



WE GO INTO THE WILDERNESS FOR THE RICHNESS

THE SCARS WE BEAR

IT GIVES OUR LIVES. BUT SOMETIMES WE—OR THE

WE BEAR

ANIMALS WE ENCOUNTER—PAY A PRICE

By EVA HOLLAND

**Lying on her back at the side of the trail, she could see the extra-large canister of bear spray. It was strapped to the side of her backpack, which somehow had come off in the chaos and had landed a few feet away. She made a hazy plan, somewhere between thought and instinct: she would grab the spray, find her feet, and leap onto the back of the grizzly bear that had her son pinned down, then spray it in the face. But when she crawled towards the can, the bear turned on her.**

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY COTTAGE LIFE

**T**here are details that Mya Helena Myllykoski remembers vividly from that day. She has visuals and sounds and tactile memories, she tells me: details like the feel of the bear's fur on her skin, the sight of the individual hairs swaying as it moved. She can remember her train of thought in those moments after she hit the ground. But she doesn't remember how the bear smelled—not even when they were nose to nose, his breath in her mouth.

When she shares that detail—that she has felt a grizzly bear's hot breath on her face—I feel something unexpected creeping up inside me, a little green shoot alongside the larger growth of fear and fascination as I listen to her story: envy. Irrationally, against all logic or instinct for survival, I envy that experience, just a little. When she tells me that she regrets not having a memory of that smell, I understand what she means. I want to know what the bear smelled like too.

We crave vivid and authentic encounters with the wilderness. That, in part, is why we go out there, why we leave the city behind for an afternoon or a weekend, or more. We want to see the stars turn overhead and hear loons, owls, and coyotes; we want to watch the mist burn off a river's surface, or a thunderstorm roll across a lake. We want to smell crushed spruce needles and wet, decomposing logs and that sweet dirt scent when the mushrooms begin to pop up.

Wilderness can feed us. It can fill our lives up with rich sensory memories. But we take risks in going there, and we bring risk with us for the animals that live there too. Sometimes we pay a price for our curiosity and our desires—but more often, they pay the price instead.

**I**t was a smoky summer Saturday when Mya, 55, and her son, Alex, 24, drove out of Calgary towards Kananaskis, Alta. August 25, 2018. They chose the trail they did, French Creek, because it was lower down—the smoke flowing over the Rockies from the wildfires in British Columbia was worse the higher you climbed. They parked Mya's SUV at the trailhead and set out down the trail in the early afternoon.

In the first few minutes, they talked as they walked. But then Mya paused to inspect a pile of bear scat, poking it with a stick to check its freshness. Her son said she was being gross, and the comment stung a little. They fell silent as they moved on.

The trail was an old road, two rutted tracks on a slight rise above dense willows and brushy growth, and the pair walked one in each rut, side-by-side. They didn't see the grizzly until he surfaced from the brush and stood on the trail in front of them. He was just two, maybe three metres away, staring them down. The bear, still on all fours, was tall enough to look Mya in the eye. He huffed and gave a short growl. Then he charged.

Alex was on her right. She tried to grasp his arm as the bear crashed into them, but they fell in opposite directions, each to one side of the trail, like bowling pins, and she couldn't reach him. Mya wound up on her back in the brush, her feet lying

higher than her head because of the way the ground sloped away from the trail. The seconds passing seemed to stretch out as she landed and realized that the bear had turned his attention to Alex—she could hear her son swearing, dropping loud f-bombs, which let her know, because they were not screams of pain or mortal terror, that their situation was dangerous, deeply dangerous, but not yet critical. Briefly, in that calm bubble of thought that can appear in a crisis, she considered screaming out loud herself, to try to call for help. But the idea felt strange.

That's when Mya went for her backpack with the spray, the sound attracting the bear's attention, and he charged at her. He knocked her onto her back again, pinning her chest with huge, heavy paws. The can of spray was in her hand somehow now, her fingers tangled in the plastic loop below the trigger guard, and she regretted that she hadn't practised removing the safety recently. She put her hands up as the bear's jaws came down towards her face. Then the canister exploded between them. It took her a moment to understand that the bear, snapping at her face, had bitten right into the can instead.

The bear backed away, looking—in Mya's word—"insulted." She couldn't breathe properly, though she didn't yet feel the searing pain of the high-potency spray that covered her face. The bear moved away into the brush, and she got to her feet. Alex was standing now too, bloody, still swearing. "Fuckin' A!" he said, riding high on adrenaline. "That was amazing!"

A deep, pained groan from the brush let them know the bear was still close by. Quickly, feeling that continued threat, they emptied all their water onto Mya's face, hoping to clear the spray. They only succeeded in spreading it around. Her skin burned now, and it hurt to breathe, and she could hardly see.



They gathered their things from the ground and retreated down the trail, Alex leading his mother along. He was still jubilant, punching the air.

