

a walk in the woods

wild wobble of your frail shell as it roots through the backpack that you left casually propped by the entrance—with, you suddenly recall, a Snickers in the pouch. Bears adore Snickers, you've heard.

And then the dull thought—*Oh, God*—that perhaps you brought the Snickers in here with you, that it's somewhere in here, down by your feet or underneath you or—*Oh, shit, here it is*. Another bump of grunting head against the tent, this time near your shoulders. More crazy wobble. Then silence, a very long silence, and—wait, *shh-hhh* . . . yes!—the unutterable relief of realizing that the bear has withdrawn to the other side of the camp or shambled back into the woods. I tell you right now, I couldn't stand it.

So imagine then what it must have been like for poor little David Anderson, aged twelve, when at 3:30 A.M., on the third foray, his tent was abruptly rent with a swipe of claw and the bear, driven to distraction by the rich, unfixable, everywhere aroma of hamburger, bit hard into a flinching limb and dragged him shouting and flailing through the camp and into the woods. In the few moments it took the boy's fellow campers to unzip themselves from their accoutrements—and imagine, if you will, trying to swim out of suddenly voluminous sleeping bags, take up flashlights and makeshift cudgels, undo tent zips with helplessly fumbling fingers, and give chase—in those few moments, poor little David Anderson was dead.

Now imagine reading a nonfiction book packed with stories such as this—true tales soberly related—just before setting off alone on a camping trip of your own into the North American wilderness. The book to which I refer is *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*, by a Canadian academic named Stephen Herrero. If it is not the last word on the subject, then I really, really, really do not wish to hear the last word. Through long winter nights in New Hampshire, while snow piled up outdoors and my wife slumbered peacefully beside me, I lay saucer-eyed in bed reading clinically precise accounts of people gnawed pulpy in their sleeping bags, plucked whimpering from trees, even noiselessly stalked (I didn't know this

On the afternoon of July 5, 1983, three adult supervisors and a group of youngsters set up camp at a popular spot beside Lake Canimina in the fragrant pine forests of western Quebec, about eighty miles north of Ottawa, in a park called La Vérendrye Provincial Reserve. They cooked dinner and, afterward, in the correct fashion, secured their food in a bag and carried it a hundred or so feet into the woods, where they suspended it above the ground between two trees, out of the reach of bears.

About midnight, a black bear came prowling around the margins of the camp, spied the bag, and brought it down by climbing one of the trees and breaking a branch. He plundered the food and departed, but an hour later he was back, this time entering the camp itself, drawn by the lingering smell of cooked meat in the campers' clothes and hair, in their sleeping bags and tent fabric. It was to be a long night for the Canimina party. Three times between midnight and 3:30 A.M. the bear came to the camp.

Imagine, if you will, lying in the dark, alone in a little tent, nothing but a few microns of trembling nylon between you and the chill night air, listening to a four-hundred-pound bear moving around your campsite. Imagine its quiet grunts and mysterious snuffings, the clatter of upended cookware and sounds of moist gnawings, the pad of its feet and heaviness of its breath, the singing brush of its haunch along your tent side. Imagine the hot flood of adrenaline, that unwelcome tingling in the back of your arms, at the sudden rough bump of its snout against the foot of your tent, the alarming

happened!) as they sauntered unawares down leafy paths or cooled their feet in mountain streams. People whose one fatal mistake was to smooth their hair with a dab of aromatic gel, or eat juicy meat, or tuck a Snickers in their shirt pocket for later, or have sex, or even, possibly, menstruate, or in some small, inadvertent way pique the olfactory properties of the hungry bear. Or, come to that, whose fatal failing was simply to very, very unfortunate—to round a bend and find a moody male blocking the path, head rocking appraisingly, or wander unwittingly into the territory of a bear too slowed by age or idleness to chase down fleetly prey.

