

The Bear

by

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I once had a bear within a few feet of me and, though I would later eat it, I never saw it.

The stories had been coming in for the past couple of days. A bear had been invading cabins. Normally, bears and humans take pains to avoid one another, and as long as both groups observe that one aspect of the treaty, everything is fine. The problem only arises when bears are threatened or when they begin to view humans as a source of food. This is actually a problem of our own making. Humans, as a rule, have become rather lazy when it comes to dealing with their trash. Bears encountering the easy food of our wasted leftovers learn to follow the trail of trash humans leave behind and are quite clever when it comes to opening the packages (such as cars and houses) where humans try to hide their food. Unfortunately, once a bear begins entering human habitation, it will continue to do so until someone stops it, permanently.

Such was the case with this young brown bear. Reports arrived about trashcans being raided, abandoned cabins being opened, and finally Arie's cabin being vandalized. The bear's behavior was escalating and everyone was put on alert. Chicken is a small community of people who do not always get along, but once a common threat presents itself, the people in Chicken look out for each other.

Chicken itself can be divided into the categories of "Old Chicken" and "New Chicken." Old Chicken is the original mining town established during the Alaska/Yukon gold rush. Due to

the book *Tisha*, it is a bit of a tourist attraction. The Fairbanks Mining Company took the town over and converted all of the town buildings into a mining camp. At some point after the gold largely dried up, the company's buildings were purchased by Greg and Sue, becoming part of Chicken Alaska Inc. New Chicken included the series of buildings that made up the rest of Chicken Alaska Inc., the post office, the airstrip, the various homes of Chicken's few residents, and the Goldpanner, Greg and Susan's competition.

While Greg and Susan's home and business were firmly considered to be part of New Chicken, those of us working for them lived in the previously abandoned buildings of Old Chicken. Our living conditions in Old Chicken were rudimentary at best. A large cabin that had once served as Chicken's general store served as our dormitory. A sunken wall, whose double door was now impossible to move, divided the men's side from the women's. As the entire building had sunk into the ground due to the thawing permafrost, the original exterior doors had to be removed. A piece of plywood with hinges and a hook replaced the door on the men's side. Despite Greg's promises, the doorway on the women's side would remain without even that for the duration of our stay. To keep out bugs and give a bit of privacy, the women nailed a heavy blanket to cover the gaping hole. In partial reconciliation, they were given the better furniture, including a worn, padded chair and couch.

The day we learned about the attack on Arie's cabin, Greg handed over a rifle to help protect us. Arie, Greg's mother, lived on the other side of Old Chicken from our "dormitory" in a much more habitable cabin. That put the attack entirely too close to home. As the women didn't have a door, they kept the rifle on their side of the building and would move the couch in

front of the blanket before they settled down for the night. While we were told that the bear wouldn't come after us, no one felt completely safe.

Jennifer and Kristen had the largest concerns. As bartender, Jennifer had the responsibility of kicking out the last of the miners and campers, closing down the main building, shutting down the generator, and then traversing the unlit half mile or so to Old Chicken. Kristen, as baker, had to wake up early enough in the morning to make her fantastic cinnamon rolls (literally "handmade" as she did not like using spoons, whisks, or spatulas for mixing her ingredients), and thus she had to start up the generator and open the building. Both had been given use of a four-wheeled off-road vehicle called a quad to drive between Old and New Chicken. During the uncertain days and nights that followed the stories of the bear, these ladies took the rifle with them as protection. It was Kristen who was forced to use it.

Kristen had a fairly regimented routine. Getting up at around five in the morning, Kristen would take the quad across the Taylor Highway to New Chicken and immediately start up the generator. With power running, she would return to the main building, entering it by the side door in the café. She would keep that side door open, but leave the front door locked as she went about her work of starting up the soup for the day and her cinnamon rolls – made from Susan's secret recipe. Once the rolls were baking, she would then work on any other preparation needs of the day.

