



# The BEAR'S EMBRACE

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A TRUE STORY OF SURVIVING  
A GRIZZLY BEAR ATTACK

PATRICIA VAN TICHEM

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*This book is dedicated to  
all of my family,  
my children,  
my beloved "Joe."*

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*“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves: ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be?... We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we’re liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. “*

— NELSON MANDELA

*“Why should we give up the dream of embracing the bear?”*

— TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

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*Acknowledgements*

## **Author's Note**

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*The names and identifying details of some characters and places have been changed to preserve anonymity.*



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## *The Hike*

The sky is clear and blue, blue. The trees are yellow. The air is crisp, cool, full of autumn sunshine. I am content riding along in our little blue Volkswagen Rabbit with my hand on Trevor's knee. We are headed south on Highway Two to Waterton Lakes National Park.

Trevor hums under his breath, and I look over at his bearded profile. I am uncertain if we've made up after our disagreement last night. He planned to go rock climbing one day this September long weekend, maybe do a hike with me the next, but I wanted us to spend all three days together, backpacking. We haven't hiked for such a long time.

Last night I sulked in the rocking chair, tipping myself abruptly back and forth. "I'll go alone, then," I said. Trevor sat in a calm pool of lamplight across the living room, his bushy dark head bent over a textbook. "I need to get away somewhere this weekend." He kept his head down. "Trevor!"

"I'm listening." Then, opening his arms, "Come here." I moved to the big armchair and sat on his knee. "All right," he said. I felt his sigh on my neck through tangled hair. "We can try out our new tent."

We enjoyed packing up. Trevor went out at the last minute for groceries and brought back all of my favourite backpacking junk foods. Now he's singing beside me in the car. I love his voice. On one of our first dates, we went out Christmas carolling, and hearing him sing then strengthened my determination to hang on to him. He looks over and smiles.

"Hi, my love."

There are shorn yellow fields on either side of us. Farmhouses dot the little gravel roads that run off from the highway. In the distance, the mountains show clear in the late afternoon light. Trevor and I have escaped to those mountains many times since we met five years ago. We used to get away to hike or ski or ramble almost every weekend. But recently, with both of us working shifts, it's been hard to organize time away. I settle into the seat and close my eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sun. Trevor gives my hand a brief squeeze.

"This was a good idea, Trish," he says. His voice is teasing, daring my "I told you so" to pop out. I don't rise to the bait. I can hear him laugh.

Trevor is still wearing his good pants and sports jacket. He's in his third year of medical school and partway through his pediatrics rotation at Children's Hospital in Calgary. I'm a nurse. I don't know if I feel like one yet, though I graduated a year ago and have worked since then on a busy surgical floor. I find it frustrating and difficult. There are many cancers and deaths to deal with, and not enough time to give patients the attention they deserve. I want to give this weekend my all and shake off the tense Patricia, leaving the pulls and pressures of nursing behind.

Trevor and I will stop in the little foothills town of Pincher Creek for supper, then stay tonight at a lodge in Waterton. We've left our plans for tomorrow wide open. We'll wake when we want to and take our time with breakfast and discuss where we'd like to hike. We're driving into dark storm clouds now, and a spattering of rain hits our windshield. It's strange how fast the weather can change.

On a hot evening a week before our hike, I stand facing the mirror that stretches across the counter in our Calgary bathroom. The room has the cheap beige countertop of student housing, and cheap beige flooring. There is a green-and-black framed print on the wall, "Recipe for a Happy Marriage," received as a gift at our wedding three years ago. I'm in my white nursing uniform, a shift just

completed.

I am twentyfour. My hair is blonde and brown, like a taffy pull. My teeth are well aligned after ten years in braces. All my life, I've been told that my blue eyes are lovely. I think so too, shy approval coming from deep inside. My nose would be better if it were smaller and straighter. My mother's nose. My grandfather's nose. I smile at myself just to see how I look. Some people have such marvellous smiles, smiles that wash over you and warm you. I wonder if my smile is like that. Trevor says it is. So does my mother.

I'm proud of how I look, but I struggle with that pride. As a Catholic, I've been taught that pride is a vice. Not good. Not right. I remember how my instructor would wring her hands in ballet class. "Such proportion, such legs. If you would only stand up tall! Look proud!" A small part of me was flattered. A little smile would come, but I could never allow myself to take her words to heart. It is easier now that Trevor adores my tallness.