In the parking lot, they flagged down an arriving vehicle, hoping to get more water to keep flushing the spray from Mya's face. The family inside—a middle-aged couple, an older woman, and a boy, maybe 12 or 13 years old—offered their water, but they didn't seem to fully grasp what had happened, or what it meant. Alex stood there, bleeding and bloodied, his face lacerated, and, incredibly, the family asked if they would be safe enough to continue as planned with their own hike. "The man looked at us and says, do you think we'll be okay in a group?" Mya recalls. "At which point I thought, You're kidding me. Really? And they did. They went and parked and got out. Alex and I looked at each other and said, they don't get it." Mya and Alex had injuries to attend to; they couldn't worry about the family. They got into their own car and left. Alex drove.

Delayed by construction on the way to the Canmore hospital, they flagged down a worker and reported the attack, asking him to relay the news so they could go directly to the hospital. Once there, Mya was sent off to shower—her dousing in bear spray was making it hard for anyone who was near her to breathe—and Alex's wounds were bandaged. They had been incredibly lucky: Alex's earlobe and nose were torn badly, his neck was scraped raw, and his arms had been bitten, but not deeply. Mya's hand had been wounded by the same bite that landed on the spray canister. Alex's earlobe had to be reattached, and he would need reconstructive surgery on his torn septum, that bit of tissue that separates the nostrils—he was transferred from Canmore to Foothills Medical Centre back in Calgary for the repair—but otherwise, their wounds were superficial.

And it wasn't just their physical wounds that seemed miraculously minor. They seemed emotionally undamaged too. On the evening after the attack, Mya returned home to an empty house: her husband and her younger son were out of town. Alex was still in the hospital. She lay down in bed, facing her bedroom door, and for a moment she imagined the bear coming in through the doorway.

The moment passed, and she fell asleep. When I asked her if, after that moment, she ever experienced any flashbacks or nightmares, she answered: "Nope. None." (Alex was similarly unaffected.)

She went hiking with her younger son a few days later because she wanted to make sure she got back out there. In deference to her husband's concerns—learning about the attack after it was all over, he was in some ways more shaken than she was—she chose a heavily travelled trail. She admits that she did feel her own wariness as they walked: at one point, a large, burned-black tree root made her look twice, thinking she saw a bear. But she says that feeling of skittishness faded soon enough.



BEAR: CSA IMAGES (ISTOCK); CLAW MARK: PIALHOVIK (ISTOCK)

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**John Paczkowski was working** that Saturday. A park ecologist and a member of the Alberta Environment and Parks unit that specializes in human-wildlife conflict, he'd been out servicing a wildlife camera. He was taking a scenic route home when he heard over the radio that there had been an incident near the French Creek parking area. He was less than five kilometres away.

By the time he arrived, Mya and Alex had gone to the hospital in Canmore. The priority, then, for the responders, as they converged on the scene, was to close the area and evacuate all other hikers. A team of bear-monitoring technicians and conservation officers took turns driving trucks up the main trail as far as they could go—which was about two kilometres from the trailhead—to intercept hikers and ferry them back to the parking lot. Others hiked more peripheral trails, sweeping for strays. Some hikers, too far out of reach of the trucks, were helicoptered to safety. "We must have moved no less than 30 people," Paczkowski says.

Once the attack site and the surrounding area were secure, parks staff turned their attention to understanding what had happened. A conservation officer was dispatched to the hospital to debrief Mya and Alex; Paczkowski checked the park's telemetry instruments and found that a collared bear had moved through the area not too long after Mya and Alex drove away. "I believe it was around four or five hours later, that bear walked into the parking lot...and walked right through," he says. "The initial thought was, This is the bear that was involved"—but soon they were able to determine that the timeline didn't match up: he'd been two kilometres away at the time of the attack. They gathered DNA samples from the attack site and from Alex and Mya's skin and clothing, in case they needed to more precisely identify the bear.

The site of the attack itself was roughly 800 metres from the trailhead. Just off the trail, in dense brush, staff found the remnants of a moose carcass, largely devoured—perhaps a wolf kill that the bear had been scavenging. Camera footage showed that Mya and Alex had been the first hikers to pass through on the trail that day, and a possible narrative of the event began to take shape. A bear protecting a carcass, startled by intruders: a surprise defensive response. >>

**M**ost people are able to shake off traumatic events most of the time. "The typical human reaction to something like that is at least a little bit of trauma for at least a short period of time—usually a couple of weeks to a month or so," says Adriel Boals, a professor of psychology at the University of North Texas whose research focusses on post-traumatic stress. After that initial period of distress, the memories and the feelings they evoke begin to fade. We recover. But perhaps 10 per cent of the time, we don't bounce back, we aren't able to move on from the memories and the sensations of the event that threatened our sense of safety. We remain distressed, hypervigilant, on edge. We might have nightmares. That is post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

The reasons why some people develop PTSD while others recover from trauma aren't yet fully understood. A small percentage of the population, perhaps only 10 or 15 per cent of people, seems to possess a natural resilience to trauma and stress. Rather than recovering naturally with time, they show few to no signs of distress to begin with. They are not easily shaken, psychologically, says Boals. It's not fake, it's not a facade designed to suppress their true emotions. Boals and his colleagues use the term "highly resilient" to describe this group of people.

