

The Bears and I
September 2021

With a white-knuckle grip on the grenade-like canister, I dutifully stretched out my shooting arm. My husband, facing me, walked backwards, stopping when he seemed much too close. “That’s about thirty feet. That’s when you can pull off the safety and squeeze the trigger.” He added, “Just make sure the wind’s not blowing in your direction.”

I stood, frozen. His instructions—in preparation for the worst-case scenario on a mountain trail—took less time than his pacing off of thirty feet. As a friend of mine says, “Do the math.”

“What if the wind’s blowing at me?” I asked. He did that little shrug that suggests dismissal. Some days, the bear eats you. Forty-two years of marriage, and I was genuinely questioning my husband’s love. All those years, and he didn’t really know me. I could no more steady myself to pull that trigger than fly to the moon.

Reading my mind, he said, “You can do it. Trust me.” I asked him how fast grizzlies move. “About 100 miles per hour.” He flashed the grin that forty-three years ago made me go out on a second date with him. Honestly, though, I wasn’t in the mood for joking. If that was a joke.

The problem with this situation was that, if I met a bear on the trail, I was totally on my own. I could depend on no one to help me. Tears and screams would not work. Plus, John’s legs are longer than mine and I like to stop to look at flowers, so he is naturally always well ahead of me on a trail. The bear would grab me first. This was so not fair.

Another problem existed. So much of our family’s life is connected to the mountains. Our three sons learned to hike as they learned to walk. They are happy and relaxed on mountain trails. I gain strength and peace amidst the trees and creeks and non-attack wildlife and in the thick forests’ gift of silence. If I folded my arms and pouted, “Not gonna go where grizzlies go”, I would be giving up fuel for my soul. I would also shrink to coward status, and I would really hate that. So, I figured out a way to hold the nasty canister at the ready: middle- and ring-finger slipped in the single belt loop, my free and dominant left hand poised to pop the safety and pull the trigger. As we marched to the trail head, I practiced my quick draw, again and again.

At the trail head at North Fisherman’s Creek, a large colored poster shouted out KNOW THE DIFFERENCE! A black bear headed one column, a grizzly the other. One black, one silver. Both big. Both with fangs and claws. The grizzly bear sported a hump on its back. Was that necessary to know in an attack? As we set off, I wondered if, in an encounter, I would make a complete fool of myself. I have a tendency, when frightened, especially when I see a spider, to jump around and shriek a great deal.

We began our descent, stumbling on the steep, rutted path paved with wobbly river rock. If the hike down were this peripatetically tricky, what might the eventual ascent be like? What if at that point we were fleeing? Despite my jitters, I recalled the famous and mysterious stage direction in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. “Exit, pursued by a bear.” Act 3, Scene 3. But usually, the props list calls for a bear puppet. I do not shriek around puppets.

What was I doing on this trail, wending my way toward willows, which grizzlies love to eat? It's fierce, that tug of motherhood. I had agreed to this camping trip because I would get to see my oldest son, who lives in the small Wyoming town nestled in these mountains and believes that one need only be sensible on the trails and, of course, carry bear spray. Thus, I would brave lurking grizzlies to treat my son to home-cooked meals, albeit on a propane camp stove. As the willows shuddered in the warm breeze, I put on my Happy Mom face, breathed to the rhythm of my rapid heart rate, and, with gusto, insisted to my inner self, "Sure! Why not?"

Gray-blue storm clouds moved in, and the air stilled. I was not happy with the sudden silence that, on hikes past, fed my soul. John nonchalantly said, "We need to make a lot of noise, talk a lot, in loud voices." With no hesitation, I started jabbering and kept it up, prodding John to keep up his side of our loud and edgy chat, until we returned to the car. Our conversation may have been vapid, even silly, but this need for noise was serious business. The realization was made even more crystal clear: This was bona fide grizzly country, and I did not want either of us to be attacked. It's hard, though, even in sweaty, heart-thumping fear, to maintain continuous dialogue after forty-two years of back conversation. Besides, John is the quiet type. When, at one thickly forested curve in the trail, I nervously huffed, "Your turn! You talk!" I thought it cruel when, at a loss for words, he sang out, "When a body meets a body comin' through the rye."

Normally while hiking, I am in a reverie. But in bear country, I repeatedly looked right, then left. It made my skin crawl to look behind me. My middle son had offered that a grizzly can follow in silence, never revealing itself until you felt his breath on your neck. I didn't realize how truly frightened I was till John casually pointed off to the right and said, "What's that?" I shrieked. He profusely apologized, hugged me, and stammered that it was just a flower we had never seen. For a brief moment, a forty-third year of marriage was off the table.

As we trooped along the trail, John shared that about twenty-five years earlier, when he and a friend fished in Yellowstone Park, surely there were bears nearby, but in their naivete, John and his friend gave nary a thought to a vicious encounter. *Grizzlies weren't invented yet*, I thought, *and neither was bear spray*. In those years, humans hadn't begun our extreme encroachment on bear lands. Growing towns weren't yet segmenting bear populations. The craze for huckleberry syrup and sauces and pies wasn't robbing bears of a dietary staple. Unknown forces weren't causing the decline of the whitebark pine, the energy-rich seeds on which grizzlies depend. Rising temperatures were not yet reducing a mother grizzly's den time. I was as much the enemy to these furry fellows as I feared they were to me. I couldn't blame them for choosing fight over flight.

Returning to the trail head, thunder intermittent, I again studied the DIFFERENCE poster and noted something new. Of all the stuffed Teddy bears I have encountered in my lifetime, including the one I have loved since a tiny child, not one resembles the black bear.

At our last weekend stop, Pinedale's Museum of the Mountain Man, I was spellbound by the uncannily lifelike diorama capturing the moment before the famous grizzly mauling of mountain man Hugh Glass. I stared into Glass's face, his eyes on the growling maw, his rifle pointed at his nemesis. I stood so close to the grizzly that I could have drawn its attention with the merest movement. And then, I knew the difference. I had no idea of raw fear.