"What are you doing, Trish?" Trevor calls. "Come to bed."

"Just changing. I'm coming."

I unzip my uniform and let it fall in a puddle at my feet. I stand tall and slim and fit in bra and panties. My eyes linger for a moment on my unblemished body. My patients have had breasts removed, tumours investigated, bowels totally resected. I hug myself and shiver.

I flick off the light and pull on an old flannel nightie, blue, with no softness left in the fabric. Trevor calls me again. He has turned his reading light out, done with studying for tonight. He's preparing for exams, squeezing his reading in between classes and labs and tutorials and hospital ward rotations. He likes children, loves the time he spends in pediatrics. "Can your husband come out and play?" our little neighbour Jason asks me whenever he sees our front door open.

"Did I take too long? Are you asleep already?"

"No, I'm still awake. Barely."

"I can't stop thinking about work," I say, climbing into bed. Trevor puts his arm out and draws me to him. "I'm glad I'm changing floors. If there were more of us in surgery, more nurses, we would have time to really care for our patients. It drives me nuts. There's a woman in now who had a breast removed for cancer. She's only thirty-eight, and they did a radical mastectomy. She has a scar from her chest to her shoulder and a lot of pain. We should be able to sit with her, hold her hand when she's crying, but instead we only have time for the basics: check her dressings, empty her urine bag, empty the drain under her incision."

Trevor rolls onto his side and kisses my face over and over. "You are a very good nurse. You get all the things done that need doing, but you give the other stuff, too. All you have to do is smile at a post-op patient, and you lighten her load."

I whisper into the dark. "There's something else I wanted to talk to you about."

"Mmph."

Trevor's breathing is becoming slow and regular.

"I'm working shifts and you're working shifts and we get so grumpy with each other sometimes," I say. "I want us to make it. Remember how we promised to grow old and wrinkly together? I want that to happen."

There's no answer, and I curl myself around my sleeping husband. When I close my eyes, I see visions of scars. In addition to two people with bowel resections and three women with mastectomies, my patients right now include two people who've had their gallbladders out and one who received an emergency appendectomy. My last shift passes through my mind as though on a screen. Me trying to answer three patients' bells that have all gone off at once. Two people want painkillers and the third has a leaking incision drain. I hurry to change his linens and redo the dressing, knowing

that two other patients are waiting at their bedsides for me to help them finish up their morning wash

~~I push the images from my mind, rolling away from Trevor. I will talk with him in the morning about getting away. We will do something together.~~

Crypt Lake Trail sounds like a wonderful hike. According to our guidebook, it's only about five miles long, but we'll gain two thousand feet. We have to take a boat trip across Waterton Lake to reach the trailhead, and there's a tunnel through a rock area somewhere along the way. The trail should satisfy the adventure needs of my kayaking, mountain-climbing, glacier-skiing husband and provide a challenge for me, his cautious wife.

The day is sunny and clear, but the wind off the lake is cold, and we've got our coats zipped up to the top. The lake stretches miles away to the right, with steep mountains on either side. The evergreen forest is mixed with deciduous trees that give it a blast of autumn colour. It's difficult to believe that it's supposed to snow tonight. Trevor wonders if I wouldn't rather stay at the lodge again tonight, but I want to backpack our gear in and camp.

"That's what we're here for, isn't it? We can snuggle up together. It will be fun." I'm happy and full of energy as we wait to board the boat. Bundled in his sweater and pile jacket, Trevor wraps his arms tightly around me for a feet-off-the-ground hug.

The trip is choppy and chilly, with people packed around us on the open wooden seats. The boat drops us at a crude wooden dock with two other hikers, then chugs off to continue its sightseeing of the lake. Dark green trees surround us, crowding the narrow shoreline and rising steeply from the water.

We adjust our packs and set off at an easy pace, talking and teasing and laughing our way up the gradual switchbacks. The other two hikers have disappeared with purposeful strides ahead of us. The water is far below us now, mirroring the cloudless blue of the sky.

"Hold on a minute, Trevor. I want to get a photo of you against the lake and the mountains on the other side."

"It won't work. If you focus in on me, the other side will just be a blur of colour."

