

Riding the Moon

by Susan Daniels

When you're in that stage of your career we call the "struggling actor" stage, you do a lot of jobs for contacts, for exposure, for survival. I washed windows, counted parking lot tickets, helped a doctor perform vasectomies. Oh, I was hired to act, too, from time to time. I played a Barbara Walters look-a-like called "Beth Israel" in a comedy sketch about The Bible. I was paid to be a placenta in a performance art piece in Golden Gate Park. I wore a balloon on my head. That was to let the audience know I was a placenta. What I remember about that job was that it was really windy that day and my balloon was all over the place and my ex-husband was in the front row consuming an entire six pack of Budweiser. He said it was the only way he could get through the show. And he's not a drinker. The job that most consistently paid the rent, though, and that exposed me to some very colorful characters, was when I was hired to perform as a Care Bear.

The Care Bears started out as a product dreamed up by a greeting card company, sort of a bear version of The Seven Dwarves. They all had personality names, like Good Luck Bear, Bedtime Bear, Tenderheart. Each had a symbol on his belly that went with his name. Birthday Bear had a little cupcake, Wish Bear a star, Tenderheart a heart. Of all the bears, my personal favorite was Grumpy Bear. Every actor who ever played Grumpy Bear boasted a checkered past and a bad attitude. Grumpy guys played grumpy

bears and mothers across America seemed to sense Grump's need to be cheered up, as they screamed across parking lots their request for one of his big bear hugs. Grumpy's outer appearance always looked excited and ready, but we knew that the jaded gay guy inside the fur was actually sneering: "Be careful what you ask for, mothers; mine's huge!" He'd then stumble over to the line of giggling, stretch pants-clad moms and one at a time proceed to hump their legs. You couldn't help but love him.

Children came from miles around to see The Care Bears. They read the books, bought the videos, chanted the songs. They glutted the malls wearing their Care Bear tee shirts, gripping their Care Bear tote bags and spending every last dollar from their parents' Care Bear wallets. These bears were hot. They were a Marketing Director's dream. And, in the Children's Theatre circuit, to be a Care Bear was to be one of "the chosen ones."

There were five groups of bears, and we all met at LaGuardia Airport every Friday night in preparation for our flights around the U.S. We called it "doing the mall thing in a covered head," and after every lucrative weekend, we laughed all the way to the bank. We performed in shopping malls that announced our coming with giant flashing signs and billboards: "Care Bears, Live!" Pizza vendors created entire pizzas around our theme, topping their pies with olive eyes, mushroom noses, and bacon bits for fur. Once we were driven to the mall in a stretch limousine.

We were so big that when Thanksgiving time rolled around, the announcement was made that The Care Bears were going to have their own float in The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The featured performer on that float would be Miss America. The excitement and anticipation that spread throughout the Care Bears Fan Club was

tempered only by the malicious competitiveness and backstabbing that went on among us when we heard that only one group of bears would be selected to appear on the float.

One out of five; bad odds for a bear.

After a week of auditions, which basically consisted of kissing up to the casting directors (“I’m serious; it would be an honor to climb into that bear suit on Turkey Day!”), all the performers had been chosen but one. From what I could hear through the Care Bear grapevine, they were still looking for someone to be Bedtime Bear, and the job had two main requirements. One: You had to be a veteran Care Bear and Two: You couldn’t be afraid of heights. It seemed that the job of Bedtime Bear was to ride atop a huge moon that would peak the glittery Care Bear float, gliding Miss America down Broadway until she arrived at that magic destination—the front of Macy’s department store, Thanksgiving morning. As soon as I heard about the requirements, I went straight to the top. I told the owner of the Care Bears that if she was looking for someone to play Bedtime Bear, I was her bear. I had most certainly earned the title “Veteran” after three years of dancing my way through shopping malls from Amigoland, Texas, to King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, to The City of Industry, California. And then came the height detail. I told her not only was I *not afraid* of heights, I, in fact, *loved* heights. I recalled every childhood height story I could think of: jumping off of barn roofs with umbrellas, (Mary Poppins,) falling out of trees, arms outstretched and thinking of Christmas, (Peter Pan,) and then I hit her with The Big One. I told her that my love affair with heights had eventually brought me to the high diving team in college. This was a lie, of course; I don’t think my school had a pool, much less a diving team, but I wanted the job. Only one spot left on the float. The float with Miss America. The Macy’s Thanksgiving Day

Parade float with Miss America. Riding atop a freakin' moon overlooking all of Broadway—all of America—on the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade float with Miss America. This job had “you're special” written all over it.

