

A young badger named Benny lay at the opening of the family burrow and watched the sky in the east turn a dull gray which was a prelude to another day on Bear Berry Pass, Texas. Soon the sun would rise over the roof of the farmhouse in the distance and warm him as he lay there and waited for his parents to return from their hunting trip. They had never been gone more than two days and today would be number seven. Surely something had happened to them because they had never failed to bring him food to nourish the young animal. His heart sank at the thought they would never return and he would be alone in the world.

He had eaten some dried fruit and nuts that were in the burrow but it was not enough to fill his tummy which growled at him like another animal inside him. As the sky brightened to a light blue just before sunrise, he slid out of the burrow and walked a short distance to a spring that was located deeper in the forest. He quenched his thirst but it did not replace something good to eat provided by his mother and father upon their return. Am I alone, he thought, forever? He couldn't stand imagining his parents might have left him, could they?

Benny remembered a large blackberry bush that grew alongside the country road that led to San Antonio to the south. His father had taken him there a few weeks ago and he thought about the sweet berries that hung low to the ground and could be easily picked by the short squat badger. Benny made his way along the edge of the pine forest and through the pasture and soon arrived at the roadway and the berry bushes that lay on the other side. He listened carefully for any cars and then scurried across the road and slid under the bushes to hide.

It was late Fall and the remaining berries were very ripe. Benny spent the next half hour munching on the wild blackberries and tried not to think about his parents. He was saddened by the loss and hoped one day to see them again but for now he was on his own. He prayed that one day his parents would return home and they would be together again as a happy family.

Weeks went by and his parents never returned. Benny knew that winter would soon come because the wind was colder and blew harder with dark clouds that covered the sky with an occasional rainstorm that soaked him and made him shiver from the cold. For now, he managed to catch some things to eat. It was enough to keep his tummy from grumbling but not enough to prepare him for the winter that would limit many of the food sources he now ate. Fortunately, badgers also eat plants and Benny was able to find wild oats and berries that lined the country roads to fill his tummy for a while. He really liked the large blackberry bushes because he could hide under the bush and pick the very ripe berries. He also found nice hiding places under the cover of the bushes, where he could sleep and feel comfortable and safe.

One day, as he lay under the berry bush, he heard singing and looked down the road and saw a young girl as she walked down the pathway that led to the blackberry bushes. The song was pleasurable to Benny's ears. He moved further into the bush to hide but could still hear her beautiful voice.

She was carrying a shiny metal bucket under one arm and was smiling and walking along swinging the bucket and singing. The young girl was from the farmhouse down the road, and he was afraid that she might see him and be frightened. She came closer and stopped about 20 feet from Benny's hiding place. She began picking the berries that were higher on the branches than Benny

could reach and started putting them in the bucket. She continued to hum her song as she picked the ripe berries but occasionally, would eat one of them and smile at their sweet taste.

He remembered seeing the girl months ago as she played outside in the yard by the barn with a doll under her arm. Benny was with his father at the time, and he told him to look at the window of the farmhouse facing the garden. Benny was shocked to see a bearded man as he peered out the window and watched his daughter as she played in the yard. His father said that people were not to be trusted since the man had shot his gun at the wild animals in the forest a while ago. Both he and Benny moved back into the cover of the pasture grass and out of sight of the farmer.

Now, as she moved along the road closer to Benny, he sensed she knew the badger was there. She seemed to look into the berry bushes and smiled but continued to sing and pick the berries and didn't seem to mind that Benny was there. Finally, she moved along, and Benny was relieved that she was away from his hiding spot. The afternoon slowly passed, and Benny slept peacefully in the cover of the blackberry bushes. He awoke from a pleasant dream and stretched his arms and legs. He peered outside and it was late in the evening and soon it would be dark. He longed for his favorite home burrow and was anxious to find it in the moonlit night. It had been too long since he was there, and it made him smile to remember all the family things he had done with his parents while they lived there.

He left the safety of the bushes and began to hunt for something more suitable than the berries. He searched through the shrubs and was happy to find some mice to catch. Benny was exhausted after spending the entire night searching for food, and continued to feel sorrow over being left by his parents to survive

independently. He had been hunting with his father and mother many times looking for things to eat, so he had an idea what to do. So far, he had been successful enough to feed himself but not enough to get him fat for the winter.

