

Detour

2200 words

Janine, Marty's wife of 32 years, surprised a grizzly bear on a high trail north of Logan Pass in Glacier National Park.

The female bear inspected her, pawed her a couple times and bit her on the shoulder, before losing interest and moving on.

They helicoptered Janine and her hiking partner off the trail and took her to a hospital in Kalispell. They said it was a warning bite thank God, that a grizzly's real bite is twice as powerful as a lion's. Someone explained it as pounds per square inch of bite pressure.

Everything looked decent for a couple days until a staph infection took over and Janine died two weeks later.

An hour after she passed, Janine's hiking partner Rose sat down with Marty in the Grieving Lounge at the hospital. She told him she might as well put this out

there sooner than later, that she and Janine had a relationship going on.

Marty listened, nodded his head and thanked her for her candor. As he thought about it, fair enough. It wasn't rocket science, the two of them together weeks at a time on various adventure outings, and for their Appalachian Trail effort, months.

Though that one, when Janine got home she vowed that was it for hiking, she was switching to bicycle touring. But that didn't happen. A couple weeks being back, taking long leisurely swims at the town pool, she said she found her mojo again.

Something else Rose mentioned, that section of high trail in northeastern Glacier Park, there were warnings posted. There'd been a recent close call. Also they weren't carrying bear spray Rose said, which was recommended by the rangers.

Marty again nodded. You weren't going to challenge it . . . did one of you override the other on the safety business, and who. What difference did it make.

Marty was thinking he maybe heard of a device once that hikers could use to avoid surprising animals--

though he could have been imagining it. Either way he mentioned it to Rose as they got up and embraced, why not, going forward, and she thanked him but said she'd probably be moving to Adelaide now, where her sister is . . . and Marty said oh? . . . and Rose said yeah, she was headed there some years ago but met Janine and that sidetracked it.

Marty assumed that was Australia and didn't ask and he said well don't be a stranger.

So that was that.

His grown kids Bill and Haley took it hard, and their first reaction was Marty needed to sue the living daylights out of the medical people. Friends chimed in too, that no way that should have happened.

There were letters from attorneys. One was from a guy in Cincinnati. Marty tossed them all except for that one, and called him out of curiosity.

“We have a summer cabin up there, is the reason,” the Cincinnati attorney said. “Outside Columbia Falls. It's been in the family since the 60's. I pick up local news.”

“Must be nice,” Marty said. “These fires we got in California, going on 4 years now--PGE cutting power, the evacuations, the assorted bullshit--it’s getting old in a hurry.”

“You’re saying,” the guy said, “you may be looking to shift gears. I can throw it out there, being real honest, it’s not bad *here*. Checks most of the boxes. Louisville too, I’d put her same category.”

“I was thinking of Montana.”

“I know you were. Wouldn’t recommend it full time. There’s an adjustment.”

Marty said, “My wife and I, we’d watch House Hunters and that lottery dream home one too--not just watch but pay attention, take some notes.”

“I hear you,” the guy said. “Leave it alone right now.”

“No kneejerk reactions, you’re saying.”

“No. Take it from me.”

Marty wasn’t curious enough to ask about that, but he said, “Well you’re a good man. You haven’t tried to talk me into suing anybody. Maybe that’s coming up, but I appreciate the little boost to my day.”

The guy said, “Okay hold on a second . . .”

And Marty waited.

“All right, I thought about it,” the guy said. “Why don’t you come out and visit. We have room.”

“Just like that?”

“Yeah. All you do, lemme know your flight. I got it from there.”

“You’re kidding,” Marty said.

“No I’m not . . . Sometimes you have to go with your gut, and just *do* shit.”

Marty said, “You mean *offer* shit.”

“That too.”

Marty said, “I don’t like flying . . . but maybe, I could rent a car. I have a bunch of points with Enterprise.”

“Even better,” the guy said, “and puts you at ease, something goes wrong it’s not your problem. You throw it on cruise control and enjoy the countryside.”

“Well we’ll see,” Marty said, and the guy said fine and they hung up.

And of course that’d be insane . . . a nice impromptu gesture from this person, except you had plenty on your plate not to mention didn’t know him from Adam.

But a couple weeks went by and the house started getting to him, and he didn't rent the car--the Dodge Charger burned a little oil but she ran fine, she only had 79,000 miles on her and that's what you got her for, the open road--and on a Wednesday morning without telling anyone Marty hunkered down and drove straight through to Phoenix.

That's how he liked to do it, if you're in the car anyway, crank out the big miles . . . and Janine always fought him on that, she wanted to break trips up short, she said driving wore her out, which never made sense to Marty when the woman could hike 25 miles in a day like a dual-piston machine.

The thought was drop in on Patrick, his old crew team buddy from back east, Colby College, and kill a few days, see where it led . . . but Patrick sounded preoccupied when Marty called him from a breakfast place in Scottsdale--so maybe you lay off.

Just for fun, he googled it, Phoenix to Cincinnati. They gave you two routes, both starting with I-40 up to Gallup and across New Mexico, then the option at Oklahoma City to jump on 44 and angle north through

St. Louis and Indy, or stay on 40 to Knoxville, pick up 75.

