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David Reiter

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Touching Bear

Abstract

I didn't set out on purpose to meet the bear. Some people do. I have known people who have touched bears on their first trip to the mountains. Scratched ears. Nuzzled the wet, black nose. To hear them tell it, the incident might have been as calculated as a snapshot with a fake floral backdrop. Almost all of them, especially the women, have learned to lower the pitch of their voices during the narrative and to play on the impatience of their audience, not to mention those hard of hearing.

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We were really after blueberries. It was a crisp, fall morning, mist swirling over the lake in the breeze. After our second cup of coffee, we washed the breakfast dishes, crushed our tin cans and broke camp. My back still ached from sleeping on the damned foamy – I'll never get used to being that close to the ground. So I say to George, 'if I can't get a good night's sleep on this torture test of yours at least I can eat blueberries.' 'Take the lead,' he says, almost like he knows what's coming. 'Your eyes are better for detail than mine.' And like a fool I listen to him and stumble off down the trail watching for the sunny patches where Marg told me you always look for the fruit.

I swear I'd practically stepped in the dung before I saw it. A pile of droppings, still damp and steamy, right there in the middle of the trail. 'Tell me it's from a deer or an elk, George,' I say, holding my nose and still looking down at my feet. 'Lie to me, for a change.'

That's when we heard the thicket rustle...

The bear is always as fierce as a Day of Judgement and has hot, sour breath. Aware of the script, it is all fangs and claws. Nearby, a cub shinnies up a dusty tree to cheer on big momma, its tongue and lips stained with blueberry flash. Of course, the raging bear is never down on all fours because a grizzly can only hide its hump while rearing on its hind legs like a lodgepole pine. Not that the lorist wants to ever be *sure* that what he or she saw was a grizzly. Slight doubt works best in *crème de menthe* retrospectives.

'How can you be sure if you've come face to face with a grizzly or just a black bear?'

'Gee, I don't know, Fred.'

'Climb up a tree.'

'I don't get it.'

'You will. If the bear climbs up to pull you down, no sweat, it's only a black bear.'

But if it grabs onto the base of the tree and shakes you out, you'll know it's a grizzly.'

Some people are so determined to meet a bear that they stash food inside their tent as bait. Along with a plethora of pan lids to use as cymbals in an alpine rendition of the 1812 Overture if a bear actually *does* wander by. One chap in the final phase of boredom with his ranchette and Mercedes tied a food caché on a flimsy branch a few metres above his tent then retired inside to candlelight, champagne and a mistress with severe misgivings. Did he expect the bear to skewer himself on the tent poles for his electronic flash?

I have never been one to toy with the Fates. A child of the Alberta foothills, I learned from a very young age that God is found by lifting eyes to the West, to mountains of implacable silence. From time to time, the wilderness sent agents from the shadows to penetrate our fences. The night before my twelfth birthday a bear apparently raided our neighbour's fowl coop and gave his Irish Setter a good swat for interfering with destiny. Mr Harris, who was away at a weekend cattle auction in Calgary, returned the next morning to find the setter in amazingly good repair, considering its crushed skull and the fact that it wasn't breathing.

'Oh, well,' he told my father, putting on a brave front in my presence. 'All the durned thing could do was yowl anyway. Just wish the bear had eaten *him* instead of my leghorns!'

A valuable lesson. In the mountains thereafter I shied away from any sign of bear. At first, I mixed mythologies, sometimes imagining myself a Sheriff of Nottingham nervously awaiting ambush by a furry dandy in a feathered cap. Older, I began to think that the inevitable encounter had been delayed to nip my potential more tragically at the first flower of promise, which may have had something to do with the fact that I'd remained virginal after most of my friends had seduced or been seduced by the most handy female approximation of their fantasies. On a trail, I'd keep up a steady chatter with my companions, especially when the path ahead was banked with dense scrub. When I caught fish, I always washed all trace of blood off my knife then buried the guts, head, tail and bones well out of sight from camp. I read Faulkner's 'The Bear' intently by firelight.

I never doubted that my consuming attraction to the mountains would eventually bring me face to face with a bear. But I was in no hurry to hasten that day. Then it came.

It happened in the line of duty. I'd been unemployed for a few months, so when the job of mapping out recreational trails for the summer came my way, I jumped at the chance. To think that someone would actually *pay* me

for hiking around!

The only problem was that I had to do it on my own. Through bear country.

My supervisor was sympathetic, in her own way. I'd love to go with you and hold your hand under the elms,' she said, batting eyebrows. 'But our budget simply won't allow it.'

She was only a few years older than me but had the advantage of university, so I missed the allusion. 'There aren't any elms in Waterton Park,' I replied.

'Maybe not,' she laughed. 'If you should make it back with all your limbs intact, I'll pack a picnic and find us one!'

Even under fluorescent lights, she was attractive enough to string along several men, so I doubted that she'd shed many tears over my remains when they were inadvertently discovered, weeks after I'd been dismembered, by a troop of boy scouts scrounging for arrowheads. I didn't bother to ask for a snatch of silk: I *was* truly alone.