As the days progressed after the bear's cabin raids, all of us relaxed back into our normal routines. For Kristen, this meant that she would prop the rifle next to the door as she entered the café rather than taking it back into the kitchen area. Such was the case the morning she heard something large step up on the wooden porch that led to the main entrance of the café.

She moved over to the small window that gave the kitchen a view of the porch, ready to call out that the café was not yet open. Unfortunately, instead of an early-rising miner, she found herself watching as a brown bear started clawing at the door. The entire building shook as the young bear tried to gain entry. His attempts would leave large gashes in the door. Unintentionally Kristen let out a gasp. The bear looked directly at her.

It was then that Kristen realized that she had left the rifle by the other door, which was on the other side of the room with the ordering counter and refrigerators in between. The bear seemed to look in the same direction that she was. To her horror, the bear began to head around the building toward the door that remained open.

Panicking, Kristen ran for the gun. She got to the door, picked up the rifle, and saw the bear heading directly for her. According to her account, she got off two shots at nearly point blank range. Both missed.

Kristen was pretty shaken up by her encounter, but was more than willing to talk with people about it throughout the day. She told us that, despite her poor marksmanship, the bear decided that entering the building wasn't worth the risk and headed back into the woods. Kristen claimed that experience disturbed her enough to fire a third shot as the bear ran off. The deep gouges in the door testified how close her encounter had been.

People spent a good portion of the day talking about the bear and Kristen's encounter. The door made for a great talking point for every busload of tourists that came to the café. By the evening, however, the excitement had worn away and worry replaced it. The bear had become much more brazen. Not only was it willing to enter human habitation, it was willing to approach humans themselves.

The reality of it didn't seem to faze me. I was amused by the women's determination to stack furniture in front of their doorway, by the argument between Mark and them about which side the gun should be on (though I firmly sided with it not being in Mark's possession), and by Greg's recent decision to sleep in the café with his own loaded gun. I had not seen the bear, nor had I seen one in reality up to that point in my life. I was not afraid of the bear, but it was more out of ignorance than any level of bravery.

In truth, people's fear of creatures in nature had long amused me. I was under the belief that, as long as I left animals alone, they would leave me alone. I recall walking through Yellowstone National Park with my high school backpacking group, making fun of the advisor who decided to buy a walking stick with bear-bells attached. Bear-bells are any type of bell placed to jingle while a person walks. The idea is that if the bears hear the bells, they will know that people are near and can easily avoid them. Several other students and I, however, liked repeating the Yellowstone joke of, "What's the difference between black bear crap and grizzly crap? Grizzly crap has bear-bells in it." It was with that same type of humor that I dealt with this situation.

Thus, when Mark woke me that night in a panic that the bear was coming to get him, I was not about to take him seriously. Granted, the situation was even more humorous, at least from the distance of time, considering how Mark presented his fears.

While the men all shared one side of the sunken cabin, we did not agree what our living arrangements should be. For example, I was against stacking our beds on top of each other and bolting them into a type of bunk bed. Mark had insisted on this so we could have "dancing space" and so, with Greg's agreement that the men's side of the cabin should also be a social

gathering spot for the staff, we now had bunk beds. The idea of the men's side being a social gathering spot died pretty. Part of the reason was the lack of light. Despite Greg's earlier promises, strict times were set on how long we could use the generator that provided light to our building and powered our washer and dryer. The main reason, however, was Mark himself. Forget that he had serious issues dealing with people socially, or that he had an overinflated opinion of himself and his abilities, or even that he returned to the cabin most nights either drunk or stoned. Mark slept in the nude.

Slept is not completely the correct term. He spent a good portion of the evening in the nude and lacked any self-consciousness about it. He would continue conversations while stripping and would stand toe-to-toe to finish them. This led both Chuck and I to appreciate his insistence on bunk beds. All it took was one nighttime conversation at the regular bed height with Mark standing next to our beds for us to decide to take the top bunks (at least until the roof started leaking over mine).