The woman who owned The Care Bears was named Candy Kane. Candy was 45 years old, but tried her best to convince you she was 7. When she stood on her toes, which she did a lot, she was about five feet tall. She had tiny red hair. Straight, tiny red hair. Her entire head looked like a casualty of being too close to a bad state fair's July Fourth fireworks. Candy plucked her eyebrows; I'm not talking “reshaping,” I'm talking plucked them out so that she could draw them on herself with a brown Crayola crayon. She painted her rouge right on the apples of her cheeks, which was no small feat, given that at her age, her “apples” look more like cores. However, she did her best to apply it in almost perfect circles. Perfect pink circles. Candy's black false eyelashes completed the doll-like look she was going for. The problem, of course, was that she wasn't a doll. She was a forty-five year old woman and the manager of a business. A very stressful business. So this doll-like appearance, combined with a nervous personality and the fact that her voice sounded like she had been sucking helium balloons all day made Candy seem like an aging cartoon lady in a doll's dress and that someone had wound up her key way too tight.

“Well...” she said suspiciously, after scrutinizing my diving team lies, “There will be no falling or diving in this job. But it does call for someone who's not afraid of heights. This job requires a very brave bear.” With the straightest face I've mustered in my career, I managed to mumble: “I'm your bear.” She said she had to think about it. The next day, I had the job.

There was to be one rehearsal of the float show, where we would be given our dance moves for the big performance in front of Macy's, and where the NBC crew could line up its shots. The shots would be determined from watching Miss America's song and by noticing which bear seemed to be the cutest or most photogenic. You've never seen a cuter, more photogenic, more competitive group of actors file into the rehearsal that morning.

We met in a large, cold Mid-Manhattan dance studio displaying seven metal folding chairs approximating our positions on the float. My chair was in the center. The other bears noticed this immediately, and there was a lot of talk about it, a lot of darting eyes and snarling. "Who'd you have to screw to get *that* spot, Bedtime Bear?" I tried not to notice their jabs, and obediently circled up with the others. Some NBC techie quickly gave us our dance moves, and we were informed that our float was to have a "Magic" theme to it; we'd all be using magical props, while we danced and interacted with Miss America. As Bedtime Bear, I would sit on the moon, so my "dance moves" consisted of simply swaying back and forth to the music. However, my prop, they informed me, was crucial to the look of the show. "Crucial," to me, meant "close-up", and I was thrilled. When Miss America walked by me on the float, singing "I really need a friend to comfort me," I would toss a handful of paper hearts off of the moon, so that they would float about her head and shoulders as she looked up in a magical surprise. Definitely a close-up.

As the bears took a break, in walked Miss America. I'm talking classic Miss America. Like every Miss America you've ever seen on every television pageant, Miss America. Big hair, big teeth, big breasts. Big southern accent. I kept looking for her

crown and her rose bouquet. She immediately began schmoozing with the NBC guys and introducing them to her agent, her manager, her vocal coach, and her hairdresser, and then broke free of her entourage just long enough to embrace the bears and gush “I just want y’all to know how *thrilled* I am to be on the Care Bear Float. You know, I have a boyfriend who’s a football player, and I call him *my* Care Bear.” Grumpy rolled his eyes at me and mumbled, “Mm. Hmm. And that’s why she’s Miss America, and we’re in the bear suits.”

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My alarm went off at 4:30 in the morning on Thanksgiving Day. It was pitch black outside and pouring rain. Pouring. Hard, loud. Like the kind of rain you only see in the movies because it’s being simulated by a bunch of guys standing on a roof with fire hoses pointing down. The parade didn’t start ‘til 9, though, so I just chalked it up to funky middle of the night weather, and dressed for the commute into Manhattan: sweats, an orange rain poncho, rubber boots. I was living in The Bronx at the time, and even though I usually braved the subways, the combination of the early hour, the weather, and the fact that it was Thanksgiving Day convinced me I could treat myself to a cab.

