

# Golden Hair and the Bears

The Mage and the Boffin had a daughter whose name was originally Jean, but which became Patricia, and then changed to Helga. They weren't sure why her name wouldn't stay the same, so they gave up and nicknamed her "Golden Hair" because of her long blond hair. And the name stuck.

At the time they were not living in their "safe place" but were living in the forests of the North West where there were few people. It was just a step from their home to their "safe place" of course.

Golden Hair loved to be outside and loved roaming the forests. She charmed the wolves and the owls and the reindeer and the caribou and the hawks and the squirrels and all the other non-human inhabitants of the forests.

Her mother, the Boffin, worried about her at first, but made a device in a necklace and hung it around Golden Hair's neck, and knew that she could contact her daughter any time. The Mage also cast a charm on her to keep her safe and stowed it safely in the necklace. The charm also made sure that Golden Hair couldn't ever lose the necklace.

Golden Hair ran for kilometre after kilometre with the caribou, or the wolves that trailed them. She cowered under the ground with the mice and she hovered overhead with the hawks. She hid nuts with the squirrels and she swam in the streams with the salmon, leaping the waterfalls in a flash of silver.

She understood the cruel truth of death in the forest. The hawk lived by killing the mice and rabbits, and the wolves ate only when they came across a dead reindeer or managed to kill one. When she ran with the wolves, she helped them bring down a reindeer, and when she flew with the hawks, she stooped on the mice and other small animals.

"I'm concerned that she is spending so much time in the forest," said the Boffin one day.

"Don't worry dear," said the Mage. "She's learning the way of the world. She can easily catch up with the formal stuff later. She's intelligent enough."

So the Boffin let her daughter spend time in the forest. She just checked with Golden Hair every so often and made her come back for a bath now and then, and only took issue with her when she didn't completely shake off the forest when she came home.

“Golden Hair, you’re shedding fur everywhere. And please cut your nails. You’re scratching things.”

Golden Hair, who was a good girl, said “Sorry Mum”, then took a shower, unplugged the drain hole, and cut her finger and toe nails. Then she went round the house with the vacuum cleaner.

“Thanks, dear,” said the Boffin and trimmed the golden hair to a reasonable length and brushed it until it gleamed.

“Thanks Mum,” said Golden Hair. “I love you, you know.”

“Of course, dear.”

Of all the animals in the forest, Golden Hair loved the bears the most. In the section of forest closest to home there lived a family of bears, a mother bear and two two year old cubs. Golden Hair spent hours and days with the bear family, eating bugs and worms, berries, nuts and seeds. She broke open rotten tree trunks with her strong claws to get at the grubs, and learned with the cubs to catch the salmon leaping up the rapids. She tore into the delicious pink flesh with her strong teeth and squabbled with the cubs for the mother bear’s leavings.

She lived with them for so long that she learned the language of the bears, though bears don’t talk a lot.

“Why is there no father bear?” she asked the mother bear one day.

The mother bear shook the water from her coat. “I hope he stays a long way away. He would kill the cubs. Do human fathers not kill their cubs?”

Golden Hair was not shocked. Bears were not humans and did things differently.

“Why would he kill the cubs?”

“There’s only so much food. And they might grow big enough to kill him or drive him off.”

Golden Hair nodded in the bear fashion. It made sense from the bear point of view.

As Autumn drew on, Golden Hair and the bears started to gorge themselves on whatever they could lay their claws on. When they weren't eating they were dozing in the sun.

One morning the ground was covered with snow.

"Time to find a place to stay," said the mother bear, leading the cubs and Golden Hair higher into the mountains. They found a place under a jutting rock, and the mother bear nodded in the bear manner.

"This will do," said the mother bear and she and the cubs and Golden Hair scraped out the uncomfortable pebbles, twigs and other debris and settled down to sleep.

In the night a heavier fall of snow had covered the rock and built up a wall around the bears and Golden Hair. The mother bear stirred and went back to sleep. The cubs and Golden Hair didn't wake.

"Dear, look at this," said the Boffin.

On her screen, Golden Hair's necklace showed the hibernating bears and Golden Hair in the den.

"Do you want me to bring her back?" asked the Mage.

"No, let her sleep. But next spring, she will have to come back and go to school. It's time."

So the bears and Golden Hair slept through the winter, cosy in their den. Golden Hair, since she wasn't a bear was occasionally a little restless, and woke a little, but the gentle snores of her companions and the warm smelly atmosphere soon sent her off again.

The days passed, the weeks passed, the months passed, and eventually the snug little hollow started to get a little damp as the snow began to melt. The bears and Golden Hair started to stretch and wake. They crawled out of their cosy nest and started to look for food. They found some moss and

grass and ate some bark off a tree. Then they happened on a rabbit which had frozen to death, and not been found by anyone else.

The mother bear knew that Golden Hair had to go home, without actually thinking about it like a human would, so she led her cubs and Golden Hair down to the lowlands and towards Golden Hair's home. In the lower altitudes the spring flush had brought out the flowers and the grass was dense and cushioned the cubs and Golden Hair as they rolled and tumbled through the meadows.

What the mother bear didn't know and wouldn't have understood was that some of the few people who lived in the area had seen Golden Hair and reported the sightings to the Baron.

"Five hundred dollars to the man who brings me the pelt of the golden bear," he declared.

It happened that a young lad of about Golden Hair's age was walking through the forest, with his gun, looking for a turkey for the pot. He was not trying very hard, to be honest, as he didn't like killing things, but he'd shoot if he stumbled across one.

He heard a crashing through the forest and the golden bear and two other young bears tumbled onto the track, followed by the mother bear who reared up on her hind legs. The boy saw the golden bear and remembered the bounty on its pelt. He raised his gun and shot at the golden bear.

Rings of fire spread from the golden bear and radiated into the universe. The moon glowed slightly more brightly for a second, and the boy found himself looking at a blond girl of about his own age, totally naked except for a necklace, but totally unharmed.

The mother bear lumbered forward and the boy raised his gun again, but his gun was knocked aside. The mother bear dropped to all fours and nuzzled the blond girl.

"She's only checking her out," said the Boffin, tossing a coat to her daughter and getting between her and the boy. "Why did you shoot at my daughter?"

"The, the, the baron offered five hundred dollars for her pelt," said the lad, suddenly thinking that pelt was not a good word to use in this situation.

"Did he? I'll have to have a word with him," said the Boffin.

The boy was suddenly glad that he was not the baron. Golden Hair walked up to him, tightening her belt around her waist.

“You’re cute,” she said.

“Don’t mind her, she’s not completely back in human mode yet,” sniffed the Boffin.

“What’s your name?” said Golden Hair. “I’m Golden Hair.”

“Jack,” said the boy.

So they walked home, with the Boffin resolutely walking between Jack and Golden Hair who kept sneaking looks at each other. The Boffin was not too displeased though, as she realised that it wouldn’t be too hard to persuade Golden Hair to go to school next term.

When they got home, Golden Hair took a shower then came and gave her Mum a hug.

“Mum, the mother bear, when she nuzzled me said ‘It’s over.’ Is it over?”

“Yes, dear, I think it’s over. Now, about school....”