The nights were beginning to get cold, especially since Bearberry Pass was in the hill country of Central Texas. The wind began to pick up again and he was anxious to get back to his home. His mother and father had dug a deep burrow alongside a fallen oak tree in the forest alongside the large pasture. He had been away for three days hunting and sleeping under logs or heavy brush for cover. Last night he had been frightened when a rattle snake slithered up to Benny and smelled him with its tongue and had learned that badgers were not something to deal with and sensed that this animal would kill them for food. But tonight, the young badger lay there in fright as the snake slithered away. He soon went back to sleep but was afraid of animals that might harm him. During the early morning, a large hawk swooped down from a tall tree and dove for Benny who, when he heard the swoosh of wings, ducked under a bush. The hawk was just trying to scare Benny, since both animals ate the same type of food, and the badger was in the hawk's territory.

Benny finally drew close to his home burrow and was relieved to know he was safe and could rest comfortably before he had to hunt again for food. But this time it was a little different! When Benny slipped into the deep burrow, he was surprised to find a small furry animal curled on the bottom. Startled at first when he saw it, so he sniffed it and then punched it in the back with his front paw. The furry thing jumped in the air and slammed into the top of burrow!

“Ouch,” he yelled, as he fell back to the floor. “Who are you and what are you doing in here. Can’t you see I’m trying to sleep!”

“Well, that’s a great way to greet me, since I’m the one who was born in this burrow and lived here with my mom and dad” Benny exclaimed.

“Sorry”, the furry animal said rather sheepishly. “I didn’t know who dug this, but I was glad to find it. I was out looking for my mother and father, but it was getting late. Then I saw this nice burrow and decided to sleep here for the night.”

That’s okay.” Benny said, “it’s big enough for the two of us. What are you by the way?”

“I’m a coyote.” he said rather proudly, as he puffed himself up to look bigger.

“A coyote?” Benny exclaimed, “Do you howl in the night like some of the other ones I have heard?”

“No, I don’t do that!” he said, “Am I supposed to howl?”

“Well, most coyotes do howl but if you feel like you need to do that, don’t do it if I’m around” Benny answered. “It is very annoying in the middle of the night when I’m hunting because it scares all the little animals!”

“Say,” he asked, “do you have a name? Mine’s Benny!” the badger said as he stretched out to show he was bigger than the young coyote.

“Gee, I don’t think I have one!” he answered. “Do I need one?”

“Sure, everyone needs a name. What if I wanted to call you, what would I say?”

“I don’t know Benny. Why don’t you give me a name?”

Benny thought for a minute and said, “I’ll call you Furball, since that’s what you are right now. A big ball of fur”

“Okay, I guess that would be nice to have a name! Thanks for doing that Benny?”

“No problem, everyone needs a name, because, if I have to call you, I just can’t say coyote or goofy or some odd name! You have to have one that we both know to be your own name.”

Benny thought about it and looked again at Furball and decided it was okay to have another animal in his burrow. There was no one to talk to since his mother and father had left him alone, even if it was a coyote.

“Furball; would you like to stay here with me in the burrow?”

“Gee, that would be great Benny. I don’t have any friends

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Why was Benny so sad?
2. Where did Benny go to get something sweet to eat?
3. When Benny was eating berries, who was singing?
4. What did she carry to pick the berries?
5. What state is Bearberry Pass in?
6. What animal frightened Benny when he tried to sleep?
7. What did Benny find when he returned to his burrow?
8. What did he name the animal?
9. What do coyotes do sometimes at night when the moon is full?

QUESTIONNAIRE ANSWERS

1. Why was Benny so sad?
His parents abandoned him
2. Where did Benny go to get something sweet to eat?
To the berry patch alongside the road
3. When Benny was eating berries, who was singing?
A young girl
4. What did she carry to pick the berries?
A silver bucket
5. What state is Bearberry Pass in?
Texas
6. What animal frightened Benny when he tried to sleep?
A rattlesnake
7. What did Benny find when he returned to his burrow?
A strange furry animal
8. What did he name the animal?
A coyote
9. What do coyotes do sometimes at night when the moon is full?
Howl at the moon