It was beginning to hail as the cab pulled up in front of the huge midtown convention hotel where all the float people were supposed to meet. In the lobby, instead of the usual billboard-type celebrity greeting, I spotted a hand-scrawled sign on a piece of notebook paper taped to the wall by the elevator, with the single word “Parade” on it, and an arrow pointing “up”. Thank God I remembered we were meeting on the 26th floor; otherwise I would have been lost in that huge building all morning with hundreds of other parade people searching “up” for their float floors. A Care Bear nightmare.

The soaked performers crossed the now soggy 26th floor carpet, clutching their take out coffee as assistants herded them into rooms labeled “Spiderman,” “Cabbage Patch,” and “Muppet Babies.” Candy Kane met us in our designated room, making sure we each tried on our bear several times, that we checked for any missing body parts, and that we were able to perform all our dance moves in the suits. I was beginning to get nervous. For me, the top three Rules of Show Business were 1: Learn your lines, 2: Check your props, and 3: Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. Well, there were no lines in this show, we wouldn’t be given our props until 30 seconds before NBC started filming, and nothing yet, in my opinion, had even approximated a “rehearsal.” I rehearsed myself as best I could. I sat in a chair and practiced swaying back and forth on the “moon” I had yet to see and to music I could only imagine. I even practiced tossing imaginary hearts into the air, trying the right arm and then the left, in anticipation of my camera close-up.

Despite the early hour and lack of preparation, though, I found myself getting pretty excited about the whole thing. I think what impressed me the most was when I pulled Bedtime Bear out of the box, smelled the fur and realized that the suit had been dry cleaned for the first time ever.

This day was going to be big.

Armed with our newly fluffed suits and official Macy’s Parade turkey badges, we boarded a shuttle bus, where Candy Kane proceeded to stand on her toes and give the final speech to the Bears.

“This is the last time I’ll be alone with you bears until the parade’s over, so I want you all to listen up, dammit! Today, you will be seen by millions and millions of people, both on the streets of New York, and on national television.” Her pointed hair began to

quiver with excitement. “Not only do you represent one of the biggest greeting card companies in the world, but because you’re appearing with Miss America, you represent our country, and the children of our country; what we stand for, hope for, dream for.”

While Candy started to choke herself up, Grumpy made obscene gestures to Funshine Bear in the back and groped around under the seat for his missing pack of Camels.

Like a marionette providing sign language for her own puppet show, Candy Kane continued, making wooden gestures to go along with every descriptive word in her speech: “Each of you bears has been hand picked,” Candy reminded us, her arm shooting out of its socket like a human pop sickle stick so she could single us out on the words “hand picked. “You are among the privileged, today. I love you guys, you know that. But if I catch even *one* of you without your head on in public, you’ll never work in this town again!” She then made us chant like disobedient school children, “We will not appear in public without our heads, we will not appear in public without our heads, we will not...”

Our shuttle screeched to a halt at 81st Street and Central Park West. Out of my fogged window, I could see partially inflated balloons—Superman, Mighty Mouse, Underdog—some stretching half a city block, lying under the streetlights like sleeping giants gradually waking from a year long nap. Through the drizzle on that cold, gray dawn, it appeared as if I was watching some weird Film Noir with half puffed men, dogs and rodents rising slowly in segments from the streets of New York.

Grumpy located his Camels, tucked them into the elastic band of his underwear, and we all single-filed out of the bus.

Central Park West was abuzz with activity. Parade officials, wired with headsets, walkie talkies and gripping Macy's clipboards, barked orders, listened to radio static and gestured wildly as busloads of bands from every small town in America pulled into their designated parking areas. Television camera crews were setting up on van tops, roof tops, tree tops. Costumed performers were everywhere. Oversized Tom and Jerrys chased each other through puddles; ample-busted bumblebees practiced their dance routines in garbage-filled alleys, a walking bottle of chocolate milk stopped to say "hello." And the clowns! I'd never seen so many clowns. Happy clowns, sad clowns, wet clowns, mean clowns. There were more clowns there than Macy's clipboards. There were a lot of clowns.