"I want to try. The sun is so bright. It would be a good picture." Looking through the viewfinder, I see Trevor tilting his head and putting on a fixed smile.

"Trevor!"

"What?"

I am laughing, imitating him. "In every picture we have of you, you're tilting your head and smiling that tiny smile." Trevor laughs too, his face clear and happy in the afternoon light. Click.

"That was *much* better." I jump aside quickly to avoid Trevor's grinning lunge. He dives for me and we struggle, tickling each other through our bulky outdoor clothes. The ground beneath us is rocky and hard, cushioned in places by fallen aspen leaves. Then the trail climbs sharply uphill, into thick evergreen growth, and all of a sudden I feel apprehensive.

"Come on, Paranoia Pearl. Quit looking for bears at every corner, and let's go."

"Let's sit for another minute. That hill looks awfully steep."

We haul ourselves onto a large rock.

"Remember how we met? I can't believe it's only been five years." I pick up a branch of pine needles, caressing it to release the scent. "I feel like we were meant to be together. We're incredibly different, but we want so many of the same things. A house with a bay window. Babies. Taking our children backpacking, when we've got some. I sure hope we're not one of those couples who can't

have kids.”

~~Trevor’s hand comes up to stroke my cheek. High above us the wind pulls at the tops of the pines.~~

I was just home from an exchange program called Canada World Youth when Trevor and I first met in 1978. Four months in the Ivory Coast, then back to the culture shock of Calgary. During a visit with friends from my African group and people who had been with Canada World Youth in Guatemala, we planned a get-together, reviewing a list of participants to phone. Trevor’s name leapt out at me, as though it was the only name on the paper. I couldn’t stop asking questions about him. Later, our paths crossed at a debriefing meeting for the Calgary-area participants. In a tiny front hallway jammed with winter coats and boots, we squeezed past each other, belly to belly. He was arriving. I was leaving. He went inside and asked about me. I went outside and asked about him. Who was the tall, blue-eyed blonde? Who was the dark-haired man with such wonderful eyes?

That’s Trevor Janz, my friends told me. The name on the list. I was amazed.

“We’d better get a move on,” Trevor says now. “That climb ahead of us isn’t going to go away.”

With a parting kiss, I step ahead of him onto the narrow trail, nodding hello to a family of four on their way out. We hike until we reach Burnt Rock Falls, halfway along the trail. There Trevor steals the camera out of my pack while I crouch to retie my long red bootlaces, and takes my picture. Our disagreement of Thurs’ day evening seems long ago.

We stop again, farther along the way, at a jumble of enormous fallen boulders. The sun is being threatened by towering grey clouds, and it is cold as we sit finishing our snack. A low rumble from up the trail gets louder and louder, and soon a colourfully clad line of children traipses past. There are about twenty of them and a few adults, all wearing small daypacks.

“Where are you from?” I call loudly above their din.

“Red Deer!”

They vanish as quickly as they appeared, and Trevor and I are alone again.

It’s uphill from here. We walk quickly to get warm; the sun is gone for good today. The view is incredible, with mountains all around us and hundreds of feet of waterfall far across the valley. We puff our way up steep switchbacks.

I stop. I can smell something for a minute, then it’s gone. It’s unpleasant. I think of bears.

“Trevor, can you smell that?” Silence surrounds us. We stand sniffing into the wind.

“I don’t smell anything. Wait. Now I do.” Then it disappears again. Trevor shrugs. “It’s probably just that plant that gives off a pungent odour when you kick it. I can’t remember what it’s called. I don’t see any bear scats.”

With a glance up the trail, he strides away. I stand another moment and gaze around me. It doesn’t look like bear habitat here, in such a narrow rocky valley. The scrunch of Trevor’s boots on the loose gravel trail is getting faint, and I hurry to catch up, the smell forgotten.

At the campsite, a kitchen shelter sits between widely spaced spruce trees. We leave our packs there and continue up the trail, crossing a creek and following the rocky path across grey scree. Ahead of us through massive, dark rock slabs, a tunnel stretches for about twenty feet. We move through it on all fours. I don’t like the feel of rock pressing so closely on all sides of me, but I hold still for pictures, then scurry to the end and the open moun’ tainside. Trevor lingers, examining the walls and musing about how the tunnel was formed.

