

Never the Twain Shall Meet
August 2020

Our little camper includes merely the barest necessities. Nothing frivolous, nothing pointless. I keep my travel journal in a cupboard above the made-for-two kitchen table. My journal, my lifeblood on these trips, sits directly atop two supine cylinders of bear spray. Two opposites.

One to record, in the quiet, still, lantern-lit evening, my meditative thoughts upon hiking little-used, near-primitive mountain trails, softly decorated with pastel flowers. Or to write of the young doe who steps slowly in the meadow across the way, its grasses touched by the slant-sun of late afternoon. She is soundless, her dipping head the only clue that she is dining, her twitching ears the only clue that she knows of our presence but determines no reason to flee.

The black, military-looking bear spray cylinders are wrapped in warnings. How to store, how to prepare, how to point, how to spray. The clipped sentences are foreboding. Learn this now. Do not hesitate. Practice using this repellent. My mind's eye—in those too frequent nightmares before we journey from one end of the state to the other, to our Green River campsite to hike the trails and have camp dinners with our son, a journalist in nearby Pinedale—sees the grizzly bear, its massive form, its huge maw exuding an awful breath, housing razor teeth that can get a grip on a person's head with zero to no effort.

I am supposed to stay calm, keep my head about me as the somehow-threatened animal begins a lumbering gait that is shockingly speedy, undeterred by the black cylinder in my hand that will probably grow limp, causing me to drop the cylinder on the ground, my eyes following it just before I smell the animal's breath. Is it hot, as described in most books? Why should I care?

Heed the warnings, though. I must not spray until the bear is thirty feet from me. I must not spray into the wind. In the nightmare, in my hand, the cylinder looks like a mini, black torpedo. And startled awake, I asked the darkness, "And just what am I doing in this territory that belongs to the grizzlies?"

When I was a mere child, and my father was just a few years into his Naval career, he would, as the Executive Officer, escort visiting family and friends to the docks of Key West's Submarine Pen and then down the hatch of his diesel submarine. This was all great fun, the tall guests laughing at their crouched position, my father's deep and serious voice warning to "watch your head." Exposed but well-insulated wiring making children of the adults as they touched, asking where this line and that line went, as if they would remember. All of us crunching into the wardroom, where a somber enlisted man from the Philippines, dressed too finely with too much starch, offered strong coffee to the adults, ice cream to the Exec's two little daughters.

Then on with the tour. We came to a section of the submarine where the sailors slept. Palettes with little cushioning, Navy issue pillows and sheets. One row after the other, one stacked above the other, held in place by heavy hinges and chains. Because of the tour, no personal items were displayed, but this is where the homesick, confined men, their sub on deployment, shared pictures, wrote letters, and told stories, one topping the other in daring-do or in romantic exploit. The area could be called cozy by a minimalist.

Yet, in this cozy nook, just under each of the lowest beds was a massive torpedo, green and silver. Navy issue. Bulbous, lacking shine. At the rear of each was a four-point fin, with a mechanism that looked as if it would twirl indefinitely. My father would discuss the tremendous force of a torpedo and its capacity to damage, citing the massive poundage, pointing to the “warhead”. As a child, I could not imagine the turbulence of the loading and launching, the torpedo’s silent and resolute trajectory. The imminent destruction.

We have turned a part of our long but narrow backyard into a getaway. It is a good place to drag a lawn chair, settle in, and write or read or just feel the summer’s breeze (when it is not wind). Fenced, with a somewhat healthy patch of grass, it is where we brought our Labrador puppy, summer day after summer day, all day, to teach him that some places are good for peeing and pooping, and some—like the Karastan rug we inherited from my mother-in-law—are not.

Sunlight filters through the leaves of a tall, nearly seventy-year-old cottonwood, planted when the neighborhood was just new. The backyard’s single tree is now lop-sided, its northern branches removed by the Power Company, the employee at our door nearly every year explaining that branches must not tangle with the electrical wires. We agree, and now keep an eye on our leaning tree, whose southern branches stretch toward a corner of our house. We love the tree, with a huggable trunk, its gift of shade, its incessant shower of small branches that our now-grown Labrador loves to carry about as if showing off a first-place prize.

The cottonwood is a tree of soft wood, and after any strong wind, branches litter the ground. The heavy, wet snow of springtime storms may break off one-third of a cottonwood’s branches, especially when the trees have leafed out. The leafy twigs that drop to the ground are a nuisance, but it is the heavy broken branches that fall to the ground or are snared high in the tree that reduce an otherwise benign tree to a sinister creature. From our lovable, lop-sided tree now dangles, high up, a thick branch, its splintered, jagged end pointing directly to earth. This Damocles’ sword is too high for us to worry it down. The Labrador is no longer allowed to play in the grassy area, and we humans must place our chairs just so.

Someday the branch will fall, and like a torpedo, it will spin quietly to its destination. It will yield its territory, and all again will be safe.