We were told we'd be placed in a "holding area" until the rain let up a bit, and Candy Kane's Crayola eyebrows went way up when she announced we'd been given the number one holding area: The Museum of Natural History.

Looking back on all of this, I'm still amazed that anyone was able to get permission to use this revered historical site, this national landmark to keep parade performers from getting wet. The Thanksgiving Day Parade was now taking on epic proportions for me. I felt as if Fate had chosen me to be a key player in a highly select group chosen to carry out a magical mission.

And once inside the building, we'd be allowed to take off our heads.

The massive bronze doors to the museum swung open, and a shaft of light cut through the cigarette smoke that rose like a mist from the cavernous lobby. Through the fog, I could make out sounds of inhaling, hacking, slurping, and mumbling as headless

performers in fur suits huddled in clusters on the tile floor, clutching their cigarettes and diet sodas, sharing war stories of careers that never happened.

As the smoke started to clear and my eyes adjusted to the dimness, the museum itself began to emerge.

Angry, stiffened birds glared at us through glass boxes, their heads cocked, accusingly. Their narrowed eyes seemed bloodshot and watery from the smoke.

An upright Grizzly, all muscles and teeth, locked eyes with me. Staring back at him, mesmerized, I heard him growl: “And you call yourself a bear?! You morons have hearts on your tummies! I see Velcro running down your back! Your fur’s been dry cleaned, for God’s sake! Don’t even look at me!”

I turned away obediently, suddenly ashamed.

“Twenty minutes ‘til places!” one of the stage managers barked.

A sixty-year-old man smoking Lucky Strikes in a duck suit shifted his huge webbed feet and motioned for us to sit down with him and share some coffee. I noticed he had positioned himself as far away from the duck display as possible.

“Those losers in the clown suits,” he grumbled. “They all work at Macy’s for minimum wage, and then they come out here, volunteerin’ in a freakin’ *downpour* when they should be home with their families, eatin’ turkey like the rest of the world, but *no-o-o!* Someone told ’em it was a privilege, an *honor* to be part of this charade, so here they are runnin’ around in clown suits. For nothin.’ Freakin’ nothin.’ You guys look like you’ve got a good contract. You ever work for The Mouse?”

He took a long drag on his cigarette.

I placed my head on the floor next to me, leaned back and closed my eyes, attempting to block out the nightmarish echoing of coughs and complaints, trying to avoid the stares of the stuffed.

“Show time!” the stage manager hollered. “Let’s go!”

Grumpy heaved himself into a standing position and stumbled toward the front door, mumbling something about sitting ducks, and life imitating art.

We all followed. Emerging from our forced hibernation, we donned our heads, stretched our limbs and squinted through slits into the glare of the glistening street.

Candy Kane pulled us aside for another one of her impassioned speeches. She was standing on a box now, in order to see us all, and between her high pitched voice and the way she was gripping her Care Bear umbrella, she reminded me of the classic circus clown on top of the burning building: manic, screaming and too scared to jump.

“OK, guys. I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is that the rain seems to be easing up. The bad news is that Miss America woke up this morning with a temperature of 103. Now don’t panic, she’ll still be performing today, but your rehearsal with her will be short. Once through the song and that’s it. So be sure to make the most of your time.”

We all grabbed each others’ paws, follow-the-leader style, as Candy led us over to the float. We could only see it in sections, though. Wearing a “covered head” dooms you to a life of claustrophobia and tunnel vision, as you see by looking through cardboard cutouts positioned about three inches away from your real eyes, and talking can only be achieved by lifting the head slightly and yelling through the neck. From what I could piece together, the float was pale blue, pink, and white. It glistened in the rain, like a

towering sugar coated box of Lucky Charms. Lots of hearts, lots of stars. I tried to find the moon. I tilted my head up. Up. UP. That moon was way up there. Originally, I had imagined the moon to be a Swiss-cheesy full moon kind of thing with a built-in seat and a ladder you climbed to get into it. The moon I was looking at was a crescent moon. A very narrow crescent moon with two distinct points. No seat. No ladder.