Crypt Lake is still and quiet, with high peaks encircling it on three sides. Dirty patches of snow on scree slopes merge with deep waters. The sky is low and heavy, with dark cloud shadowing the mountain and lake. I shiver. The hike up here was more exciting than this. Turning, I see the blue of

Trevor's jacket wandering down the shoreline. I lie flat on a limestone slab to escape the wind, closing my eyes to listen to the silence. But I can't relax with the cold seeping through me. Trevor's returning footsteps and his voice are welcome sounds.

"Let's go and cook us some supper, wife." He offers a hand to pull me up. "This is great up here. Over that mountain is Glacier National Park, in the States. We're that close."

"Uh huh." I look up at him. "I'm freezing."

We set up our new bright-green "worm" tent away from the shelter, then take a few minutes to rig a food cache high between two trees. The two other hikers we met on the boat have an enormous fire going in the shelter. We talk over supper and share some burning sips of Southern Comfort as the sky darkens. Big, soft snowflakes whirl and dance behind us. Trevor and I sit close, warding off the chill.

A white world greets us in the morning. Tiny crystal flakes are falling. Still in our down sleeping bags we treasure a last few moments of warmth. I am tucked under Trevor's bearded chin, where I listen to the steady, slow beat of his heart.

We can hear the voices of the other two campers and the beginning crackle of a morning fire. If we want to catch the morning boat back to town, we need to get moving. Reluctantly, I release Trevor. He dresses and clambers out of the tent, disturbing my warm calm. The cold of the day steals into my sleeping bag no matter how tightly I seal it around my head and neck. I sigh. Time to get up.

I put on every piece of clothing I brought, but I'm still chilled through. Trevor is full of smiles and a loud song.

"Get to work; you'll warm up then," he jokes.

I ignore him. The pit fire at the shelter is strong, but it warms only a piece of me at a time. Trevor pulls out frozen pita bread, frozen peanut butter and frozen oranges. He suggests we thaw them, but I have no patience to wait. I take a quick, tongue-burning sip of his tea and a handful of trail mix from the open bag on the table, then stuff my fingers back into heavy mitts and shoulder my pack. Trevor will do the last few minutes of packing up.

I am glad to be alone in this Christmassy world. Mine are the first tracks to mar the fresh snow. My breathing and the swishing of my clothing are the only sounds. It's nine o'clock, according to the other hikers. The boat won't be at the dock to pick us up till eleven-thirty, so we can take our time. Happy and warm now, I plod along in solitude.

Soon Trevor crunches up behind me. There is snow in his beard and all over his tuque. Even his bushy eyebrows are coated with flakes. He sails on by, calling me a slowpoke. I give him a quick shove as he passes.

"Are you warming up yet?" he calls over his shoulder.

I yell back. "Are you kidding? It's hot out here. I need to stop and take my coat off!" He smiles and waves.

The narrow valley stretches dark green and white ahead, with soft grey cloud close above. What a contrast to yesterday's early brightness. Trevor's blue anorak and orange backpack move brightly ahead of me. He waits at the steepest parts of the trail to give me a hand. As we descend, he describes some of the geo' morphology of the area. I'm only partly listening, caught up in the exhilaration of the wintry mountain morning.

It doesn't take long to cover this part of the trail. We are already at the bottom of the big elevation gain, with the boulders where we passed the kids from Red Deer in front of us. There is such an abrupt change here from open rocky slope to thick forest. In a minute, we will be in the trees again. I hear the tramp, tramp of our boots on snow and gravel. The sound of Trevor's singing up ahead makes me glad.

“Blue skies smiling at me, nothing but blue skies do I see...”

~~He's gone around a bend now and is obscured from sight by trees. I quicken my step to rejoin him.~~  
The trail has widened, and we could walk beside each other, hold hands and talk.

A bear.

And Trevor.

Two more steps forward. I stop. A bear? From the side. Light brown. A hump. A dish-shaped face.

A grizzly. Charging. And Trevor. Fast. He half turns away. The bear's on him, its jaws closing around his thigh, bringing him down.

Seconds pass. Time holds still.

A grizzly?

I take two steps back. Where am I going? What should I do? My heart beats loud in the silent, snowy woods. I can't outrun a bear. It knows I'm here. I can't leave Trevor. Panic rising. How will I get past the bear? Trevor? My mind racing. Legs like jelly. Shaky weak. Think.

