

# The Bear Came Over the Mountain

Alice Munro

Michael Rivera

*The bear went over the mountain,  
The bear went over the mountain,  
The bear went over the mountain,  
To see what he could see.*

*And all that he could see,  
And all that he could see,  
Was the other side of the mountain,  
The other side of the mountain,  
The other side of the mountain,  
Was all that he could see.*



First published in *The New Yorker* in 1999, Alice Munro's "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" is about an elderly couple who must deal with the problems that arise when Fiona, the wife, starts suffering from Alzheimer's. The title of the short story is taken from the famous children's song that is printed above. Although initially the story doesn't seem anything like the song, as the plot continues we start to see why Munro chose that name for her story.

After some time living at home with the disease, it is decided that Fiona will need to be admitted into a care home. Contrary to the reader's expectations, however, there is no tearful separation scene here, full of heartfelt goodbyes. Nor are there any angry complaints when her husband Grant finds out that due to the home's policy he will be unable to visit Fiona for a whole month ("we find that if they're left on their own the first month they usually end up happy as clams", the supervisor explains). Everything is calmly, passively taken in stride, as if "that's just the way things are".

It is here that we start to see the reasons behind Munro's odd title choice for this short story. In the children's song, the listener expects the bear to find something interesting when it goes over the mountain, but instead the bear simply sees the other side. Like the song, Munro's short story constantly subverts the reader's expectations that this is all leading to some sort of huge emotional climax. This is especially apparent in the scene when Grant is finally able to meet Fiona again. To his surprise, not only does Fiona apparently no longer remember him, but she has also become romantically involved with Aubrey, another patient in the facility. Despite these shocking revelations, though, there is still no emotional outburst, and Grant doesn't even venture to ask Fiona if she recognizes him.

However, that's not to say that Grant doesn't care for Fiona. During their month apart, he calls the hospital every day to find out how Fiona is doing, and he continues to visit twice a week even after Fiona hints to him that she'd rather spend time with Aubrey. Through his internal monologues we find that he's clearly affected by these events even though he doesn't react to them. In addition, we also learn that there may be reasons why he represses his emotions, particularly when he finds out about Fiona's relationship with Aubrey. As Grant starts to reminisce about days gone by, readers discover that he was not always too dedicated to Fiona. When he worked as a university professor he had a number of affairs, and apparently it was so bad that he was forced to retire early. The reason Grant is so forgiving of Fiona's infidelity is that he is guilty of it himself.

And so we see another example of how the story is like the children's song: the same thing happens over and over. Just as the first side of the mountain mirrors the other, Grant's old age comes to mirror the times of his youth (albeit with an ironic twist). This idea compounds even further after Aubrey is taken out of the home for financial reasons. Fiona becomes so depressed that her health is affected, and so Grant asks Aubrey's wife Marian if Aubrey can visit Fiona to help make her feel better. Marian refuses, but later calls Grant back to ask him out to a social event. The gears in Grant's head start turning, and he realizes that this might be his chance to get Marian to change her mind. In short, he's considering cheating on his wife in order to help her continue her own affair with Aubrey.

I'll refrain from detailing the ending because anyone interested in this short story can read it in its entirety on *The New Yorker* website. Do a simple search of the story's title along with "*The New Yorker*" and in less than a minute you can be reading the ending yourself on your cell phone. I will say one more thing, however. The children's song that the title is based on is meant to be repeated, over and over, as long as the singer wishes. As such, the bear continues to go over the mountain, over and over, each time seeing the same result. Just like in the song, the ending of Munro's short story implies that the bear will be continuing its routine for quite some time.