

# The Being of It All

by Carol Emshwiller

I hear the call when I'm up on a mountaintop in roiling clouds with thunder. I was about to hurry down to a safer spot, but the voice says, "Come." Then, "Do, be, proclaim. Become more than just your father's son."

The air is crackling with electricity. I see a tree get hit and crash down below us. Even so, the voice is wrong. I yell, "Mother's daughter. Mother's daughter." It echoes back and forth, across all the peaks and back to me as if I were a god.

Or maybe the voice was meant for somebody else.

"It's just me," I yell. "Me. Marilyn."

My voice echoes again. I sound so powerful I could come to think the call really *was* meant for me—that I really could proclaim.

But there's no answer.

"Just me."

It doesn't come again. Maybe this silence means it knows it made a mistake.

"Repeat," I say, "so I'll know for sure."

It doesn't.

I guess I'll never know for sure.

I'm wearing my big black hat. I wanted to pretend I was bold and the hat helps. I can be bolder if no one sees it's me. That may have confused whoever it was calling out. Take off that hat and I'm just like everybody else. Worse actually, dull and shy. I can never think of what to talk about. I don't know what to do with my hands. I never

look anybody straight in the eyes. If I see somebody I know walking down the street, I cross to the other side.

I'm with my little dog, Booboo. She's as shy as I am. Lightning scares her. Right now she's somewhere just below. She'll hide behind a rock until I come back.

"Be," the voice said. I've never been. "Do." Do what? You can't just say, Proclaim, without saying what about.

I shout, "I need more information." It echoes and echoes. Miles away, mountain to mountain.

But no answer. I'm on my own.

It's that echo that's confusing me ... my voice sounding so powerful. It went so far and came back ... I don't even know how many times. I felt like a giant.

But who wouldn't hear a call in thunder and on the top of a mountain? It can't mean much. We must all hear things like that and I'm the only one it took this long to finally get to it.

Still, just in case the voice really was meant for me, and even though it got the sex wrong, I'll do something. Or maybe sit down right here and "be" for a while.

I do that. I sit on a stone beautiful with orange lichen. Booboo comes running up and jumps on my lap. I tell her we're "being" but not to worry, we won't do it for long.

She's a little dog with ears that flop around. She's a mix of colors. Whitish underbelly, gray/grizzled rest of her, and some yellow around her face and ears. When she's with me, she usually looks as if she's smiling. When strangers are around she looks anxious or angry.

As I sit (Am I really "being"? How can I tell?), I think about how I want to look the part. I mean the part of having a voice that echoes out. I'll change my outfit. I'll not only wear my big black hat, I'll buy a red and white striped shirt. I'll get matching striped socks. I don't have to dress that way all the time. I can rest now and then and be my shy self when I'm wearing my gray and tan outfits.

Actually I like my life the way it is. My nasty little dog. My little cluttered cottage. I might change, but not my real life. I couldn't stand that. I *need* to be shy.

But I have to keep remembering my powerful voice up there. There was hardly a mountain it didn't ring back from. Maybe I'm not who I've been thinking I am all these years. Up on that mountaintop everything buzzed with energy. I ... even I ... sparkled.

Except there's nothing I like better than staying in the shadows creeping around watching people—lying in wait as though to jump out and scare, but never jumping out.

My little dog is as frightened of people as I am, but she's tough. She got frightened by the lightning, but she didn't go far and came running back to me as soon as I started down. She always does. We're each other's only friends.

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I do it. I buy a whole new outfit for my new way of being (that red and white striped shirt and matching socks), but when it comes right down to it, I'm scared to wear it. I do put a little red jacket on Booboo.

She thinks, "If I must," and I say, "You must."

I put on my big hat, and we go back to that same mountain. I'm pretty sure the voice has to be in a storm. It's a sunny day now, but you never know on the mountains. Storms come up suddenly. Maybe we'll be lucky.

When I'm almost all the way up, I see a man climbing in front of me.

I hope he's not going all the way. If the voice does come again, which of us will it be for?

Up the switchbacks, back and forth we go, higher and higher, that man and I and Booboo. We stay well back from him. I'm glad I'm not wearing my costume. What would he think if he saw me like that? That I was the kind of person who *wants* to be noticed, that's what.

I drop yet farther behind just at the thought that he might stop and talk.

He gets to the top before I do.

He has one of those soft khaki hats, not like mine. Under it I can see his short brown beard but not much else. (Under my big hat, and thank goodness, you can hardly see anything.) At the top he stands with his arms out and turns slowly to see the view from all sides and as if he were lord of it all. He doesn't need a voice calling him. I'll bet he's already Being and Doing and Proclaiming.