Now it is important to establish right away that the possibility of a serious bear attack on the Appalachian Trail is remote. To begin with, the really terrifying American bear, the grizzly—*Ursus horribilis*, as it is so vividly and correctly labeled—doesn't range east of the Mississippi, which is good news because grizzlies are large, powerful, and ferociously bad tempered. When Lewis and Clark went into the wilderness, they found that nothing unnerved the Native Indians more than the grizzly, and not surprisingly since you could riddle grizzly with arrows—positively porcupine it—and it would still keep coming. Even Lewis and Clark with their big guns were astounded and unsettled by the ability of the grizzly to absorb volleys of lead with barely a wobble.

Herrero recounts an incident that nicely conveys the near indestructibility of the grizzly. It concerns a professional hunter in Alaska named Alexei Pitka, who stalked a large male through snow and finally felled it with a well-aimed shot to the heart from a large-bore rifle. Pitka should probably have carried a card with him that said: "First make sure the bear is dead. Then put gun down." He advanced cautiously and spent a minute or two watching the bear for movement, but when there was none he set the gun against a tree (big mistake!) and strode forward to claim his prize. Just as he reached it, the bear sprang up, clapped its expansive jaws around the front of Pitka's head, as if giving him a big kiss, and with a single jerk tore off his face.

Miraculously, Pitka survived. "I don't know why I set that darn gun against the tree," he said later. (Actually, what he said was, "Mrffff mmmpp nnnmm mffffffn," on account of having no lips, teeth, nose, tongue, or other vocal apparatus.)

If I were to be pawed and chewed—and this seemed to me entirely possible, the more I read—it would be by a black bear, *Ursus americanus*. There are at least five hundred thousand black bears in North America, possibly as many as seven hundred thousand. They are notably common in the hills along the Appalachian Trail (indeed, they often use the trail, for convenience), and their numbers are growing. Grizzlies, by contrast, number no more than thirty-five thousand in the whole of North America, and just 1,000 in the mainland United States, principally in and around Yellowstone National Park. Of the two species, black bears are generally smaller (though this is a decidedly relative condition; a male black bear can still weigh up to 650 pounds) and unquestionably more retiring.

Black bears rarely attack. But there's the thing. Sometimes they do. All bears are agile, cunning, and immensely strong, and they are always hungry. If they want to kill you and eat you, they can, and pretty much whenever they want. That doesn't happen often, but—and here is the absolutely salient point—once would be enough. Herrero is at pains to stress that black bear attacks are infrequent, relative to their numbers. For 1900 to 1980, he found just twenty-three confirmed black bear killings of humans (about half the number of killings by grizzlies), and most of these were out West or in Canada. In New Hampshire there has not been an unprovoked fatal attack on a human by a bear since 1784. In Vermont, there has never been one.

I wanted very much to be calmed by these assurances but could never quite manage the necessary leap of faith. After noting that just five hundred people were attacked and hurt by black bears between 1960 and 1980—twenty-five attacks a year from a resident population of at least half a million bears—Herrero adds that most of these injuries were not severe. "The typical black bear—inflicted in-

jury," he writes blandly, "is minor and usually involves only a few scratches or light bites." Pardon me, but what exactly is a light bite? Are we talking a playful wrestle and gummy nips? I think not. And is five hundred certified attacks really such a modest number, considering how few people go into the North American woods? And how foolish must one be to be reassured by the information that no bear has killed a human in Vermont or New Hampshire in two hundred years? That's not because the bears have signed a treaty, you know. There's nothing to say that they won't start a modest rampage tomorrow.

So let us imagine that a bear does go for us out in the wilds. What are we to do? Interestingly, the advised stratagems are exactly opposite for grizzly and black bear. With a grizzly, you should make for a tall tree, since grizzlies aren't much for climbing. If a tree is not available, then you should back off slowly, avoiding direct eye contact. All the books tell you that if the grizzly comes for you, on no account should you run. This is the sort of advice you get from someone who is sitting at a keyboard when he gives it. Take it from me, if you are in an open space with no weapons and a grizzly comes for you, run. You may as well. If nothing else, it will give you something to do with the last seven seconds of your life. However, when the grizzly overtakes you, as it most assuredly will, you should fall to the ground and play dead. A grizzly may chew on a limp form for a minute or two but generally will lose interest and shuffle off. With black bears, however, playing dead is futile, since they will continue chewing on you until you are considerably past caring. It is foolish to climb a tree because black bears are adroit climbers and, as Herrero dryly notes, you will simply end up fighting the bear in a tree.