It all sounded okay, he'd never driven any of it, and when the friendly waitress name-tagged Meg refilled his coffee he asked her for a recommendation. She got big-eyed like she had no idea and didn't want to give him wrong information but she said she'd check with someone who might know, and when she came back she told him well, there was a construction zone on 44 west of Tulsa the person said, that could really put you in a foul mood.

Marty said she could come with him, if she didn't have anything else going on, and she played along, and reminded him the breakfast specials ended at 10:30 if he wanted to time it on the way back.

Marty told Meg he figured he could get away with the joking around because he was closing in on 60-- though you still had to pick your spots and be careful-- and she wished him a good trip, and threw in that he didn't look 60, which fired him up a little and he grabbed a toothpick at the register and stepped back out into the sunshine.

Hmm, well . . . she'd called it a trip, as though it was a done deal, and he'd been referring to it that way himself, otherwise why put people out and make them analyze it for you . . . so here you were, you might have to go through with this.

He considered it for a couple minutes and called the Cincinnati lawyer--guy's name was Greg--figuring if the guy hesitates at all, forget it, but Greg said he was glad he called, and to please excuse him because he's walking into a courthouse, but he'd see him in three days.

So . . . but one thing you'd better do, Marty realized ten miles down the road, was call his kids, and he pulled off at a rest stop.

Haley didn't pick up and Marty left a short message, "Hi honey. I'm on a little road trip here, you know, clear the cobwebs. Don't worry about a thing, I'll talk to you soon."

Bill did pick up unfortunately and was like, *What the HECK. Dad you're WHERE?*

Marty got off as diplomatically as he could, before Bill started up on suing the doctors again.

So there was that . . . and he shut off his phone and stuck it in the glove compartment until he rolled into Cincinnati four days later.

He got sidetracked a day by Loretta Lynn's place in Hurricane Mills, the roadside signs breaking you down, detouring you to it. Marty always enjoyed Sissy Spacek in the movie role, plus easy to forget that Tommy Lee Jones was the husband.

The tour and hospitality were great, and if you wanted they put you up in a cabin on the ranch for a hundred bucks, so he went with that too.

Now Greg asked where he was presently and Marty said the Holiday Inn Express on Rybolt Road, he'd checked in an hour ago, just had a little swim.

"You're fighting me already," Greg said. "We got an in-law set-up in the basement, wide open. You even have your own entrance around the side."

"Hey man," Marty said, "you're over the top generous. I don't like to impose."

"And you like your privacy."

Marty said, "But here's the deal. Can I at least buy you and your family dinner?"

“So, like a one and done,” Greg said.

“Jeez . . . didn’t mean to insult you. You got me off my ass. Have to say, I feel better, more bounce in my step.”

Greg said, “The zen of the open road?”

“No doubt something to do with it, yeah.”

Greg said he’d check with his wife and when he called back he said 5:30 his house, no discussion. Greg added that his wife was inviting someone else, to round it out.

“Okay now hold on,” Marty said.

“Hey you’re a big boy,” Greg said. “And you never know.”

The house was a modest 1950’s style ranch that had been redone inside. There was plenty of space between houses, and there were old-growth trees up and down the block.

Greg’s wife Sue introduced Marty to Frances, and by dessert they had it kind of rolling, and he invited her back to the Holiday Inn Express. Not to spend the night, but to hear more about her experiences chronicling the

Shoshone tribe in eastern Idaho, including learning the language.

“Dumb question,” Marty said, “but *any* similarity to western languages at all?”

“There are no dumb questions,” Frances said. And the way she put it, her tone, her look, her smile . . . it was very nice.

Marty weighed a few things. Then he said, “I ran this by someone else, in reverse. It didn’t work. But would you want to have breakfast with me in Scottsdale?”

“Sure,” Frances said.

“You’re saying . . . no follow up questions? No strings attached? No . . . you’re fucking crazy?”

“Unh-uh.”

“Oh . . . So you think? . . . I mean I better let my kids know, I guess.”

“You can invite them to join us,” Frances said.

“Nah, that’s not going be practical . . . necessarily. I apologize, just give me a minute, I want to formulate this.”

“I’ll go out by the pool,” she said.

“No we’re good, please don’t.” And he took a deep breath and called Haley.

“Hi Sweetie, me again,” he said. “Listen, can you give this message to Bill as well?”

Haley said now I’m worried.

“Don’t be silly,” Marty said, “nothing like that . . . Just an update, that I drove from Phoenix to Cincinnati--and now I’m headed back to Phoenix, Scottsdale--and it’s possible I’ll be switching it up once more, meaning back to Cincy . . . depending.” He didn’t look at Frances.

There was some silence on Haley’s end. She said, “Dad, are you a fucking lunatic? What on earth is going on?”

“Nothing,” Marty said, “take it easy honey, sort of a new friend type deal is all . . . listen, I’ll catch you later, my phone’s on, love you.”

“Sorry about that,” he said to Frances. “Where were we?”

“How did it go?” she said.

“Uneven. They’ll recover.”

“But you’re phone’s on? You just threw it in your suitcase.”

“Good point, maybe not. *Our* more important issue--before you come to your senses and realize what you’re doing--which route do we take. One has a road construction issue, apparently.”

“I don’t mind road construction,” Frances said.

“No?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Marty said. “Taking it a step further--do you *prefer* road construction?”

“You’re funny,” she said.