“How am I going to get up there?” I managed to grumble through my neck.

One of the parade officials spotted some construction worker friends on 79th street and hollered: “Hey, Joe, Harry, Leo—you wanna help send a bear to the moon?” They howled uproariously, as the three stooges ambled across the street and proceeded to shove me by my furry bottom, up Up UP. I swung my chubby bear leg over the moon, and tried to sit straight. I couldn’t; I was fat, I was blind, I was slipping. I lay down and hugged the moon for dear life. I, who had boasted about my “love of heights” a mere few weeks before, was now trembling uncontrollably, cursing Candy Kane, and vowing that next year the main requirement for sitting on the moon would read: “Performer should have no concern over whether she lives or dies.”

I felt a hard object poke me between the legs and discovered that it was a tiny metal loop screwed into the moon. I hollered down to one of the parade crew, who told me he had no idea what that loop was for, but if he were me, he’d use it to hold on to! I gripped it as tightly as my furry paw would allow and managed to pull myself into a seated position. However precariously, I was, at last, sitting on the moon.

I angled my head down and spotted a dollhouse sized Miss America being helped from the back of a Chevy Impala by some matronly escort carrying a crown in a Ziploc bag. Miss America looked like hell. Her big Texas hair was now small and matted,

pinned close to her head by rows of metal hair clips. She looked pale, pathetic and soggy, as she inhaled the steam from her Styrofoam cupped tea.

Within seconds, the float began to shake, the moon began to rock and I could hear a rhythmic pounding beneath me. To my horror, I realized that either the East Coast was experiencing its first earthquake in centuries, or, worse, the rehearsal had started without me! I strained my ears to hear the music that must be playing. Nothing. I tilted my head as far over the moon as my nerves would allow. Just tops of bear heads, moving and swaying. It didn't matter that I still hadn't seen what my paper hearts looked like that I was to scatter to the wind. Now, I couldn't even see Miss America. I couldn't hear the cue she was supposed to sing. I couldn't do anything but sit on a moon and hold on to a loop. I started to yell. The head was too big. The moon was too high. No one could hear my muffled screams.

Three more big shakes and the pounding stopped. The rehearsal was over. Panicking, I picked up my bear head and stuck my entire *face* through the neck in an effort to get Grumpy's attention. "What the hell am I supposed to do? I can't tell what you guys are doing down there, I can't hear anything but pounding; I have no idea when I'm supposed to throw my prop! Help me out!"

How ironic that the cue I strained to hear was "I really need a friend to comfort me."

Grumpy must have sensed my desperation; he was unusually helpful. "Use your best guess. The Prom Queen walks under you about halfway through the song. Just estimate and toss!"

Just estimate and toss.

Right.

Easy for old Grump to say. He had his feet on the ground. He had dance moves to rely on. He had Miss America.

I had no clue and a close-up.

I spotted a Master of Ceremonies below us, one street up. This guy looked like he was in charge of everything. He had the headset, the walkie-talkie, the clipboard and a megaphone. He was, clearly, Mr. Parade. I corrected my posture, took three deep breaths and from inside Bedtime's head, I tried to sing a few bars of "My Favorite Things" to calm myself down. The only version I know of the song is Julie Andrews singing it in *The Sound of Music*, so there I was, straddling a paper mache moon and singing with a British accent: "Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens..."

The rain was falling in a steady drizzle now, but the parade remained impressively on schedule. Shortly before nine, Central Park West became like a shuttle launch site, as everyone from 78th street – 81st shouted in unison "10, 9, 8, 7..." until we all cheered "One!" and a bellowing fog-horn honk sounded the start of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Mr. Parade played the perfect traffic cop, merging with precision everything from helium balloons to mean clowns, and timing it all to the second.

"Go Sacred Heart Marching Band," he commanded through his megaphone.

"Go Kermit!"

I sat up straight and out of my eye slits saw the giant frog take its place on Celebrity Row. We were next.

