

Between the Bear and the Bee

Patrick Costello

We were on Skyline Drive through Shenandoah National Park in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

It was 2013. I was driving a 1989 Mercury Grand Marquis. The car was the size of Iowa. The road was steep and twisting.

She insisted on my old beater for the trip because the front seat was a giant sofa. My wife loved using the center seatbelt, so we could snuggle while taking in the majesty of the scenery.

While the Mercury was a great car, it was also old and worn out. The brakes creaked. The suspension groaned. The steering made me an unwilling participant in a game of chicken whenever a sharp turn came along.

Amy happily took photographs and sang with the boombox I kept on the back seat. I maintained a poker face. My backside was chewing the seat in absolute terror.

I needed a break. We came along what looked like a little service road. I pulled over. It led to a cul-de-sac. There were a few picnic tables and a small dumpster. There was another car pulled over. A couple talking on their phones.

I stopped the rumbling old Mercury and pried my fingers from the wheel. I started to get out for a stretch. Amy stopped me and pointed to the hill on the edge of the road. Through the trees, a black bear strolled up to the dumpster, looking for tidbits.

It wasn't a large bear. Black bears can be dangerous at any size. I gently closed my car door.

We gave the bear a moment to nose through the litter before getting ready to start the car. Amy did not even take pictures. We both knew that you don't mess with bears.

I was about to start the car when the doors of the other car flew open. The driver and passenger leaped out, yelling that there was a bee in the car.

My wife and I waved our arms to get their attention. Stop! Shut up! There is a bear!

We finally caught their eye. When they turned to see what we were pointing at, they ran back into the car.

As soon as their car doors closed, they flew open again.

Bee!

Bear!

Bee!

Bear!

The screaming and running made the bear look up from its garbage du jour. It plopped down on its ample buttocks and looked our way.

It is dangerous to associate human emotion with a predator. That said, I swear that this bear had an expression on its face, as if it were asking us, "Are you seeing this?"

It was a conundrum. On the one hand, we were terrified for the lives of these strangers. These dumb, dumb strangers.

It was also the funniest thing either of us had ever seen.

Hence, the conundrum. My father raised me with two mottos.

The first is: *Noli nothis permittere te terere*. That's Latin for don't let the bastards grind you down.

The second is: *Always do the right thing. No matter the cost.*

The situation was surreal from our vantage point. What if one of them is allergic to bees? What if they are so afraid that they can't understand danger?

Aw, crap. Time to cowboy up.

I kissed my wife and stepped out of the car. Amy gawked at me. This was a risk, but I wanted to avoid seeing these people get mauled.

Maintaining eye contact with the bear, I walked across the lot to the strangers' car. They had taken to cowering low down on the asphalt. At least the car was between them and the bear.

I kept my voice low and cheerful. "Howdy. I'm Patrick. That's my wife Amy over there."

Amy waved. They halfheartedly waved back.

"I'm going to shoo the bee out of your car."

I did not wait for a reply. It only took me a moment to jump into the vehicle and chase the bee out a window. I kept my eyes on the bear.

The bear's bewildered expression remained the same.

I got the couple back into their car. The plan was to have them drive me back to my car, but they drove off without so much as a thank-you.

The bear shifted its weight. I shifted a bit myself.

If I was going to be bear chow, I might as well go out singing. Took my eyes off the bear. I walked casually back to the Mercury, belting out *The Streets of Laredo* in a low baritone.

Amy stuck her head out the window and sang along.

I made it to the car, dropping behind the wheel into Amy's arms. "My hero," she purred.

We made out for so long that the bear got bored and left.