



Bob Friend

Love is a Bear

Brian Schott

William had written countless articles about incidents in bear country for the local newspaper. Maulings. Lost hikers. Park management practices. The best way to avoid a bear while hiking in grizzly country is to let them know you are there. Bears, like love, need words to know where you stand. Silence can be deadly. Surprising a grizzly around some bend in a trail is a sure bet for trouble. Throw a cub and a sow into the mix, and you can almost count on a brutal mauling. The instinct to protect the young is fierce, deadly. Papa bears are different. While a mother will spend up to four years with her cub, the males like to roam, solitary creatures. They spend a few days with their short-lived spouse, mate, and go on their way.

William picked up the phone to tell his wife he would be late. Kelly had been waiting most of the afternoon for her husband to return from work, early as promised on Friday, to begin their weekend of hiking and camping in Glacier National Park. After finishing a story about a new ordinance that allowed people to keep up to six chickens within city limits, William had arrived home three hours late, quickly changed his clothes, and then jumped back into the

car for the 45 minute drive from their small home in Whitefish, Montana.

When the young couple parked their car in front of the backcountry permit office in Apgar, things were upset. The stench of their bickering followed them from the car and through the doors of the old one-room building. Anyone could smell it.

Kelly didn't wear her anger well. It spilled out like a bursting water hose and she made biting comments to her husband in front of the park ranger who prepared the paperwork for their weekend outing to Morning Eagle. The small backcountry campground had just reopened that morning, two weeks after the last sighting of Stella, a young 300-pound female grizzly bear who had taken a liking to nacho flavored Doritos. Throughout August, park rangers of the million-acre park had been implementing a negative reinforcement program aimed at behavior modification on the bear. Rangers used noise, barking dogs, and other non-lethal stimuli like rubber bullets to encourage young Stella to stop nosing around the campground for junk food and frightening tourists.

While they re-watched a video that explained how to travel safely and keep food away from their tents, Kelly whispered that Will did not understand what it was like to be a mother all day, scolding him while she bounced Lucy in her arms. William wore his bitterness in an uncomfortable manner, like clothes that fit too tight. He apologized to her once again, scratched his dark moustache, but didn't really mean it.

"You don't understand the pressure I'm under at work," he said. He'd been writing for *The Daily Inter Lake* for ten years. The editor job was opening. And there was nothing he was going to do to mess up his chances to advance.

"You have no idea what it's like to always be waiting for you," she replied.

Will received a compassionate rise of the eyebrows from the ranger while he asked a few questions about the re-opened campground, then followed his wife to the car. He would arrange for interviews with the bear team after the long weekend and return to the office with a fresh and vivid start on the story of successful behavior modification of the junk-food-loving bear. All the official Park stories had to go through the necessary filtering of a government communications office anyway. It was time to concentrate on his family. Be grounded. Life since the baby had been like a tornado. How had they gotten so lost so quickly? How could all the little things add up to so much? The "D" word had even been thrown around, a stupid threat from Kelly at first, escalating in arguments about money and time, his drinking, her anger.

They drove in silence, parked at the trailhead 10 miles up the Going-to-the-Sun Road, re-laced their hiking boots, and set off down the well-worn trail with Lucy riding in a seat on Will's backpack. Kelly pounced up the trail like a cat. Will lumbered along with the heavy pack like their old black lab. During the two-mile hike to the campground through the thick forest of cedar, larch, and cottonwood, the couple talked loudly along the trail, finally arriving at a small clearing near the shores of Morning Eagle, a large, deep lake ringed by jagged cliffs with mineral stains clinging to the granite from the waterfalls of springtime. A few errant raindrops splattered down into the dusty soil.

"Another late start from your father and here comes the rain," said Kelly, lifting the toddler from Will's backpack. Kelly was a natural athlete and her husband stared at her strong leg muscles as she crouched, tight hiking shorts hugging tan legs, steady hands placing the toddler gently on the ground. Lucy had never had a haircut and blond curls spilled over

small ears. He was startled by how similar the pair looked—his daughter a mere miniature of his wife.

Camping on the weekend after Labor Day had become a decade-long tradition for the couple prior to Lucy's birth. The tourists were gone and it was a time to celebrate the quiet of the forest—and in some ways, mourn the passing of summer. For the first time the previous autumn, they had skipped their annual outing, too tired with a newborn and the hike felt too unpractical. Now they were here, trying to pretend that life could be something closer to what it was like before.

"Like I'm supposed to control the weather," he grumbled, throwing down his backpack.

