



Uncle Donny And The Bear

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About the looniest thing I ever saw was my Uncle Donny trying to punch that bear. I concede that bear baiting has a history of occurrence in a variety of different, albeit emotionally stunted cultures. But usually the baited bears are in cages. The bear that Uncle Donny tried to KO was in the Obadeechee Campground parking lot. It was standing on top of a car door.

Said car door had, as recently as several minutes before, been attached to Uncle Donny's Pontiac.

Conceivably the bear had no legal claim to the door, though the bear might have argued, had he enjoyed a proclivity for rhetoric, something like, "I took this door with my bear hands and I'm keeping it." We might have grimaced at the pun, but the point would have been made. Of course, he didn't have to make any points. He was a bear. My Uncle Donny, meanwhile, was a Methodist. He was also a notary public, but neither of these stations had provided Uncle Donny with the slightest idea of how to conduct himself in the outdoors.

Only an hour before, my father had said, "Donny, they have the steel bear boxes for a reason. That's where we should put the food."

Uncle Donny, my mother's brother and a firm believer in American automotive technology, had scoffed.

"George, would you quit flapping that tongue of yours? What kind of a bear is going to be able to smell food through the car?" He talked as though my dad had entertained the most foolish idea since the square wheel.

"Even if he could smell it, he won't be able to get to it. The doors'll be locked!" He slapped the Pontiac's roof.

"C'mon. This is the Don's Dream Machine!"

"I'm just saying," my father said quietly. "The Ranger was very clear that we should put all our food and toiletries in the bear box."

"What, do they breed some kind of super bears up here?" Uncle Donny nudged me with his elbow. He laughed long and hard at that idea. "Super Bears! Ha ha!" He had kept saying all through dinner, "Will he have a cape? Ha ha!"

The bear that stood on Donny's ex-door was brown. He didn't have a cape. But he did have our Styrofoam cooler from the front seat and was nosing around inside. After tossing aside a jar of bread-and-butter pickles, my favorite, the bear found the steaks we had been saving for our final night of the trip.

Throughout our ill-conceived journey, whenever my cousins or I had whined about hiking in the rain, being bitten by mosquitoes, or having to endure the truly odious outhouse, Uncle Donny had replied, "Just wait til we fire up them steaks!" For Uncle Donny, this was the ultimate, incontrovertible trump card. After the third day, I told my Uncle I thought I had scurvy. He replied, "Ain't nothing a thick, juicy celebration steak can't fix."

Seeing our celebration steaks in the jaws of this ursine intruder was, I think, the final straw for Uncle Donny. Which is not to say it had been easy for Donny to see my father's reaction. Trying to hold in his guffaws, after all, Dad had only made the sound more explosive, to the point where he emitted blasts every three to five seconds that recalled otters making love over a public address system.

Still, the mockery was not what broke Donny. Neither were the obvious computations he was making in his mind about the expense of replacing an entire car door. Even though he was a man who would, on principle, only buy cans of food if they were dented and on clearance, I knew that the impending cost of vehicle repair was not what threw Donny over the edge.

In fact, he had been standing in relatively quiet contemplation, watching the scene as if he were in the midst of a peaceful daydream. He looked more tranquil and thoughtful than I had ever seen him. That all changed when he saw the bear with our steak.

Then he yelled, "Get your filthy mouth off of our steak, you dumb bear," and charged.

Most people would think that only a madman or a fool would attack a bear without the benefit of a weapon. By and large, they are correct. But to pass off my uncle's reaction to madness would be to sell him short. The man really likes steak. Plus, lest we forget, the bear had seriously screwed with the Don's Dream Machine.

The bear, for his part, didn't seem to notice the incensed notary public careening towards him, screaming obscenities and unrealistic threats.

But my father, mirthful tears still streaming, quickly fell out of his convulsive reverie and yelled, "Donny, what the hell are you doing?!"

He tried to stop to him, but Donny had too much of a head start. With a full head of steam, Donny threw a colossal right hook. He missed. The lack of contact flipped Donny over the bear. Hitting the concrete, Donny bounced and then landed for a second time. The bear, unfazed, continued to work the steak over in his maw.

"Donny, you get over here right now," my father stage-whispered hoarsely. He stood about fifteen feet back, ten feet closer to the scene than my cousins and I.

Donny did not reply. He picked himself off of the ground.

"I'm not going to tell you again, bear," he said. "You drop that steak, and this'll all be over."

Apparently the bear did not want it all to be over. He didn't move. He just kept chewing.

My father began to speak in slow and measured tones. "This is a serious situation, Don. This is no time to get hysterical. Your kids are here. They want you to do the right thing, to be safe."

Looking at my cousins, Gerald and Donny, Jr., it was not entirely clear that this was so. They put their position beyond question when Gerald yelled, "Kick that bear's ass, Dad!" and Donny Jr. chimed in with, "Yeah, Dad! Kick its ass!"