To ward off an aggressive black bear, Herrero suggests making a lot of noise, banging pots and pans together, throwing sticks and rocks, and "running at the bear." (Yeah, right. You first, Professor.) On the other hand, he then adds judiciously, these tactics could "merely provoke the bear." Well, thanks. Elsewhere he suggests that hikers should consider making noises from time to time—singing a

song, say—to alert bears of their presence, since a startled bear is more likely to be an angry bear, but then a few pages later he cautions that "there may be danger in making noise," since that can attract a hungry bear that might otherwise overlook you.

The fact is, no one can tell you what to do. Bears are unpredictable, and what works in one circumstance may not work in another. In 1973, two teenagers, Mark Seeley and Michael Whitten, were out for a hike in Yellowstone when they inadvertently crossed between a female black bear and her cubs. Nothing worries and antagonizes a female bear more than to have people between her and her brood. Furious, she turned and gave chase—despite the bear's lolling gait, it can move at up to thirty-five miles an hour—and the two boys scrambled up trees. The bear followed Whitten up his tree, clamped her mouth around his right foot, and slowly and patiently tugged him from his perch. (Is it me, or can you feel your fingernails scraping through the bark?) On the ground, she began mauling him extensively. In an attempt to distract the bear from his friend, Seeley shouted at it, whereupon the bear came and pulled him out of his tree, too. Both young men played dead—precisely the wrong thing to do, according to all the instruction manuals—and the bear left.

I won't say I became obsessed with all this, but it did occupy my thoughts a great deal in the months while I waited for spring to come. My particular dread—the vivid possibility that left me staring at tree shadows on the bedroom ceiling night after night—was having to lie in a small tent, alone in an inky wilderness, listening to a foraging bear outside and wondering what its intentions were. I was especially riveted by an amateur photograph in Herrero's book, taken late at night by a camper with a flash at a campground out West. The photograph caught four black bears as they puzzled over a suspended food bag. The bears were clearly startled but not remotely alarmed by the flash. It was not the size or demeanor of the bears that troubled me—they looked almost comically unaggressive, like four guys who had gotten a Frisbee caught up a tree—but

their numbers. Up to that moment it had not occurred to me that bears might prowl in parties. What on earth would I do if *four* bears came into my camp? Why, I would die, of course. Literally shit myself lifeless. I would blow my sphincter out my backside like one of those unrolling paper streamers you get at children's parties—I daresay it would even give a merry toot—and bleed to a messy death in my sleeping bag.

Herrero's book was written in 1985. Since that time, according to an article in *The New York Times*, bear attacks in North America have increased by 25 percent. The *Times* article also noted that bears are far more likely to attack humans in the spring following a bad berry year. The previous year had been a very bad berry year. I didn't like the feel of any of this.

Then there were all the problems and particular dangers of solitude. I still have my appendix, and any number of other organs that might burst or sputter in the empty wilds. What would I do then? What if I fell from a ledge and broke my back? What if I lost the trail in blizzard or fog, or was nipped by a venomous snake, or lost my footing on moss-slickened rocks crossing a stream and cracked my head a concussive blow? You could drown in three inches of water on your own. You could die from a twisted ankle. No, I didn't like the feel of this at all.

Archer's tale is one of love and regret, in which the unearthing of the hidden functions as both metaphor and setting. While sketching the beauty of discovering bits of the unknown, Archer also notes that if you "bring something to the surface . . . you become responsible for it." Throughout, this intensely personal piece accurately describes our tendency to allow our past to arouse in us a desire we can never fill: to fix a moment that has already been lost.