On the lake in front of their campsite, a duck circled, hummed above the surface of the water, then splashed down, leaving a trail of scuffed-up water. It took off again and repeated these antics like some homage to the already dying day. A steady wind blew through the trees. Thunder tumbled down the wooded hillside as rain dropped in sheets across the far shore. Luckily, the storm appeared to be quickly moving away from them. The weather might just cooperate, Will thought, jotting a few quick lines in his crumpled reporter's notebook, noting details from his brief conversation with the ranger and other observations about the camping area.

"I might go ahead and—this spot is very nice," he said, pulling the tent from his heavy pack. "I love this time of year, there is something about—"

"Would you go ahead and put it—" Kelly motioned to a more level spot as she drank water from a wide-mouthed red bottle.

Lucy entertained herself by drawing in the sand with a small stick. She pointed to the lake and said: "Wah." Words were just beginning to bubble up within her. The peaks of the Lewis and Livingston mountain ranges in the distance were already capped with snow. Will looked at his wife and although Kelly's features were familiar and pleasing, he did not feel like he fully recognized her, a shattering feeling after more than a decade together. He traced the contours of her sharp cheekbones with his eyes. Kelly looked older than he thought she should and seemed tired, with small, fine wrinkles extending from the corners of her eyes. Her fingernails were long, but without nail polish. No doubt, her 30-year-old body had recovered well from the pregnancy, but there was something about those lines on her face that spoke of unbearable weariness.

Kelly looked at him. "Where's the cook stove?" she asked. "I'm pretty hungry."

Will's eyes opened wide. "It was on—I thought you—"

And then it began. Again. Had they known how close the bear was to the campground, picking up pieces of their words, they would not have been worried about a forgotten stove. Stella, hearing the angry words, lumbered further away, as snatches of the conversation followed her.

“I just can’t believe how thoughtless—”

“It’s not—there’s something—”

“It’s hard not to feel negative, Bill.”

“If there was a way, that was better, now don’t you think that—”

“I wait and I wait and then you forget—”

“What about me, and my job, and all the things that—”

“You never pay attention, so wrapped up in—”

“And you—what about all the times that—”

“We don’t see you for days at a time when you’re off—”

“Maybe it would be better if I just—”

“Maybe it would—”

And so it continued. Mama growled. Papa thundered.

Lucy looked up as the level of the argument rose in pitch, but continued playing, drawing lines in the sand with her water-worn stick. Every time Will threatened to leave the family, a wave of both peace and terror engulfed him. He had signed up for the long haul. But could he hold on?

Kelly suddenly declared that she was going for a hike. She sat on a rock and re-laced her hiking boots.

“What will we—?” then thinking better of it after a deep breath: “Make noise,” Will told her. “Make lots of noise. And don’t stay out too long. It’ll be dark by seven.” His tone was more father than husband.

Kelly kissed Lucy and looked at Will, then shook her head and began to walk. She did not notice the scratch marks on the trunk of the giant cottonwood as she hurried past it on her way into the heart of the forest. Kelly cried out “Hey bear!” as she walked and touched the canister of cayenne pepper spray on her belt.

An experienced camper, William busied himself with efficiently setting up the campsite. Lucy played with the tent poles and he created the dome. He unfolded camping chairs and they sat and ate granola bars as he pointed to woodpecker holes in the trees. Green lichen dripped from tamarack branches, their needles already beginning to turn a faded green before their October explosion of gold. Will unrolled the sleeping bags and spread them out inside the tent, excited to be sleeping again under the stars. He loved his job, but it preoccupied him unnecessarily. Out

here, he felt like he could breathe. Back home, with a growing mountain of debt and a wife who seemed bitterly angry with him every time he got home, he sometimes felt as if he were drowning.

“Come here,” said the father, motioning calmly to his child with outstretched arms, his shoulders slightly sore from the weight of the heavy pack. She drew more shapes in the sand with a stick. “Let’s get a fire going before mummy gets back.” A soot-stained fire-ring of rocks was already built.

His eyes dropped to the ground and he gazed past the child to the trail leading into the darkening forest, about 50 feet away. It was four o’clock. Light would hang in the sky for another three hours. The wind gusted and the limbs of the giant cottonwood at the trailhead groaned. He crumpled some sheets of newspaper from the office and formed a tipi of wood around the pile of paper. He struck a match and noticed his byline melt into smoke. His fingers were streaked with newsprint.

“So whaddya think, Luce?”

The child smiled at him and walked on unsteady legs toward the fire. He looked at his watch, an antique timepiece that his wife had purchased for him on his last birthday. He lifted his head to the clearing sky, then back down and blew on the base of the flames.

