Bear Encounter

Bill Bryson and his friend Stephen Katz are camping in the woods of North America.

There was a sound of undergrowth being disturbed - a click of breaking branches, a weighty pushing through low foliage - and then a kind of large, vaguely irritable snuffling noise.

 Bear!

 I sat bolt upright. Instantly every neuron in my brain was awake and dashing around frantically, like ants when you disturb their nest. I reached instinctively for my knife, then realized I had left it in my pack, just outside the tent. Nocturnal defence had ceased to be a concern after many successive nights of tranquil woodland repose.

 There was another noise, quite near.

 ‘Stephen, you awake?’ I whispered.

 ‘Yup,’ he replied in a weary but normal voice.

 ‘What was that?’

 ‘How the hell should I know?’

 ‘It sounded big.’

 ‘Everything sounds big in the woods.’

This was true. Once a skunk had come plodding through our camp and it had sounded like a stegosaurus. There was another heavy rustle and then the sound of lapping at the spring. It was having a drink, whatever it was.

I shuffled on my knees to the foot of the tent, cautiously unzipped the mesh and peered out, but it was pitch black. As quietly as I could, I brought in my backpack and, with the light of a small torch, searched through it for my knife. When I found it and opened the blade I was appalled at how wimpy it looked. It was a perfectly respectable appliance for, say, buttering pancakes, but patently inadequate for defending oneself against 400 pounds of ravenous fur.

Carefully, very carefully, I climbed from the tent and put on the torch, which cast a distressingly feeble beam. Something about 15 or 20 feet away looked up at me. I couldn’t see anything at all of its shape or size - only two shining eyes. It went silent, whatever it was, and stared back at me.

 ‘Stephen,’ I whispered at his tent, ‘did you pack a knife?’

 ‘No.’

 ‘Have you got anything sharp at all?’

 He thought for a moment. ‘Nail clippers.’

 I made a despairing face. ‘Anything a little more vicious than that? Because, you see, there is definitely something out here.’

 ‘It’s probably just a skunk.’

 ‘Then it’s one big skunk. Its eyes are three feet off the ground.’

 ‘A deer then.’

I nervously threw a stick at the animal, and it didn’t move, whatever it was. A deer would have bolted. This thing just blinked once and kept staring.

I reported this to Katz.

 ‘Probably a buck. They’re not so timid. Try shouting at it.’

I cautiously shouted at it: ‘Hey! You there! Scat!’ The creature blinked again, singularly unmoved. ‘You shout,’ I said.

 ‘Oh, you brute, go away, do!’ Katz shouted in merciless imitation. ‘Please withdraw at once, you horrid creature.’

 ‘Oh thank you,’ I said and lugged my tent right over to his. I didn’t know what this would achieve exactly, but it brought me a tiny measure of comfort to be nearer to him.

 ‘What are you doing?’

 ‘I’m moving my tent.’

 ‘Oh, good plan. That’ll really confuse it.’

 I peered and peered, but I couldn’t see anything but those two wide-set eyes staring from the near distance like eyes in a cartoon. I couldn’t decide whether I wanted to be outside and dead or inside and waiting to be dead. I was barefoot and in my underwear and shivering. What I really wanted - really, really wanted - was for the animal to withdraw.

Text to read out

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