

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

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The Hillbilly and the Predator

*There is an ancient Native American proverb that says,
"If a pine needle falls in a forest, an eagle will see it,
a deer will hear it, and a bear will smell it."*

30 YEARS AGO, before my husband, Mike, and I had kids—or much common sense, for that matter—we decided to take advantage of his week of shore leave from the US Navy and soak up a little rest and relaxation in my parents' mountain getaway. By 'mountain,' I mean way out in the boondocks past the high California desert at an altitude of over 7,500 feet, in the middle of NOWHERE. And by 'getaway,' I mean a 20-foot trailer, outfitted with the wrap-around deck my family had spent many weekends helping, I mean *watching*, my dad build. The only water supply was a rogue stream that the seller's surveyor hadn't noticed or documented when Dad placed his paltry bid on the 20-acre lot of 'worthless wilderness.' Turns out, Dad knew about the stream all along. He was a clever man.

First, some quick back-story about Dad. He grew up a poor child in the moss-draped woods of Northern Alabama. You know, the kind of place where kids had to walk to school barefoot, in the snow, and uphill—both ways.

Dad was cursed (some say blessed) with a semi-typical Southern childhood that was pepper-sprayed with richly textured yet highly questionable education. He grew up learning the kinds of things that nobody teaches kids in a structured academic environment: how to skin and prepare a wild critter when you need something to eat while you're lost in the woods for a few days; how to disassemble and then hastily reassemble a tractor motor before its ornery owner came home; how to steal honey from a beehive without getting yourself flayed alive by your angry momma—who's *worried* about your safety; how to shoot your older brother with a BB gun—just to see if you can—and then successfully hide from your furious daddy. Incidentally, the best way to hide from a 6-foot—5-inch, 240 pound maniac who's hell bent on killing you is to crawl under the house and stay there until your older brother pisses him off so bad that said maniac forgets all about you. I'm just saying.

Despite these crazy everyday occurrences, Dad somehow survived long enough to drop out of the 9th grade, undergo exhaustive Army Paratrooper training, and earn an all-expense-paid trip to Korea that lasted 18 months, where he contracted a raging case of TB that should have killed him. And that was all before the age of 19.

So, it should surprise no one that, after spending my youth pretending to believe every piece of sage advice he gave me, I secretly shunned all of his corny wisdom, determined that I would show him how someone with a real education makes her way in the world. Besides, what could a junior high school dropout with a hillbilly accent possibly teach *me*?

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

When Mike and I asked if we could stay at the mountain getaway, Dad responded with the usual skepticism-laden parental remarks.

“You two couldn’t find the place, let alone survive in it.” Or, “Kel, you can’t boil water or make ice cubes. You’ll both starve.” Or, “It’s a long way to the doctor.” We had gone camping and off-roading throughout my childhood, and *that* line had always been his favorite.

Well, Mike and I persisted and convinced dear old Dad that we would be fine. Mike was, after all, a military man who had grown up in New York City. He was worldly and he would protect me. I wasn’t sure exactly who would be protecting him, but the idea of living off the land for a week held huge appeal. I never quite figured out what that appeal was, but if I ever do, I’ll let you in on it.

That evening, I packed enough gear to last a month. I assembled some cute outfits with matching sandals, my best make-up bag, and the all-important ultra-hold hairspray. Mike dropped plenty of dried Italian meats, cheeses, and olives into the cooler with the eggs, butter, and milk that Mom had insisted we take. She gave us a can opener and a box of canned bacon, canned black bread from the Army surplus store, canned shoestring potato chips, et cetera. You get the idea. Durable and shelf-life-friendly stuff that would keep for weeks, if need be. Turns out, Mom was pretty clever, too.

With pomp and circumstance, we embarked on the 6-hour drive to our mountain domain. A domain with no TV, refrigerator, or running water. We did have the icy-cold stream, though, so we didn’t worry our pretty heads over where to find fresh water.

Our first few hours in paradise were quite fun. As I unpacked everything, I felt like Eva Gabor on the old TV show, *Green Acres*, waving my pretty clothes around while Mike solemnly checked out the topography outside.

While we lounged on the deck in our sleeping bag that night and lost ourselves in the natural light show above, I regaled him with clever stories about survival tactics Mom and Dad had taught me over the years. When he voiced concern about rattlesnakes, I assured him we wouldn’t encounter them in the morning because they needed to warm up in the sun for a while before they could move. I then explained that we would definitely spot bear scat on the ground. When he asked how we would identify it, I told him the gigantic piles of doo-doo embedded with half-digested wild berries near bear footprints would be a pretty good tip-off.

We woke the next morning to blistering sunshine and oppressive heat, so we planned to take some goodies to the stream and spend the day alternately frolicking in the cool shade, working on our tans, and enjoying the great outdoors. Only mildly concerned for our personal safety—hey, we were stupid kids, so cut us some slack here—we grabbed Dad’s shotgun and casually stuffed a couple of shells (shotgun shells, not the mozzarella-oozing Italian variety) into the backpack and headed into the wild blue yonder.

By late afternoon, we’d had our fill of mosquitoes, flies, and prickly leaves; the time had come for us to pack our trash and head back to the

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

trailer. Striking a fierce pose that would have made Uncle Sam cringe, Mike stood proudly with Dad's shotgun, wearing nothing but a Fruit of the Loom wife-beater, his tighty-whities, and a pair of un-laced hunting boots. Armed with bug spray and sporting a yellow string bikini, I fell in line behind Grizzly Adams as he bravely led his trusting damsel through the woods.

We arrived at the trailer to see the front door dangling in the doorway from one hinge. Alarmed, yet eager to demonstrate my survival skills, I whispered, "Here, give me that," and took the shotgun from Mike's hands. I was, after all, a crack shot, trained in the fine art of putting holes in yellow beer cans that never moved while I aimed at them.

As we crept toward the deck, we glanced around nervously but didn't see anything out of place, except, of course, the door that looked as though its civil rights had been violated. That's when my heart started pounding, and I became truly frightened.

After gathering the remnants of the shredded screen—and his composure, Mike noticed deep claw marks along the edges of the metal door. We tiptoed into the trailer and saw, to our horror, that a bear had plundered the interior, no doubt searching for the pungent cheeses, sausages, and olives we had foolishly left in the compartment under the bed.

The table was scratched, the cabinet doors were open, and the sleeping bag had been ripped apart. And, on the floor, upside down, lay the Tupperware container that Dad had insisted we fill with black pepper and leave on the counter. He had always clung to the belief that a bear's sense of smell could make a Bloodhound hang his head in shame, and that one good whiff of pepper could make any predator think twice about staying for lunch. When I saw the nasty slick of bear snot splattered all over Mom's handmade curtains, it occurred to me that my hillbilly daddy *hadn't* fallen off the turnip truck, as I had long suspected! I also knew it was time for us to beat a path out of there, too.

I don't think we've had such a scare since that day, but we've laughed about it over the years and we decided that, if our kids ever pulled anything that stupid, we'd kill them when we found them—and the crawl space under the house would be the first place we'd look!