

# Relocating the Bears

By JB Cline

***“Iris. I’m concerned that you’re not listening to me.”***

“You’re right- I’m not listening to you,” Iris replies. I’m ignoring you because you’re annoying. I’m also reading my paper, drinking my coffee, and pretending I don’t have an ugly kitchen. Now, please go away before Letitia comes back.”

Iris hates her kitchen, especially in the early morning before it gets light. She can’t stand the yellow daisy wallpaper or the brown checkered vinyl flooring, but she can’t be choosy either. The house is a rental, and it’s cheap, located in suburbs from the 1950s south of downtown Charlottesville. It’s on a bus line so she can get to work, and it comes with a roommate- Letitia. Nobody can say that Letitia is shy or reluctant to share an opinion, clumping around in her parking enforcement uniform, writing tickets for the City. She’s an adequate roommate for Iris because she pays her rent on time and scares the landlord into doing repairs.

***“Speak of the devil, here she comes.”***

“Please, just leave me be.” Iris pleads.

Letitia blows into the kitchen, cold and wet, shoes muddy, heading straight for the coffee maker.

“A bear got in the trash last night.” She pours coffee into her favorite cup and tops it off with two packets of fake sugar.

“I spent twenty minutes picking up the trash, and now I gotta change clothes before I leave for work. I stepped in bear poop, and you know why? Because it’s still dark and the outside light is burned out.”

No answer from Iris, pale, skinny, and oblivious, sitting at the table reading her newspaper and pretending not to hear her, or anyone else. Iris knows Letitia has four more outfits hanging in her closet, and they’re all parking enforcement uniforms.

“We have to buy special bear-proof trash cans. On second thought, why should we buy them? Isn’t that the landlord’s responsibility? Iris, are you even listening?”

Iris looks up, blinks, adjusts her glasses, and returns to her paper. “I read an article the other day about this program where the city can shoot tranquilizer darts at bears that get into neighborhoods. Then they call people who come and pile them into cages and take them to the Shenandoah National Park to let them loose. They get relocated, you know, back to nature where they belong.”

“Instead of buying bear-proof trash cans? That’s ridiculous.” Letitia kicks her shoes off, cheap black leather slip-ons, grabs a section of newspaper, and sets it on the floor with her shoes on top. “My shoes are ruined.”

“No, it’s very humane, much better than shooting them,” Iris replies. “The bears aren’t in the right environment, in a city with busy roads and people. One minute they’re pawing through someone’s trash, then pop! They don’t know what hit them. They wake up with a little headache in the woods far from the city, safe from urban dangers. *C’est voila*. Problem solved.” Iris folds her paper. “I have to go to work.”

“Where’s the local section?” Iris checks the countertop.

“Under my shoes,” Letitia goes to change.

Iris sighs. If she read her news on her phone, this wouldn’t happen, losing the local section to a pair of her insensitive roommate’s shoes. She does it because she likes to feel the newspaper in her hands, hear the way it crinkles, and turn pages. Grabbing her coat and purse, Iris gives up on the local section and heads out the door. She walks to the bus stop and thinks about the bear, poor creature, aimlessly looking for its next meal in a trash can in the middle of the night.

While Iris waits for her bus, she forgets about the bear’s problems so she can concentrate on her own. Like for instance, that letter from a collection agency about unpaid tuition. Iris dropped out of college last year, lied to her parents, and told them she got student loans so they didn’t have to pay tuition. So now she’s getting hounded to repay the money, and that’s what she gets for being a good person, albeit a liar.

Then there’s the big thing, the reason she can’t go to school anymore or think straight, and the reason she lies. It’s the voice in her head. It won’t stop talking.

***“I’m just trying to help you,”*** it says.

“I don’t need your help.” Iris has her seat on the bus.

The bus driver looks at her and shakes his head.

“The driver thinks I’m a crazy person,” she mumbles quietly.

***“Have you thought about my proposition?”***

“Is that what it is, a proposition? Find seven people consisting of four women and three men, all under thirty-five, and gather them together at Market Street Park, at exactly ten pm on March 17<sup>th</sup>. That’s nuts.”

Iris is too loud, and the bus driver glances at her in the rearview mirror.

***“And I forgot one thing, no pets,”*** adds the voice.

“Homeless people stay at Market Street Park. I’m not homeless, well, at least not yet. Not that I’m going to do this because I’m not, but where in the park would you want this gathering?”

***“In front of the statue.”***

“There is no statue. They took it out.” A pulsating pressure starts up in her head again, it’s happening a lot lately.

“Also, March 17th is tomorrow and it’s a holiday- St. Patrick’s Day.” Iris continues. “I don’t have seven friends and I’m certainly not standing around with homeless people in the dark at ten o’clock at night!”