“Oh, Lucy,” he said, fanning the fire.

The wood began to crackle, then caught, and he added larger pieces on top of the hot embers. William looked into the struggling fire, then stared into the face of his daughter. The flames licked the dry wood.

“Hot,” said Lucy with a big smile as she shook both hands, palms facing out and fingers splayed at shoulder level, making a baby-sign-language motion that Kelly had taught her. “Hot” was her favorite word, one that she took great joy and care in saying. She turned and began to wobble toward the lake. He hurried to her, picked her up, spun her around, and plunked her back down near the fire. He found a straight stick, whittled it to a point, pulled out a packet of marshmallows, and stabbed one through the center. Lucy giggled. He took out another marshmallow and broke off a piece for Lucy. He popped the other half in his mouth, took her hand, and helped her hold the stick over the flames.

They ate bananas, applesauce, and nuts while they watched the fire burn. He would save the loaf of bread and some cheese for Kelly’s return. While his daughter nibbled on small pieces of cashews, he packaged up the food in a canvas sack, and then took Lucy inside the green, dome tent to change her diaper. He stripped off her shirt and wrestled her into flannel

PJ's, playing peek-a-boo with her pajama top. Then he carried Lucy down a small trail to the food prep area where he hung the bag of food and their trash from a tree. He returned to the fire and the dying light made him nervous as he looked at his watch. Just past five o'clock. He stared at his daughter and again felt as if he were looking into the face of his wife nearly 30 years ago, long before he had ever known Kelly. Lucy's features were so similar, the way a button nose fit between green eyes and how a supple chin spread into ruddy cheeks.

William sat quietly, breathing slowly, the side of Lucy's head resting gently on his shoulder blade, tired eyes on the glowing embers. Her head resting there and her warm body pressed tight made him feel whole. He gravitated to Glacier because it made him feel small, a little part of the big flow. But with his daughter in his arms, he felt big, like the starry arms of a galaxy. Lucy squirmed, and he twirled her around on his lap to face him, then readjusted her pajama-top buttons and smiled at her. He could see the flicker of flames from the fire make a kaleidoscope in her eyes, and he felt a wave of sadness. Where was Kelly? It was after six.

It suddenly occurred to him that his wife might actually have left *him*. Had she finally had enough? Or was she hurt? Even dead? The thought of Kelly dying in the woods made him feel as if his breath might stop—and maybe he wouldn't remember how to start breathing again. Why had they even bothered to come here? The notion of camping in bear country with his young family now seemed foolish, downright dumb.

Soon, Lucy's head sunk down and pressed a soft cheek into his chest. William hummed a little lullaby tune, softly patting her back. From time to time, the fire popped and the sounds of her breath lulled him into a place of muted emotion. He checked his watch. He shifted his head back to look at his daughter's face. Eyes closed, her skin looked as delicate as ice. The sun dipped behind the big cliff walls, creating an early sunset, a dusk that would linger. The light began to play tricks on his eyes.

Just before seven, he stood up and Lucy stirred slightly, separated her lips, but no sound emerged as he carried her inside the tent and laid her on their sleeping bags. He grabbed a blanket that his wife had knitted and covered her body. A crack of a branch outside the tent made him glance through the flap, but he could only hear the snap of the fire. He stared at his daughter and thought about the features of his wife's face again. Why did she feel like a stranger after all these years? He kissed Lucy on the forehead, and

emerged from the tent.

As he rubbed his hands together slowly above the fire in the growing darkness, he tried to reassure himself, sure that she just got preoccupied with finding more berries. He had done it himself. Sometimes when you pick huckleberries and your hands are all blue, you just get into a mindset where the berries are the only things that exist. Filling the bucket with these plump orbs of fruit, for some reason, means something. Time and real world worries disappear. He looked out again into the darkness beyond the fire's glow. The tree branches appeared to be moving, but the air was still, the apparition simply a trick of light from the flames. He paced around the fire, erasing the lines that Lucy had drawn in the dirt with a swipe of his boot.

Will walked to the tent, unzipped the flap, gazed at Lucy, then re-zipped the flap and returned to the fire, absentmindedly throwing one of Lucy's sticks into the flames. When he wasn't holding a stick, or adding a branch, he put his hands into his pockets and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, looking down at the ground. He scratched his scalp and cleared his throat.