"Quiet, boys," my father hissed sharply. This silenced them abruptly; they'd never heard my father speak so harshly. I had, but only once, at age eight, when I'd somewhat accidentally set my mother's hair on fire.

Donny stood by the bear, watching it masticate his steaks. A sort of silly grin spread on his face. My father interpreted this as a good sign. He said soothingly, "See, nothing to worry about, Don. Come on back over here and we'll just go out to get our steak dinners, okay? My treat."

"Steak," said Uncle Donny whimsically, pointing his finger into the air as if to say, "Capital idea!" Shrugging his shoulders in an almost carefree way, he started to walk back toward us. As he passed the bear, though, his features suddenly hardened and, without warning, he delivered a resounding right cross to the bear's head. We waited in stunned silence. Uncle Donny had the flushed look of a child caught defacing his mother's white chairs with permanent marker. My father tensed visibly, his knees bent, ready, if not entirely willing, to spring to Donny's aid.

What ensued is somewhat difficult to describe because it involves on my part some speculation as to the psychology of this particular member of the Family Ursidae. I couldn't, in good conscience, report that the bear was angry about the events at hand, but neither would it be accurate to say the creature was pleased. What the bear did was rise up on its hind legs and give my Uncle Donny a hug.

My cousins and I looked at each other, with eyes like dinner plates. We heard a loud, sharp inhalation from Uncle Donny. Bears, as per their reputation, are large and heavy mammals. After several seconds of baring the weight, so to speak, Uncle Donny's knees buckled. He and the bear tumbled to the cement. The bear, however, had apparently not quenched its thirst for physical intimacy; it placed a large paw in the center of Uncle Donny's chest, pinning him in place like a note on a cork board.

"Stay here, boys," my dad said sharply. Then he started slowly backpedaling away from us.

"Where are you going, Uncle George?" asked Donny, Jr., a tinge of hysteria in his voice.

"I'll be right back," said my father evenly. "Don't worry. I'm going to get something at the campsite to help your dad."

Then he cupped his hand to his mouth. Firmly, but not loudly, he said, "Don, I'm coming right back. Don't move."

If Uncle Donny had any plans for motion, he seemed content to conceal them for the moment. The bear commenced to growl directly in his face.

"Holy crap," whispered Cousin Gerald. "It's drooling all over him."

Donny, Jr. shuddered and turned to me. "What's your dad doing?" he cried.

I could hear my father rustling around in our campsite, which was not far away.

"Don't worry," I said. "He's getting help." I certainly hoped that was true.

Meanwhile, the bear leaned in close to Uncle Donny's face and roared. We three boys all yelped and Donny Jr.'s arms locked around my neck.

As I struggled to regain the flow of oxygen to my brain, I saw my father approaching the bear. In his right hand, he carried a black spray can. Moving methodically, he stepped into close range of the

beast and extended the black can within three feet of its face. Then he fired, launching a fierce spray of chemicals. Unfortunately, the spray sailed directly into his own eyes. My father was never good with tools.

As the chemicals burned his eyes and sinuses, he let out a horrible wail, a heart-shattering blast of sound that somehow brought to mind a mortally wounded Ethel Merman. The man had a preternatural gift for making noise.

At this, the bear, no doubt used to more peaceful environs, lifted its paw from my Uncle Donny's chest.

Looking at my father, the bear seemed to be calculating as to when, or if, he could count on this creature to cease its terrible bleating.

"AGGGGH," my father bellowed. "SWEET SUFFERING JESUS!"

Abruptly, the bear reached his decision. He turned and fled into the forest.

When the coast seemed clear, we ran to our fathers. A breathless Uncle Donny sat up. Rubbing his chest, he crawled over to my father, who was rolling around on the ground, still yelling. Through my dad's clenched fingers, you could see his face had a band of irritation, bright red around the eyes. Uncle Donny put his hand on my dad's shoulder and steadied him. They stayed there for several minutes, with the three of us standing in a ring around them. Finally, my father's pain seemed to subside a bit, and he sat up, still covering his face, with Uncle Donny's hand resting on his shoulder.

The situation seemingly having stabilized, Uncle Donny turned to us.

"How about that bear, huh?" he said, shaking his head. "He'll think twice next time."

I could already sense Uncle Donny's cogs in motion, shaping the tale with which he would regale the massed family at Thanksgivings and Christmases to come. An adventure story, a man-versus-nature epic that, while factually dubious, would no doubt be presented as a compelling morality play, with the moral being something like, "Bears shouldn't steal human food."

As my dad moaned quietly, I looked over to the black can, lying on the ground a few feet nearby. The white block letters on it read "bear mace." I picked it up for closer inspection. A wave of awe flashed over me at my father's prescience, at the anxieties he must have endured, planning and executing this foray into the jaws of nature, as it were, with such a blithe and unsuspecting band.

Sitting there, covering his bleary red eyes and letting loose the occasional whimper, my father seemed very manly. I felt lucky. I only briefly considered spraying him again.