Iris walks to the front of the bus, her stop is coming up.

“You ok there?” The bus driver looks worried.

“I’m ok, I just have a headache.” Iris isn’t lying now, her head pounds and she can hear blood rushing past her ears.

**“Just do what I ask and your headaches will go away,”** says the voice.

#

Iris’s job at the coffee shop is terrible. The hours are long, the tips are stingy, and the air smells like rancid grease, but she matches the mediocrity by being an awful waitress. Her manager says she lacks concentration. She’s not bad on purpose; she’s spent months learning the job and has tried making friends with her co-workers. It’s the voice.

She’s polite to Mayella, the other waitress on her shift, a stout, fair-skinned young woman of unshakable Christian faith. One Sunday a while back, she convinced Iris to come with her to church. Two weeks ago Iris went to Mayella’s Tupperware party for Jesus. Mayella assured her that Tupperware is a collector’s item now since the company went bankrupt, leaving Mayella with a lot of unreturnable plastic, and Jesus would want Iris to invest in the future. After 30 minutes of uncomfortable small talk with fervent strangers, Iris realized the only way out was to place an order. Head pounding, flipping desperately through the catalog, she scribbled numbers on her order form, thanked Mayella for a wonderful evening, and bolted for the door.

Today, she can’t get a single order right, so the manager puts her at the register. The lunch rush is a disaster; customers are lined up to pay, but Iris forgets how to make change. Her headache is worse, and the voice nags her nonstop.

“Iris, can I see you in the back please?” It’s the manager, Bob. Everyone calls him Big Bob behind his back.

When she walks to the back, she finds him fidgeting and staring at his shoes.

“Iris, I don’t think this job is for you. Do you remember our talk?”

“I know I’m having trouble today. I have a headache. I need to go home and rest.”

“You lack concentration,” Big Bob reminds her needlessly.

“Yes, I know.”

**“Tell him he has shit for brains,”** says the voice.

“Stop that!” Iris erupts before she can stifle herself.

“Iris, don’t shout at me,” Big Bob sputters. “You knew I’d have to let you go if your performance didn’t improve. You can’t just order me to stop. This is your last day.”

Iris sees his red face, and his barrel chest puffed out like some kind of fat bird during mating season. His big stomach tumbles over his belt, and she wonders how he manages to buckle it without seeing it.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t shouting at you,” she mumbles.

“There’s only two of us here!” Big Bob stares at his shoes again, then sighs. “Forget it. Your check will be ready at three tomorrow.”

#

On the bus ride home, Iris sits by the window and leans her head against the glass. She sinks into her sadness. Her thoughts wander away from her recurring failures so she can stay afloat until she gets home. She’s not the only one with troubles. What about the bear, raiding trash cans at night? Where does it live? Surely it can’t stay in a city like this without getting shot or run over. Iris suspects that the blather about relocating bears never happens. The bear is headed for a bad ending.

***“The bear could have a good life if it was relocated to a better place, maybe in the company of some other bears so it wouldn’t be alone and stranded. Don’t you feel that way sometimes?”***

“Yes. Sometimes I do,” she murmurs. “But the thing is, I don’t have anywhere to go.”

#

At home, Iris sluffs off her coat and purse, leaving a trail through the living room into the kitchen. Letitia isn’t home, and that means she can talk with the voice in her head in relative peace.

***“What do you have to lose? All you have to do is gather three women and three men in front of the statue tomorrow night at ten, and then you won’t hear me again.”***

“Again- there’s no statue. I thought you said four women.” Iris rubs her temples.

***“Four women, including you, and three men. See how easy it is? You don’t even have to be friends, just people. Remember, no pets.”***

“This is so stupid. Have you tried this before?”

***“Well, yes, things didn’t work out then, but I have high hopes for you. You have potential.”***

Iris considers this while she takes an Ibuprofen and pours herself a glass of wine.

*Maybe, just maybe, if I do this one stupid thing, I can have peace inside my head. I can start over.*

“Ok. I’ll do it.”

***“Now you’re talking!”*** says the voice.

#

Letitia walks in the door and follows the trail of coat, shoes, and purse into the kitchen, she dumps them on the table in front of Iris and her third glass of wine.

“What gives, Iris?”

“I got fired. My boss said I lacked concentration.” Iris slurs her words and squints at her roommate. Letitia is a good prospect.

“Iris, that’s terrible. You should sue or something. How are you going to pay the rent?” Letitia helps herself to a glass.

“I’m picking up my last paycheck tomorrow afternoon. Listen, you have to meet me tomorrow night at ten at Market Street Park. Actually, make it 9:55 pm so you’re not late.”

Letitia looks at her sharply. “Why?”

Stuck, Iris doesn’t have a plausible story ready. “The bear,” she blurts out.