The bear has Trevor. I can't see anything because of the bushes. I can't hear anything.

Not a bear!

I can't run. Take off my pack. It might divert the bear. After summers of handing out “You Are in Bear Country” pamphlets at the Banff Park gates, instructions for a bear encounter flash through my brain. I throw my pack down. So fast. My mind whirling.

Climb a tree.

Grizzlies can't climb trees. Nor can I! I have to. A tree with small, dry branches all the way up, right beside me. Get up! Steady and slow, shaking. Don't fall. Don't break the branches. They get smaller the higher I go. I have to stop. I feel very high. The branches are thin. Can't go higher. Stop climbing. Look down.

Trevor?

Scared. Snow falling. Soft. Absolute quiet.

I freeze. Terror fills me. It's right there. Eye contact. Small bear eyes in large brown furry head, mouth open. It's charging the tree. A scream, loud. It's moving so incredibly fast. It can't. Grizzlies can't climb trees! Everything so fast. It launches itself at the tree. Three huge lunges, branches flying and cracking. Twenty feet up. I'm frozen. Up. Brown ball of muscle and fury. So fast. Another scream. Cut off. Knocks the branch out from beneath my feet. Swats at my leg. My mind folds in.

On the ground. What's happening? Protect my head. Which way is up? Roll on my front. Play dead and it will go away. It will go away. Trevor and I are not supposed to die yet. Don't fight, make it worse. Be passive. Hold still. Tuck my chin in. I won't die. It will leave.

A grizzly is chewing on my head.

Crunch of my bones. Slurps. Heavy animal breathing. Thick animal smell. No pain. So fast. Jaws around my head. Not aggressive. Just chewing, like a dog with a bone. Go away! I'm holding still. Horror. I can't believe this. Scrape of teeth on skull. Which way is down, so I can put my face there? Slurping and crunching. Lolling my head in its jaws. Playing with my head.

I'm angry.

I don't want to die. Get lost, you stupid bear! My mother will be so sad. I don't want to be a tragic death. Everyone will cry. Thoughts flit through my head. Incredulous. Angry. Terrified. Helpless. The bear is doing so much damage. Crunch and scrape. Anger wants to explode from my head. I don't want to die.

One hand pinned under my head. Work fingers free. There's a huge, distorted black nose right there in front of me. My fingers reach to tweak it. Gently. A diversion. Don't want to make the bear more

angry. Big and black and sensitive, like a dog's nose. Divert it from chewing on me. A light twist. Blurred view. Don't look now. A woof! It's backed off. Am I dead?

Open an eye. Peek. It's still there, pacing in front of me. Walks ten feet, turns. Swinging its head back and forth. Ten feet and turns. Looking at me. Low woofs. Little eyes, looking right at me. Quick close my eye. Perfectly still.

Please God make it go away.

Please God make it go away.

Please God make it go away.

Over and over in my head. How long?

The bear is gone. Absolute silence. Am I dead? How can I tell? I'm breathing. I hear it. Alive. Now what? Very, very cold. Head cold. Head wet. Warm wet, turning cold. Ground hard. Hold still. Don't move. Where is it now? Play dead.

Trevor?

No pain. Head feels strange. Shivering. Now what? Need to get warm. I can't see. Grope for my pack. Right there. I want the sleeping bag. Fumble. Too weak. A jacket. My pile jacket. Lie and wait. Rest. Scared. What do I do? Panic rising. Stay calm and think. Those two hikers. They'll be coming. Wait.

Trevor?

In the absolute silence, I try to call him. Panic. I can't pronounce his name. Why? My mouth? Don't think. There's no answer. Silence and cold. All so fast. I drift.

How much time before distant voices sound? There they are. The other hikers. Getting louder. Sound of footsteps tramping on snow. Time distorted. Spinning. I am crying, trying to stand, to talk. Help us, let's go, crying, afraid, head floppy and strange, shoulder sore, can't see.

Loud voices. Terror in the voices. All of us. Trevor's voice too. Hard to understand him. I can't see. Shouting. We'll go for help. No! Take us with you. Away from here. Before it comes back. Get us out of here. On hands and knees, groping. I'm blind, but I'll crawl this trail if I have to. Can I stand? Have to walk. Have to get out of here. Shouting. I'm standing. Cold and wet and weak, joining in the yells.