A little black cloud blocks the sun and it starts to hail. That man's hat won't help much, but mine will. It may be too big and too bold for me, but it's serviceable. I

pick up Booboo and both of us hunker down under it. Up this high, that's the only shelter there is.

And here's that voice again, even as I hunker down.

"Come. Do. Proclaim. Be your father's son."

It's still saying "Father's son."

The man looks all round as if looking for the voice, but it seems to be coming from straight up. He looks up and gets the hail full on his face, but then he grimaces, turns, and starts down. It's as if he doesn't want to hear more, even though it said "Father's son" and most likely means him.

He passes us. He may not have seen me, though he must have seen Booboo in her little red jacket.

Hail or no, I put Booboo down and climb to the top and stand where he was standing. I take off my hat to show my real self. I shout. "Is it me? Am I the one?"

No answer.

I wish now I'd worn my new outfit. I like it. I mean I don't like it on me, but I'd like it on somebody else. It's cheerful. I was pleased when I saw myself in it, but I didn't want anybody to see me like that.

I shout again, "Am I the one?"

No answer.

I give up ... for now. I pick up Booboo so as to go faster and start down. I call after the man, "Wait. The voice means you. It can't be me."

But he's ignoring the switchbacks, jumping straight down, from one turn to the other. I start jumping down, too. It takes no time at all to get all the way down to the flat, foresty place.

Then we, I and Booboo that is, sit down to catch our breath. We've walked ... jumped, rather, beyond the hail. The sun is shining. Booboo is happy. She loves getting carried and cuddling up on my shoulder. She looks up at me like: What's next? Are we going to have some more fun?

I tell her, "Yes."

I give us a drink from my water bottle.

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When we start again, we want to avoid other hikers so we stay off the trail. Or rather slightly off it. We want to think about ourselves. We walk right in on a campsite. Nobody's there. Booboo sniffs around the bear can. We realize how hungry we are. I open it. I let Booboo eat anything she wants. I eat three breakfast bars, each a different flavor. Then I spread the food around. The voice said do, so I'm doing something for the bears. Why not? We're all hungry.

I do this at several places. We hurry away from each one, though. We don't want to be there when they come. We stay on the trail this time, and then here's that man just in front of us. He's still looking around as if he owned the whole forest. He's taking the mountain's words to heart.

I thought he was long gone. For some reason Booboo goes after him, snarling and barking, and he keeps backing up. She grabs his pants leg. He kicks out, but she won't let go.

I say, "Sorry. She's usually not this way."

"Get him off me."

*His* voice is big and booming. I'll bet he's one of those people who can't talk softly even when they try.

"Son," he says, "call off your damn dog."

Not only the voice on the mountain, but he, also, thinks I'm a boy. I have to admit I have a boyish figure, but now that's two in a row thought so. Not only that, but he thinks Booboo is male, too.

I say, "Sorry."

He keeps kicking out. The ground is rough. He falls. Booboo lets go of his pants and jumps on his chest. She's going for his face. I grab her just in time. I shout, "Bad dog. Bad dog," but she knows I don't mean it. She doesn't even look contrite.

I say, "She's never done this before," which isn't *exactly* a lie. Maybe there's something about him Booboo senses but I didn't notice. I stare at him for clues. He doesn't look like much, sitting in the fireweed by the side of the trail examining his pants.

"That dog ought to be put down. One of these days he'll hurt somebody."

I'm trying to hold Booboo back but it's not easy.

"Who are you? You and your little squeaky voice."

He makes a gesture as if to take care of Booboo right now all by himself.

"Just Marilyn."

"That lightning struck a tree right behind me. Did you have anything to do with that?"

"I didn't. I don't even know how."

He thinks I'm lying—that I'm trying to look harmless and ordinary with my everyday name.

Then he says, *What* are you, not who.

"I really am Marilyn."

He staggers up. I'm still too busy holding Booboo to help. I say "Bad dog" a couple of times again.

She's thinking, "Okay, okay. Let go. I give up."

(If it was Booboo's lightning, then it's as good as mine.)

I tip my hat even lower over my eyes. My shyness has made me bold. I say, "All right. All right. That was my lightning. I admit it."

Afterward I'll feel ashamed.

*He's* the one made me say it. Why would I even think I could do that?

He says, "Let me pass."

Of course. Why not?

He makes a fist as though to punch me, gives me a warning glance, and goes trotting down the trail. That makes Booboo all the more anxious to chase him. I tell her we don't need to bother with him now.

She'd still like to go after him.

I say, "Maybe you'll get the chance to bite somebody else pretty soon."

But she thinks, "I feel like biting him in particular. More than anybody else."

I sit down with her wriggling on my lap. Finally she calms down.

I tell her, yet again, what a bad dog she is and she licks my hand.

