in a dream he slumped slowly, but still smiling, into his favorite chair. He had no idea what to do or say.

Now it was time for Mr. Bear and the great noble elk to help the old man, taking him gently by the shoulders and seating him at the head of the table.

He blinked his eyes and looked around slowly at all of his mates circling the table; at Mr. Fox and Coyote, sitting up straight with their polished silverware at the ready, the bees in a cute little hive carried in for the occasion, the deer and Mr. Bear in their seats with the squirrels and Miss Chipmunk and the birds perched on their shoulders or wherever else they could fit on the candle-sticks and the high chairbacks. The crows, of course, hung from the chandelier above and kept up an incessant racket.


*B*ut now Mr. Bear told the crows to hush, and knowing that the old man did not, even now, know the language and songs of all the animals and birds he took his honey stirring stick from under his arm and began to wave it back and forth slowly, just like a concert master, as all the animals began to sing a song in unison of welcome and grace.

They sang with an enchanting and intermingling chorus of voices, until it seemed that even the flames in the fireplace leaped for joy.



*M*r. Bear was such an unlikely concert master and yet he was so strong and steadfast that he seemed the perfect leader. His deep voice provided the melodious bass, like the muffled rumble of distant thunder, which carried all of the other squeaks, yaps, barks and trills in a mountain song as wild as the twinkling stars in the moonlit sky above. It was not long before the old man and all the others had fallen under the spell of the song. The whole company seemed to rise and sway to and fro before his old eyes.



ven Mr. Bear seemed to become as light as air and to float freely on the swelling tones of the music. The song went on for a very long time. No one could say how long. But finally, as the moon had moved slowly in its arc over the peak of the roof, and was now slanting through the windows on the west side of the cabin and the sky over the distant peaks was bleeding rose-white with dawn, Mr. Bear reduced his voice to a long, low and throaty hummmmm.

*H*e gave the sign for the animals to eat and to refresh themselves, and he made sure that the old man's plate had plenty of fresh delicacies from the forest to eat and that there were fermented juices to drink, and especially, a selection of Mrs. Bear's special berry desserts.

As they had sung, so they ate and drank, in unison and with joy, and the wee hours of the morn wore on in tune to the raveled sleeve of time. They were happy.

As the moon set, and the fire died down, and the cabin began to soak in the early chill of the moments before dawn, the animals, as noiselessly as they had arrived, began to melt back into the forest. Mr. Bear's enchanting drone had died away with last hot coals of the fire. The old man had begun to nod as Mr. Bear and the noble elk carried him carefully off to bed.



*T*hey laid him down gently and pulled his old blankets up to his chin. Then, they too melted out the door and away into the forest, as quiet and forgotten as the last shadows cast by the dying moon.



The sky blushed and the sun rose and the sweet breath of a new day spilled over mountain and valley. The old man awoke quite a bit later than usual but finding that he felt wonderful. He sat up and he peered around his little cabin. Something was different, he thought, but he couldn't tell exactly what. He made himself some breakfast and sat down in warm sunshine to a good meal. As he cleaned up the table he made sure to leave some of the left-over crumbs out for the mice. He smiled. He lived happily ever after.

The End