Unfortunately, by the time the bear came to Chicken, Chuck had moved on and I was forced to the bottom bunk lest I wake up in a puddle of muddy water. That meant that when Mark came to stand by me during this night, I would have to sit up to avoid a direct viewing. By the time Mark came back from the bar, I had been sound asleep.

"Paul! Paul! Wake up, man!"

I tried just ignoring him and returning to my dreams, but Mark escalated from simply saying my name, to poking at me with his finger, to shaking my shoulder.

"Come on, man. Wake up!" There was a pleading to his voice that roused me quicker than his shaking.

“What do you want, Mark?”

“The bear’s here,” he replied in a forced whisper. He was emphatic enough that his voice gave a little squeak.

“What?” My grogginess was in no way feigned. While I was pretty certain that I heard him correctly, the idea behind his statement refused to penetrate my consciousness.

“The bear,” he emphasized, “It’s here.”

My awareness started to focus in on the situation, “Oh man, Mark. You’re naked.”

“I know,” he nodded emphatically, “that’s why it wants to eat me.”

“What?”

“It wants to eat me. It thinks I’m a big meat popsicle.”

“A pop...? What wants to eat you, Mark?”

“The bear, man! The f-ing bear! It’s looking right at me!” He pointed at the window behind himself.

Our side of the cabin had three windows. I was sleeping next to the wall that was farthest from our entrance and that had one of those windows. While a part of me shocked itself awake, I refused to acknowledge that fear or to play the “something’s behind you” game.

“Then maybe you should cover yourself.”

“Right, right,” Mark’s response showed me that he wasn’t fully with reality. As the substitute bartender for the nights Jennifer had off, I knew that he would ingratiate himself to the locals by providing rounds “on the house” and occasionally join in their festivities himself. Some of the locals would gain further favor with him by sharing their own supply of marijuana. While Mark would later lose his job for his experiments in pharmacology, it was pretty well

established with the rest of the staff that if he couldn't find a way to get high at night, he would use the opportunity to get drunk. I was suddenly of the opinion that he had done both.

"Oh, man! Paul, man! It's still looking at me!"

I had resisted all temptation to look at the window and a part of me was starting to fear what might be there, but I ignored that too.

"Mark, nothing's looking at you."

"It is too! It's thinking it wants some Mark-sized steak!"

"Mark, go to sleep. There's no bear."

"There is too! It's right there!"

My patience snapped and so did I.

"Mark, you're drunk and you're high, and you're probably hallucinating. There's no bear. Go to sleep!"

"But..."

"Go! To! Sleep!"

"The bear's going to get us."

"Even if there were a bear, it couldn't get in. You built the door, remember? You latched it, right?"

Mark jumped up, again exposing himself, and ran to the door to check the latch.

"It's good; we're cool."

"Good. Then go back to sleep."

"Right. Thanks, man. G'night."

"Good night, Mark."



I tried to force my mind to quiet.

“It’s still there.”

“Mark...” But my threat went unfinished as he passed out. While a part of me wanted to look through the window, the possibility of coming face-to-face with the bear kept me from doing so. Instead, I lay awake for a long while, trying to listen for any sound that would indicate that a bear was casing the cabin. Hearing none, I eventually fell asleep.

The next morning, paw prints in the soft earth indicated that Mark hadn’t been hallucinating after all. While a part of me was terribly disturbed that my head had only a pane of glass between myself and the creature, some odd part of me found it comforting. The bear followed my pattern of belief. I had left it alone, and it had done the same.

Greg was not in the best of moods that day. It’s hard to be cheerful when you spend the night fitfully sleeping on a wooden bench, the type common among cafes everywhere. Oddly, Mark made no mention of the previous night to me nor, to my knowledge, to anyone else. I, too, kept the experience largely to myself, though I was more than willing to make mention of Mark’s performance to my fellow employees.

Very little about that day has stayed in my memory. But the early evening brought enough excitement to make up for the lack. The café had passed its peak hours and I was in the phase of starting the clean-up process when Kristen ran into the building.

“The bear! Paul, the bear is right here in town.”

“What?!” I ran to one of the wooden booths and looked through the north-facing windows.