I'm thinking ... wondering ... well, What *am* I? is a good question. Maybe nothing I think about myself is true. Like even which sex I am, and Booboo's sex, too.

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People are coming back from hikes and getting ready to eat. We decide to find some more bear cans to open. It's not just for us, it's for the bears, too.

And it's working. The next camping spot we find, here's a bear. Before I can stop her, Booboo is trying to chase it away. How can she be that stupid? Is there something about that man that's like a bear? Or about the bear that's like the man?

I don't know what to do. I don't want to call attention to myself, but I don't want her hurt.

I yell, "Stop that."

Booboo won't listen, but maybe the bear will.

Anyway, I'd rather yell than sit here and watch Booboo get clobbered.

The bear turns toward me but only for a second. Then it swipes one big swipe and Booboo goes flying. A great arc. Everything slows down, and for a moment I see her silhouetted against the sky and I think: I've got lots of time to run over and catch her, but then time catches up with itself. She lands yards away. The bear gives a cough of warning and goes back to messing around in the camper's packs as if we didn't matter.

We creep away. Booboo seems to be pretty much all right. She's limping a little, but she won't look at me. She knows she made a big mistake. She wants me to pick her up but she doesn't dare ask.

Is this what happens when shy people ... creatures, that is ... have the guts to do, and do things they shouldn't?

I say, "You ought to be on a leash."

She thinks, "If I must."

I say, "You must."

Next time we raid a camping spot it's not going to be to open bear cans (I don't feel so much like helping bears as I did), but to steal a clothesline so I can make a leash.

But the next camping spot we come to belongs to that man. And there he is, leaning over packing up his food. Is this one of the spots where we spread the food around for the bears?

And there goes Booboo before I can yell "Bad dog" and "Stop that" and grabs him by the butt.

"Not you again."

Is there something only she knows? Is he as he looks to be, and as he acts, the one in charge of everything? The president of this or that or the head of the company? Head of all sorts of things that rightly belong to ... well, Booboo?

It's all about her. How could I not see that? I always think everything means me. It's me, me, me, all the time. That's what makes a person shy. If it's not me, then what's to be shy about?

Next time the voice comes I'll yell, "It's Booboo. She's the one. She's already doing things, and being. She's taken your words to heart. Look how she's gone after things."

Meanwhile the man is trying to reach back to pull her off.

She's more bulldog than I ever thought she could be.

"Get him off me."

His pants are already a wreck. Torn down the sides and almost all the way off.

He makes more noise than the bear did. Not just a cough, but a bellow.

If I or Booboo could call down lightning, we ought to do it right now. I hold my breath and think hard, *Blam, blam, blam*, but nothing happens.

I say, "Let go."

Booboo is thinking: "Don't tell me what to do."



Why should she listen now when she never has before? As usual I have no effect on anybody.

(Booboo is thinking, of the two of us, she's top dog.)

I just stand there.

Booboo thinks she has to do all the work.

(What if the voice comes again and says, "Don't do and don't be?" Meaning me?)

Booboo thinks I ought to stop being shy and stop thinking so much. Just like that, stop. She's thinking, "Do something, for Heaven's sake."

I just have to trust Booboo on this. Instead of trying to pull her off. I grab his little folding shovel and hit him on the head. But even so I'm glad it doesn't seem to hurt him too much.

But here comes another bear. The food is still all spread out. It never takes much. Just half a candy bar is enough to bring a bear.

Booboo lets go and jumps into my arms. The man runs. As best he can in torn, falling-down pants. We hear him crashing down and down. The bear gets busy eating the stuff that's still all spread around.

Booboo and I think: Whew!

Then, BLAM! And a flash. But there isn't a cloud in the sky that I can see. So the sky, doing any old which way it wants. Or maybe Booboo. And why not?

We've ... all of us together, the bear and Booboo and I and maybe the sky itself ... we've rid the forest of a big, noisy, hairy, scary presence that thought he owned the whole place.

The voice comes again even way down here. "Do," it says. "Be. Proclaim. Be more than just your father's son."

I say again, "It's me. Marilyn."

Then there's lightning right beside us, and I think I hear, "Boo, boo, boo, boo, boo ..." Echoing on and on.

As we creep away, she limps a little, but she acts just the same old Booboo. She's thinking: "From now on let's both be boys."

I say, "Okay."

And she thinks, if she has to wear a red jacket, then I should be in my striped shirt. She thinks it isn't fair—that she has to wear the jacket, but that I don't have the guts to wear the shirt. She thinks we should both wear nothing but red from now on.

I tell her, "Okay, okay."

I sit on a stone, again beautiful with orange lichen, again Booboo on my lap. I tell her we'll sit and Be for a while but not to worry, we won't do it for long.

The End

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