For most, though, a key factor in recovering from trauma is agency, the sense that you have power or control over your own circumstances. "If a person at least believes that they have some sense of control over the good and bad things that happen to them, even if bad things happen, it greatly buffers the effects that stress has," says Boals. So Mya and Alex's active response, their success—however lucky it may have been—in fighting off the bear, could have helped to protect their minds from the trauma in the aftermath. People are more susceptible to trauma when they feel trapped in the situation, helpless. Contrast that with Alex's adrenaline-fuelled exultation after the bear's retreat, punching the air and cheering. A sense of victory is a powerful thing.

## “You love bears? Great. I love bears. But it isn’t mutual. So you’ve gotta give up that romance; it’s a one-way relationship. If you love them, you need to protect them”

Biologists distinguish defensive attacks on humans—in which a bear reacts spontaneously to protect its young or its meal—from predatory attacks, in which a person is a more deliberate target. Predatory attacks might come from a sick or starving animal, or from one that has been overexposed to human habits, food, and garbage, and learned to view us as food source rather than as a source of danger. Those are the animals that wildlife managers worry about the most: their contact with us, and our detritus, puts both us and them at greater risk. (Hence the saying: a fed bear is a dead bear.) Often, we create the creatures that we fear.

But Mya and Alex’s bear was different. “Because it was a defensive attack,” says Paczkowski, “a bear defending a carcass, it was doing what bears do naturally. We did not pursue any further management action on this bear.” In other words, they let the bear live. They did, however, close the surrounding area to the public for the next few weeks.

That news was a relief to Mya. She recalls telling one of the conservation officers, in the immediate aftermath of the attack: “Neither one of us is traumatized by this, but we will be if you shoot that bear.”

Today, she describes the experience using terms like “grateful.” She is grateful that they escaped largely unscathed and grateful for the luck that saw them through. But she is also grateful for the intensity of the encounter: Mya and Alex lived through a brush with the wild world that was much closer than anything most of us will ever experience. That’s a privilege, and it leaves her with a duty. “I need to share this story with other people, so that we can save more bears and more people,” she says. “My primary purpose now is to protect more bears.”

Mya’s reaction to the attack may seem unusual, but emerging from trauma with a sense of purpose is actually another typical response that Boals and his colleagues study. It’s a

concept called “post-traumatic growth,” also known as “adversarial growth” or “benefit-finding.” The terms describe a phenomenon of people finding meaning through trauma. A person might feel that, having survived a traumatic event, they now understand their own strength more fully or clearly. They might feel a sense of sudden personal growth or come away with a new or renewed spirituality. They might feel gratitude for all of the above, despite the trauma that prompted those feelings. And, as in Mya’s case, they might become imbued with a clear sense of purpose.

Mya doesn’t want to be misunderstood: she is not suggesting that bear attacks, or even bear-human encounters, are good or desirable. “I don’t want people to misinterpret our lack of trauma as it being okay. Because it’s not okay that this happened, for us or for the bear.” She now addresses bear-human conflict—in speaking gigs and in a book that she is working on—with understanding and authority. She is grateful for the sense of meaning and purpose that the bear gave her.

“They’re not interested in us,” she says of bears. “They’re not. It’s not a mutual love. You love bears? Great. I love bears. But it isn’t mutual. So you’ve gotta give up that romance; it’s a one-way relationship. If you really love them, you need to protect them. That means preparing in a really deliberate way.”

She wants people to understand that when they go into bear country, they are intruders—even in the wild places that we know and love best; even in the ones that we kit out with Muskoka chairs and barbecues and call home every summer. Mya is quick to admit that for all their luck, she and Alex made mistakes. They fell silent, instead of making noise as they proceeded down the densely forested trail. They had only one can of bear spray between them.

But as John Paczkowski points out, they did have that one canister, and it may have saved their lives. “The fact that she was carrying her bear spray almost certainly reduced the intensity of the attack and the severity of the injuries,” he says. “Although it was a non-traditional deployment of bear spray, carrying bear spray was a key factor in these two making it home that night.”

Which brings us back to that little green shoot of envy. My craving for every detail is part of the problem: like many of us, I want to immerse myself in the sensory experience of being outdoors. I don’t always want to shatter the silence by shouting “Hey, bear!” down the trail. I want to insert myself into the wild without changing it—but I can’t, not really. Our presence ripples out around us, whether we are scaring birds into flight or fish into deeper water, or startling bears up from their meals. Mya’s lesson for me, then, is this: I have to learn to be satisfied with the gifts that nature gives me. I don’t get to know what the bear smelled like. 🐾

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