Things went well enough until I came to the Borderline Track, a meandering path that led to the boundary with the United States and then continued into Glacier Park, even more infamous for its testy bear population. Just last month, a West German accountant in lederhosen had been kabobed by a grizzly while sipping Liebfraumilch on the banks of an innocuous creek. The report failed to speculate as to whether the bear was motivated by *lebensraum*.

The sign at the trailhead was quite explicit:

WARNING
GRIZZLY BEARS HAVE BEEN SIGHTED
ON THIS TRAIL IN THE PAST WEEK
CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

I clearly had my excuse. But I also had a deadline by which my supervisor's Deputy Minister expected a draft report, else his kind attention to her ambitions for promotion might be eclipsed. She would not be impressed by a phone call about a sign posted to discourage librarians, greengrocers and lawnbowlers. And she was certain to remind me of details in the letter I'd attached to my application for the job: *...a seasoned hiker, in touch with the wilderness...* etc., etc..

A way out dawned on me. I could plagiarize highlights from a Parks Canada brochure and maybe invent a few trivialities to plug the gaps. I

scoured the shelves of the Visitor Centre and interrogated the hapless assistant at the counter, without luck. Nothing had been written on the Borderline, but they would certainly be happy to see whatever I came up with. When I asked about the bears, the assistant smiled and leaned over the counter conspiratorially.

‘There aren’t any bears,’ he whispered.

‘But the sign –’

‘Too many drug runners. The Yanks are applying the pressure, you see. We’ll never stop the pros, but we thought it might at least scare off a few amateurs. Wear your bear-bells and you’ll be safe enough.’

‘I don’t *have* any bear bells.’

‘Then you’d better just whistle a happy tune, mate.’

Which is what I did until my lips went dry halfway in along the track. Unmercifully, the ground was sound-proofed with pine needles and sodden cottonwood leaves, so I had to do *something*. I beat a rock against my canteen like a tom-tom until I decided that might be too aggressive from a grizzly’s territorial perspective. Forced to pause several times to record essential data, I rustled the paper from my notebook and topographical maps so vigorously the edges frayed. At one point, a few squirrels, doubtlessly émigrés from more opulent campsites, crept up to sniff around my pack for crumbs.

But they were the only wildlife I saw until I reached the boundary marker, a pyramid of stone with a pompous brass plaque declaring that the weary traveller now stood at the longest unprotected border in the world, a fact that would bring a smile to dope runners heading south to market, just as it must have to scads of draft dodgers seeking refuge in Canada. For a moment, a lingering breeze carried the chill of ghosts.

Something about reaching your destination makes the ground you’ve covered seem less of a threat. As though your scent ground underfoot makes the path a part of a tamer reality that things wild will avoid. Nevertheless, on my way back, I began to sing. I cannot carry a tune. My version of *The Sound of Music* would make a fascist out of Julie Andrews, but I sang it anyway. Until it occurred to me that proclaiming ‘the hills are alive...’ might make them so.

The bear pretended not to notice me as I came around the bend.

It was grubbing around a rotting log, flicking bits of it away like irksome matchsticks. For an instant I felt the panic of white ants suddenly exposed to the glare of sunlight. But I didn’t trip and fall flat on my face as I’d imagined I would. I merely wrapped my arms around the nearest thick tree and tried to fade into the bark.

The bear still pretended not to notice.

'Wood,' she said, to the log's heartwood, not to me. The trumpet had blown for generations of grubs. How could they ever have persuaded themselves that their Jericho would last until the end of time?

She was a black bear, which made me feel only marginally better. I was sure she must be larger than she seemed from the distance between us. Fat and sleek, she glistened in the filtered sunlight as though she's just emerged from a swim in the river. Her head rocked back and forth as she splintered the log and scooped up her prey. Occasionally, she lifted a paw and shook it. Was she merely playing with her supper?

I thought of three courses of action, none of them failsafe. I could roughen up my clothes a bit and hope to pass as an oversized lichen clinging to the bark of my patron tree. But I rejected this as too passive; she'd pry me loose like a cork from a champagne bottle. Or I could scramble up the tree, leaving the contents of my pack down at ground level as tribute. Yet, having swallowed my sole remaining granola bar, what if she decided to climb up in search of seconds? Besides, my tree scaling skills were abysmal. Though I'd read somewhere that a person pursued is capable of climbing 20 metres in less than a minute, I didn't fit that case study because the bear was still minding her own business. So adrenaline wasn't coursing my veins in sufficient quantities. Until it was, I'd keep the Tarzan option as a fallback.

The third idea was the most rational, which should have prompted me to distrust it. I reasoned thusly:

Major Premise: Bears that are neither hungry nor provoked will not chase people.

Minor Premise: This bear is sated, and I have not provoked her.

Conclusion: Therefore, this bear will not chase me.

I decided to walk in slow motion around the bear. So I began to pick my way, at a respectful distance from her, through the scrub. Suddenly all the leaves under my boots were tinder-dry, crackling as though rubbed against a microphone. Fallen twigs snapped like vertebrae. I didn't even see the tree root elevated just enough above the ground to catch my foot. Leaning the wrong way, I lost my balance.

Then the bear noticed me.

I remember just two things: the bear blatting like an enraged french horn in the shrinking distance and her breath over me as I fainted.

It was both hot and sour.

Soon after, I lost my virginity.