“What about the bear?”

“I called Animal Control. They want to meet us there at ten tomorrow night. Bears are active at night, and they are going to shoot it with a tranquilizer dart.”

“Our bear isn’t in Market Street Park. Why not come to our place?”

“Everyone with a bear complaint has to meet there with Animal Control, you know, as a group. There have been a lot of complaints,” Iris lies.

“Iris, listen, are you ok? I realize getting fired is stressful and you’ve had a lot to drink, but this is, you know…”

“You have to be there tomorrow at 9:55 pm. Please. I need you to be there.”

Letitia stares at her for a long minute before she replies. “Ok.”

“*One down,*” says the voice.

#

It’s one in the afternoon when Iris wakes up with a roaring headache, but this time it’s not the voice, it’s a hangover. Letitia isn’t home. Iris would be finishing up the lunch rush if she still had her job. She only has one commitment for the park tonight and she has to find five more, with no earthly idea how to go about it. She showers, dresses, and walks to the bus stop.

The bus driver looks at his watch and opens the door for her. “Aren’t you here late?”

“I got fired,” Iris mumbles, “I’m going in to pick up my last check.” She takes her seat. They’re the only two people on the bus.

“Listen,” he says kindly, “maybe it’s time to talk to someone.”

“That’s the problem,” Iris replies, “there’s too much talk in my head as it is.” They ride the rest of the way in silence.

It's quiet when Iris walks into the restaurant, most of the lunch rush has cleared out. She spots Jordan the dishwasher standing in a cloud of steam, wiping his wet red hands on a towel. He's thin and twitchy. If Iris had to guess, his recreational drug habit took him a little farther down the road than most, but who is she to judge? He still has a job and she doesn't.

"Hey man, I heard you got canned," he says. "Mayella says you have emotional problems."

"I lack concentration," Iris replies.

"So, I was thinking that with your problems you probably have a prescription for something like Valium for anxiety. Is that it, anxiety? And what with money being tight you might be interested in selling me some, since I have anxiety too. My girlfriend also has anxiety so we need a lot of Valium." His voice drops and he looks to make sure no one else is in the kitchen. "Or anything else you got."

Iris looks at Jordan and sizes him up for a visit to the park. The voice didn't say they have to be stellar characters, just warm bodies in the right spot at the right time, so what the hell.

"I have something you can use. But you and your girlfriend have to meet me at Market Street Park, where the statue used to be, at 9:55 tonight."

"9:55 pm? Isn't that kind of specific?"

"I have emotional problems. Be on time, or I'm giving all my medication to someone else."

"I don't know." Jordan hedges.

"It's a lot of medication, six months' worth, and I don't want to wait around."

"Ok." Jordan pulls out his phone.

***"You're getting good at this!"*** says the voice.

#

The envelope with her final check is on the manager's desk, and Iris is relieved to find he left early for the day. She picks up her pay, and she is about to duck out the door when Iris finds herself wrapped in two big pale arms that smell of lavender and today's special- chicken pot pie.

"Oh, Iris, I'm so sorry about all this!" Mayella hugs her until she can't quite breathe. She spins Iris around. "I brought your Tupperware order. You are a generous soul to order so much. Here's your invoice." The total is \$214.68, probably half of Iris's final paycheck. "I can take a check, and I'll drive you home and help carry it into your house."

***"She's a good candidate,"*** says the voice.

"I have to take my final paycheck to the bank," Iris replies. "I'll meet you at Market Street Park at 9:55 pm tonight, where the statue used to be. You can bring my Tupperware, and I'll have your money in cash." Iris hopes the cash part convinces Mayella to come to the park that late.

"Iris honey, you're not living there now, are you?"

“I think with your help, I can make a full recovery. Spiritually, too.” Iris demurs.

“Ok- but I’m bringing my rape whistle.” Mayella shakes her head sadly.

Iris worries while she walks to the bank. Her head hurts again. She still has to find two men to meet her at the park, and the afternoon is almost gone. She might have to do something desperate, like start a fire and call 911.

***“You can only bring two men, not a whole Fire Company,”*** says the voice. ***“Be creative.”***

“Maybe I can lure two male dog walkers in the park.”

***“Rule number one, remember? No pets.”***

When Iris exits the bank, she shoves the envelope of money into her purse; at least she can pay for the Tupperware, but that’s about it. Her phone shows 6:30 pm. It’s so late! Suddenly, she feels dizzy and sick. Where will she get two men in three hours?

***“Iris, did you eat today?”*** asks the voice.

For once, the voice is helpful. Iris is starved, and that gives her an idea. Catching the Number Three bus to Market Street Park, she walks to the place where the statue used to be and pulls out her phone. She calls New York Flying Pizza and places an order for delivery at exactly 9:55 pm., then asks for the name of the delivery person.