When there was no more light in the sky, his hands smelled of smoke, and his stomach burned, he heard a sound, like a crackle from the fire, but more dense, as if the sound had weight to it. He heard the crack again, coming from the trailhead, but up high. Something was in the branches of the cottonwood. He waited for his eyes to adjust and suddenly saw what he was immediately certain was the feline shape of a large mountain lion. The comic side of his brain could not believe that he was about to be attacked. He steadied his eyes on the shape as he knelt to the ground, picked up a large stick, ready for a fight. Play dead with bears was the rule. You can't outrun them. But you fight a cat.

The rustling increased and he followed the shadow of the animal about ten feet up in the branches, but something wasn't quite right about the movement or the size. He walked backwards from the fire and braced himself at the mouth of the tent, holding the stick in front of him like a sword. The night was moonless and stars were beginning to shimmer from beneath the ink.

Kelly jumped from the last branch about five feet from the ground and walked quickly towards him with a slanted half-smile that seemed to say hello, I got you. He lowered the stick and shook his head, wincing as if in pain. No sound came from his mouth. Adrenaline raced to his extremities and he had the sense that his hands might explode. With rosy cheeks and bits of tree

bark littering her hair, she looked at him with neither remorse, nor anger, nor fear. She waited for him to speak. He started to laugh, shaking his head back and forth.

“I saw your bear—way across the lake,” she said, in measured cadence as he shook his head back and forth, dumb. “I watched her for hours. She was digging for grubs. I couldn’t put down the binoculars, she was so beautiful.”

William felt like she had punched him, but he continued to chuckle, a little crazy. He let the stick slip from his fingers.

“And you know what? She has a little cub.”

He stopped laughing. There was no air in his lungs. He forced out some words.

“But you were so quiet. What were you—?”

—“I knew I was late,” she said. “And the whole time I was walking back, I wondered how worried you were. When I finally got here, I saw you bring Lucy into the tent. And for some reason, I just decided to watch you.”

He stared at her, again unable to speak.

“All of a sudden I guess I wanted you to be me, just waiting. Like I always do. I wanted to make you feel—”

She paused, moving closer to him.

Words began to boil inside him, then sputtered.

“I still feel that—there are still times that—I just want so much that—”

He tried to make sense of his emotions, searching for anger, but the emotion he expected was not there. He started to laugh again.

“You can’t just condition me like—” he stammered, his hysterical laughter increasing, echoing back to them from off the far walls of the cirque. The couple looked at each other in the flickering light of the dying fire, smiling. As his nervous laughter subsided, his mind peeled away layers of time and she appeared, in that firelight, like the girl he had fallen in love with so many years ago.

The gunshots rang out in the late morning—a single, layered explosion that startled the family as Will assembled his fly rod. The air was windless and the sound followed the trails of his laughter from the night before, ricocheted around the walls of the cirque, circled and then faded while Will and Kelly looked at each other.

“What was that?” Kelly said, as she walked over to Lucy and picked her up.

“I’m not so sure,” said Will as he balanced his rod on a stump.

“Sounded like a gun.”

“A rock slide?”

“No way. Too sharp.”

“Should I go look?”

“Don’t you dare leave us.”

The answer arrived ten minutes later in the form of a park ranger with a rifle slung over his shoulder. He emerged from the thick woods, passed underneath the large cottonwood and approached the camping area in a hurry. He was dressed in full uniform, and looked a lot more like military personnel than a friendly ranger, a startling presence in the otherwise tranquil forest.

“What’s going on?” demanded Will.

“Good morning, sir. I’m so sorry. Everything’s okay. We had an incident.”

“What?”

“The bear.”

“Stella?”

The ranger walked closer and smiled at Lucy who continued to play with her stick. He removed his gun from his shoulder and rested the butt-end on the ground.

“We were heading down from the pass for more observations when she surprised us on the trail. She charged us and we had to shoot her. There was no choice.”

“What about the cub?” asked Kelly, demanding, angry.

“Cub’s been darted. We’ll transport it out.”

“To where?”

“Zoo. Yearling would never survive out here alone.”

Will walked over to his pack and pulled out his notebook, but the ranger refused to answer any questions about the killing of a protected species—Park policy in talking with reporters. Will was referred to the communications office. He knew the drill.

“If you folks are okay, I have to go,” said the ranger. “I’m sorry for the disturbance.” And as quickly as he had broken the quiet of their morning, he disappeared down the trail toward the road and left the family alone once again. Morning mist rose up above the lake, swirling in smoky currents as the sun broke over the edge of the cliff walls. A few minutes later, Kelly spoke.

“I wish you had seen her,” said Kelly. “She was so beautiful.”

Will smiled at his wife and looked over the steaming water, thinking about the beautiful bear and her cub. •