While most of Chicken Alaska Inc. was made up of a single wooden structure that was divided into four separate areas (café, saloon, liquor store, and gift shop), during the middle of the summer a camp of sorts would set up on the north side of the “town.” Hikers, hunters, and the occasional miner would set up there through some arrangement with Greg and Sue. At this point in the summer, the main portion of this area was dominated by two miners who shared a camper. When they weren’t out dredging the nearby river for gold, they were often in the café, the bar, or sitting in folding chairs outside of their camper.

All I could see from my vantage point was a group of people gesturing excitedly. I put down the rag and headed out the door to get a better view when I heard a shot ring out. Some part of me was hesitant to see the bear get killed and I slowed my pace. By the time I reached the area where everyone standing, the bear had disappeared.

“Did you see it?” Kristen asked excitedly as I walked back to the café. I wondered at her excitement, but then realized that until now she had been the only one to encounter the animal. Perhaps this helped make the entire experience feel more real to her, or perhaps she thought that people had somehow doubted the story despite the marks the bear had left in the door.

I shook my head, feeling somewhat cheated. “No, it was gone before I could see anything.”

She nodded in sympathy but her adrenaline was still there. “It was the strangest thing. The bear was just walking right into town. In the middle of the day!”

She pointed to the sun for emphasis, and while it was more truthfully near the end of the day, she was right, that was damn strange behavior for a bear. And that would be the topic for the rest of the evening. The café had a sudden uptick in business, as the event seemed to spur

people's appetites and their need to socialize. Nearly everyone was eager to find out if I had seen the bear, and I received either sympathetic or disbelieving looks from all of them when I told them that I hadn't. For some reason, it was either unfair or suspicious that I had been so close to the event, yet hadn't seen anything.

That several other people happened to be visiting the miners when the bear had tried walking into town made the word spread even more quickly. By the end of the day, everyone was talking about the bear. And by that night, Greg was sleeping in the café again.

My sleep that night was undisturbed by any further interruptions from Mark. I have no recollections of any dreams or even of any thoughts in the early morning. It wasn't long before I discovered, however, that Greg's sleep had not been as undisturbed.

Kristen let us know almost right away the next morning. The bear was dead. Always good as a solid source of information, Kristen's telling of the events was not discounted or even added to by anyone else later in the day. Granted, she had been one of the first to hear the story, and from none other than Greg himself.

Greg seemed to expect that the bear was going to return. The café was, by far, the largest source of food in the area. As the bear had already proven its determination to approach the café during times of high human traffic, and had already returned after getting scared off once, Greg was certain that it was going to return that night.

For that reason, he didn't let himself doze off that night. And so, he heard the bear when it made its way to the side door. Moving quietly, Greg picked up and double-checked his rifle. His plan was to go out the front door and catch the bear from behind.

It was a good plan, and it would have worked had the bear not decided to double around and head for the main entrance itself. Greg came out the door to find the bear climbing over one of the round wooden rails that lined the porch. He brought up the gun as the bear moved towards him and fired directly into the bear's face.

While the first shot probably killed the bear, Greg fired a few more just to be certain. His gunfire was enough to wake the nearby campers. By the time Kristen had arrived that morning, they were talking about what to do with the bear. She said that it looked so much smaller in death than it had in life. She could have sworn that the bear was several feet bigger when she had her encounter with it. To some degree, she almost seemed sorry for the creature.

By the time I arrived, the bear had already been "cleaned." All that was left of it was the bloodstain on the ground in front of the café and the pieces of the bear that were being kept in the freezer. I never saw the bear, but later that week I would have my first and only serving of bear stew. I couldn't help but feel sorry for the bear that I was eating. In the large scheme of things, when it comes down to a choice between human or animal survival, I side with the survival of the human. Still, I couldn't help but feel that we were the real intruders here and the bear paid the price simply for following its natural instincts.

I ate the stew, and while the meat was gamey, I think it was the seasoning of guilt that made me not enjoy the flavor.