"Go Bears!"

The float beneath me lurched forward, and once more my oversized, soggy paw gripped for dear life the dime-sized loop between my legs. I heard a Care Bears song sung by Carole King blaring from speakers on the float and I tried to create a rhythm to it as I waved my free paw to the music while simultaneously rolling forward with my pelvis. The bears were already making lewd comments about me straddling the moon and cackled hysterically through choruses of “Bedtime Bear Makes Your Dreams Come True!” Grumpy kept yelling up to me that I should just relax and enjoy what would be forever referred to as “The Ride of a Lifetime,” and begged me several times to trade places with him.

“Please give me a ride! Let me straddle that moon! Pleeeeeeease!”

Despite the rain, the loop and the lurching moon, the view from my tunnel-visioned cutouts was spectacular: A sweeping view of Central Park to my left, all the wonderful old Upper West Side apartment buildings to my right, and the giant helium Kermit paving our way ahead, with screaming men below him in lime green amphibian costumes, working like hell to control the ropes and keep the famous frog afloat in the downpour. The drums in the band, the trumpets, the whistles. And the children. All those crowds and crowds of children. The weather didn’t stop them from lining up—sometimes ten rows deep—sitting on fathers’ shoulders, bundled in hooded raincoats, screaming and swaying with their multicolored umbrellas, some sporting plastic bags on their heads.

“Susan! Susan! We love you, Susan,” the joyous crowd shrieked as we floated past. I waved hysterically, wiggled my legs, and beamed under my furry face, so surprised and pleased that my friends had turned out to watch me after all. It wasn’t until

we passed Columbus Circle that I realized Miss America's name was Susan, and that there was a big banner on the front of our float announcing that fact.

As we headed down Broadway, a parade official began to jog alongside our float.

"Where's your rope?" he shouted up to me.

I tried to gesture with my one free paw that I didn't know what he was referring to.

"Your rope!" he said again, still jogging and puffing. "There's supposed to be a rope threaded through that loop in the front, tying you onto the moon so you don't fall off!"

Thank God for those covered heads. The faces we make under there, and the words that we utter should never reach the eyes or ears of a child.

I was now gripping the loop tighter than ever, as I listened to Carole King passionately wail lyrics about a place called Care-A-Lot, a place that's in your heart, full of love, faith, hope. She sung about sharing your feelings, about the joy of laughing out loud. And, despite my fear, I began laughing and singing along with her. Because I'm sitting on top of the moon. I'm riding down Broadway. I'm waving and kicking and not falling off. Sing it, Carole; I'm a Dream Come True.

My paws, once dry and fluffy, were now soaked and heavy, and the Velcro that had stuck them to each arm had long ago lost their "stick". The skin around my wrist was raw with the wet and the cold and the waving. But I was in Care-A-Lot; I was representing the Children of America. I was becoming oblivious to the fact that I had a show coming up and that Macy's was only one block away.

It wasn't until the music clicked off abruptly and the float jerked to a sudden halt that I realized there was no turning back.

It was, indeed, "showtime."

NBC began moving their cameras into place. A man I had never seen before, dressed as a mean clown, climbed aboard the float with a bag load of props. He dashed from bear to bear, placing a prop quickly into a paw and then moving on. He got to me just as I heard TV crewmen yell "30 seconds 'til cameras roll!" Something was pitched towards me and the mean clown was gone.

"They must have put my hearts in a box!" I thought, as I felt the hard, heavy, rock-like object in my hand. I held it up to my right eyehole, and turned it over and over trying to figure out what they had given me.

Suddenly, everything became horrifyingly clear.

Twelve red, heavy cardboard hearts had been cut out for me to "toss into the wind". Someone must have thought cardboard was sturdy and would land more accurately on a target. Someone must have thought red would show up better on television. Someone never thought it would rain all Thanksgiving Day and that the hearts would stick together like glue. Someone never checked the props!

"Ten seconds 'til cameras roll."

I was now screaming through the neck, trying furiously to pry the stacked hearts apart with my clumsy wet paws. I thought, "If I can loosen even *one* from the rest, it'll be better than throwing the whole heavy thing down..."

