

THE SHE-BEAR AND THE SUGAR BOWL

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A frantic flutter of wings startled me on a quiet early morning at Smokemont Campground on the North Carolina side of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Something in the undergrowth had startled the birds. The noise sent a chill through my own chest. I turned toward where the birds had come from just as a large black she-bear padded slowly onto the road behind me. She held her nose high, sniffing the air.

I sat motionless, not knowing what to do. Few campers were awake. Connie, my wife, and our four daughters were at the comfort station about thirty-five yards from our tent. Water boiled above the fire. Bacon, eggs, and other breakfast items were on the picnic table between me and the bear.

The bear stepped hesitantly toward our table, stopped to sniff the air, and suddenly headed toward a neighboring campsite. Seizing the moment, I grabbed an armload of breakfast foods and shoved them into the front seat of our nearby van.

Suddenly, eight tiny feet crunched on the gravels as they raced from the comfort station. Behind them came Connie—just as the bear turned back toward our table.

“Quiet, girls!” I called in a hoarse whisper. I raised both hands, signaling them to stop. I glanced from the girls to the approaching bear and back to them. They were still running, oblivious to the danger before them.

“What, Daddy?” Stacy, our youngest, asked happily.

I held my index finger to my lips in a plea for silence.

“Shhhh!” I cautioned. “Stop! Look!” I pointed toward the bear, which was now only a few feet from our table.

The girls scooted to an abrupt halt in front of the van. The bear, hearing the noise, stared at the six of us and sniffed the air. We stared back, our mouths open and our hearts pounding wildly.

Slowly, I herded the girls into the van and slid the door closed. Connie slipped quickly into the front seat. I walked to the driver's side of the van and I stared at the bear from behind the car door.

Only then did I notice it—a plastic sugar bowl left on the table in my mad scramble to protect our breakfast. The bear also spied the bowl. She padded to the table, stepped onto the bench with both forefeet, and nudged the bowl with her large, black nose. Then she picked it up gingerly in her mouth, saliva flowing freely across her lips and onto the bowl.

Surprisingly, however, she dropped it and never bothered it again. She lifted her head, closed her eyes, and loudly sniffed the mountain air. Then she lumbered off toward the next campsite.

Sighing with relief, I quickly retrieved the sugar container—bear slobbers and all—and returned to my frightened family.

“It’s okay, girls,” I reassured them. “The bear’s gone now.”

They slowly left the safety of the van and stepped uncertainly toward the tent. The bear, however, was distracted by something else. She knocked a camper’s large cooler to the ground and sniffed at its tightly latched lid.

Meanwhile, a quick-thinking, less-curious camper had alerted the park ranger that a bear was in the campground. The ranger, a short woman, drove slowly up the narrow road to the campsite where the bear was nuzzling the cooler and got out of her light-green pickup. She walked slowly toward the bear.

“Sheba!” she spoke quietly. “You leave that alone, Sheba!” She motioned for the growing number of spectators to back away. “I don’t think she’ll hurt anybody,” she told them. “She’s just a panhandler, and we’ve had this problem with her before. But she’s wild, and you never know what to expect when you’re dealing with a wild, unpredictable animal.”

A few campers readily obeyed the ranger, withdrawing a few steps. Most, however, remained transfixed where they were. One teenage boy with a camera chose to venture several steps closer. He knelt down and peered through the viewfinder. The bear spied him and returned the stare. The boy took two more steps toward Sheba and knelt again, readjusting his camera.

Suddenly, the bear lunged toward the young photographer, pounding the ground forcefully with her forefeet.

“Get back!” the ranger yelled.

Everyone ran backward, some stumbling in their haste. Connie and the girls were already in the van.

“That’s her warning!” the ranger said. Everyone took her comment personally and retreated farther. The teenage photographer, trembling, peered from behind a distant poplar tree.

“She telling us that she means business,” the ranger continued, stepping slowly toward the bear. “Go on, Sheba,” she said soothingly, “move on out of here. These campers won’t share breakfast with you.”

As though Sheba understood the ranger’s words, she lowered her head and padded slowly past our tent, across the road, and through the underbrush on the side of the mountain.

Everyone sighed with relief and returned to their campsites. The camera boy, pale and wide-eyed, was frozen behind the tree. Our girls stayed near the car after that. Later, they groaned when I gave them each their afternoon snack—a pastry called “Bear Claws.”

I only regret that I could not videotape the scene at our picnic table. I’ve wondered what the Tupperware people might have paid for a video in which a bear gives up a sweet and easy meal because she could not pry off that sturdy Tupperware lid.