“It’s Terry,” Flying Pizza person replies.

“Is Terry a guy? I feel safer with a guy delivering.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t make any sense.”

“It has to be a man,” Iris replies. Next, she calls Old World Thai for delivery at 9:55 pm exactly, by a man.

“You know, the food tastes the same whether it’s delivered by a man or a woman,” says Ms. Old World Thai.

“It has to be a man,” Iris insists.

“This isn’t some kinky sex thing, is it?”

“No! It’s not that at all.” Iris replies, indignant.

“Fine, but you have to pay in advance.”

*So that makes two men,* Iris muses after she’s coughed up her credit card number, but she doesn’t feel better; she feels worse. What will she tell these people when they come? She doesn’t have any drugs, she doesn’t live in the park, and that bear will be around for a while because she never called Animal Control. All Iris can tell them is the truth, that she lied to them all to make the voice in her head go away. Hungry and shaking, she finds a bench and sits before her knees buckle.

***“The truth will set you free,”*** says the voice.

“Shut up,” Iris snaps.

#

Darkness settles over the park, and streetlights come awake, one after another. The trees cast deep shadows everywhere. Iris huddles on her bench, under the light’s halfhearted glow, while she waits. With night, the air grows colder and seeps into her overcoat, numbs her feet, and creeps up her legs. Dark figures pass her from time to time, scurrying away without eye contact or a friendly word. Iris convinces herself that no one will meet her. She’s failed, not a big surprise, so in ten minutes she can go home to a warm bed and a lifetime of fending off the damn voice. But then two people walk out of the shadows and come toward her, seated on her frozen bench under a peaked streetlight. It’s Jordan and a woman.

“Do you have it?” Jordan asks nervously, while the girlfriend smokes and stands watch.

***“They all have to be together in the same place,”*** says the voice.

“I know that,” says Iris.

“Know what? I’m confused.” Jordan glances around, twitching.

“My roommate will be here any minute, and she’s bringing it,” Iris lies.

Another figure appears carrying a bundle in two hands. It’s the New York Flying Pizza guy.

“Are you Terry?” Iris asks.

“Yes, that’s \$35.78, and it’s dark and creepy out here, so I expect a good tip.”

“Are you a man?”

“Yes, jeez, just give me the money and take your pizza.”

***“Four minutes left, two men and two women so far. You need one more man and two women. No pressure,”*** the voice says.

A large shadow looms over Iris. It’s Mayella carrying a gigantic trash bag filled with plastic bowls, lids, cups, plates, and a large cake holder.

“Iris, honey? You look like you don’t feel well. Jordan, is that you? I smell pizza.” Mayella sets the bag down.

“Iris, where’s my stuff?” Jordan’s voice is shaky. “What’s with the pizza?”

***“Two minutes left. You just need one woman and one man,”*** urges the voice.

“My roommate and the deliveryman should be here.” Iris panics, spinning around, searching through the darkness. She sees three figures approaching, walking into the light. It’s Letitia, and with her is a woman and a policeman.

***“You have too many people- one minute left,”*** the voice warns.

“What the fuck is this!” Jordan shrieks, yanking his girlfriend around. She drops her cigarette, and they disappear down the path.

Iris is on her feet now, quivering.

“Iris, I’m worried about you,” Letitia begins, “You need help. I hear you talking to yourself all the time. You have to recognize that your life is spiraling out of control. This is Pamela. She’s a social worker I called today, and this is Frank. He’s a community service officer with the Charlottesville Police. We’re here to take you to a hospital so you can get better.”

**“You’re one man short now. Thirty seconds left.”** The voice bears down hard, and Iris hears ringing in her ears like sirens signaling disaster.

“Iris, I have to agree sweetie. Let me help you walk to the car,” Mayella grabs the Tupperware bag and reaches for Iris’s hand.

“I need the delivery man!” Iris bursts into tears.

“I’m the delivery man, and I need some cash. No, never mind– I’m leaving.” Terry the Flying Pizza Man turns to go.

“No! You can’t leave!” Iris screams, sinking to her knees, when another man with a bag steps into the light.

“Thai food delivery.”

**“Ten o’clock. You did it!”** The voice is exultant. **“I knew you had potential.”**

The glow from the street light swells, then explodes, its flash obliterates the shadows. Light drips over them like butter rolling down a hot skillet. Unable to move, they are enveloped, disassembled, and dissolved before racing away. Iris witnesses their transformation and feels it within herself as well.

*What’s happening?* Iris hopes the voice still hears her.

**“Iris, when a bear is relocated, does it know what’s happening?”**

*No.*

**“Well, there you go!”**

*Damn, Iris marvels, this is not what I expected.*

**“Goodbye, and Good Luck!”**