Then it hit me. The nightmare. The nightmare of what was about to happen.

I began kicking the moon hard, trying to get the mean clown's attention. Like some crazed auctioneer I waved the ten-pound heart way up in the air, praying for someone to notice me, to save me.

The float lurched again.

Cameras rolled.

Bears pounded.

America watched.

Sophie's Choice was nothing compared to the decision I had to make that day on the float. Should I risk hitting Miss America with a ten-pound paperweight, knocking off her crown and possibly giving her a concussion to go with her fever, ruin her image on national television and be faced with a major lawsuit?

Or should I hold on to my prop? Give up my close-up?

I remembered Grumpy's words.

I estimated and tossed.

What happened in those minutes that followed the Big Throw became a blur of washed out pinks and blues, of soaking wet dry cleaned fur and black and white reminders of the Real Life that lay ahead. Like a carnival merry go round grinding to a stop after its dizzying ride around a grassless fairgrounds circle, so, too, our soggy float limped off Broadway, hobbled a wide right turn on 34th Street and then shivered, abruptly to a stop. The fantasy music had stopped, too, and in its place was the sound of honking cars, traffic cop whistles and the pounding of a float load of departing bears. I sat staring forward, afraid to slide off the moon by myself, afraid to find out what had actually happened just seconds ago in front of Macy's Department store, afraid of the 40,000

television viewers that had witnessed my accidental murder of Miss America.

I was alone and wet - - a paranoid bear on a broken moon, and like a child on the carousel horse that has stopped in its “up” position, I waited for a crew person or a piece of hefty machinery to help me down at the end of my ride. No one came. All the bears were waddling over to the tour bus. Even Grumpy had deserted me.

Despite the fact that there were no children to be seen, I was still under Care Bear Oath to keep my head on in public. I could see the bus filling up with bears, now, and it was clear that no one even missed me. The group had always been competitive, but this seemed the ultimate insult: Abandoned in Care-A-Lot.

“Screw it,” I mumbled, as I flipped myself onto my stomach and prayed that the long slide down the side of the moon wouldn’t cripple me forever. Keeping that head on saved me; it acted like a protective furry helmet as I maneuvered an awkward controlled slip down the moon and crashed onto a platform that had been built especially for Miss America. Two more bangs down the side of the float and I was finally on familiar asphalt, limping and muttering my way across the street to join the others on the bus. Down the road, a homeless man in a cardboard box peeked out one end of his corrugated cave and snickered out loud at my clumsy victory. I lifted my paw in his direction, feeling only slightly better knowing that inside that matted furry circle I was actually giving him the finger.

I finally hauled my fur onto the bus, and made my way down the long aisle to the only empty seat. I noticed that none of the bears spoke to me. I tried to make eye contact with a few of them, to see if I could get some sort of a sign as to what had happened on the float, but everyone seemed preoccupied. There was a lot of coughing

going on, a lot of wringing out of fur and searching for cigarettes. Depressed and paranoid, I slumped down in the seat, looked out the window, and waited.

Candy Kane appeared soon after me, took her “front of bus” position and announced that no bear was to light up anything until the Head of Marketing came aboard to make a brief statement.

More agony. I felt like I was in the principal’s office, waiting to hear just how badly I had failed my final exam.

I spotted Miss Marketing shoving her way through the crowded parking lot, and strained to see if she was carrying any legal documents with her, or a broken crown. She popped her head into the open doorway of the bus, wearing a Care Bear turtleneck and matching earrings.

“Hi, guys!” she chirped. “I want you to know that the response to this float has been even bigger and better than we ever dreamed! I just spoke with the President of the parent company, and he’s agreed that if all goes well this year, we’ll be seeing you on this same float again next Thanksgiving! And as a big “Thank You” to all the bears, I have a little treat for each one of you!”

She opened her purse, pulled out Blow Pops for everyone, and left.

Candy took her seat. The driver started the engine. The familiar sound of flicking lighters filled the bus.

As we pulled out, Grumpy Bear’s lone voice groaned from the back, “I just want to know who’s the #&%*! that hit me in the head with a rock?”

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