"Someone take my arm. Take my arm! My arm!" Voices far away, then louder again. Someone takes a gentle hold of me. Mind fuzzes in and out. Let's go. Get out of here. Where is the bear?

I'm shaking. A sleeping bag is placed over my head gingerly. Encases my head. Don't think about it. Warmer. Wrapped around my shoulders. My shoulder hurts. Don't touch that arm, whoever you are. The other side. Let's get the hell out of here.

Head strange. Like Medusa, flopping. Stumbling, the ground rough. Three miles at least. Couldn't just lie there. The bear would come back and drag me into the bush and bury me, like they do. No way. Not me. Hard to walk. Weak. Want to slip away. Can't. Walk. The other hikers yelling. Scared. Yelling. To scare the bear away? Is it back? Oh God. No, it's not. Heart pounding. Someone helping me. He walks fast. Panic. Can't keep up. Fall. Can't get up. A hand under each armpit and heave. Where are my feet? Stand. Keep walking. Pain. They take turns. Trevor? Where are you? He is far ahead of me with the other guy, loud voices receding.

"Trevor!"

Don't leave me. Stay close. I can't see. I can't walk any faster. I can't walk any more. Are we close? It's uphill here. My heart threatens to stop. No breath left. Another yelling decision. I yell too. Make a stretcher from the sleeping bag. Try. Can't. Agony to lay my head down. World spins, spins. Piggyback. Coat around my head to calm the snakes that flop. Shoulder hurts. Uphill piggyback. Dead.

weight. Can't stand it. Put me down.

Slip away.

Voices. They want us to wait. They will go for help.

No! I can't. Don't want to die. We'll get there. We'll make it to the boat. Help me walk. Walk, legs! Trevor's voice is strange. Garbled. I saw him for one upside-down and bloody moment. Can't see now. Another mile, they call. Downhill. Stumbling. Hold tight to the arms holding me. Walk. Trevor's voice. We'll miss the boat. He's going to run ahead. He's gone.

No! Stay, Trev! Stay!

The yells are less frequent. My helpers breathe heavily on either side of me. We're just about there they say. I'm doing great, they say. Under-the-breath curses, mutterings. Frightened. Incredulous. Just keep walking. For the first time, I know where we are. A log across the trail to climb over. I remember this from yesterday. Not much farther. Relief washes through me. I am only partly here. Can't think. Head strange. Hurts. Slow and steady. Talk to myself. Keep walking. Cold. The wind colder now.

Wind off the lake? Are we there? Please.

Don't think. Just walk. Almost there. Another voice. Other footsteps.

"I'm Jim." Calm and steady. "I'm a paramedic."

Sink. The ground meets me. I'm gone. Safe. Help.

I'm moving. I hear water. Slapping. Splashes. Climb into a pitching boat. Don't anyone touch me. A snowstorm. So cold. See nothing. Black world. Night? Voices rise and fall around me. The world sways and swings. Wedge myself against a corner, the boat motor loud. No one touch me. Hurt. Wrapped in something. We'll get there. Safe now. Voices compete with the motor and the wind. Good. Bear can't get us now. Hold on. Don't slip away. Don't die. Boat slams against the waves, bucks and rises. Travelling fast. Wedged, hold perfectly still. Blackness. Hurt.

Some kind of bench. Where am I? Strong male voices with German accents. Gentle hands. Want to take a look. Blood pressure. A doctor. They'll take me to the local hospital, where Trevor already is. Mummified. Slow motion. Take care of me. Is Trevor okay? Yes, he'll be okay, they tell me.

Into a vehicle. Sometimes I'm here, and sometimes I'm not. Want me to put my head down. No! Don't touch me. Fight with strong arms. Want me to relax, put my head back. Can't! Let me hold it myself. Don't touch my head. I win. Feel the big body next to me. Shivering violently. How far? I want this to be over with. The ride is bumpy. Pain. Safe.

Emergency-room sounds. Is it over now? The accents and big men are gone. Footsteps. Sense of bright lights. Shivering fiercely. Don't let me fall off. Am I lying on a stretcher? My head feels strange. In pieces. A warm hand holding mine. Puff and hiss of blood-pressure machine. Starting an intravenous. A friendly voice. Each hand? IV morphine. Doctors introduce themselves. Contact. Calming. Relax.

"How's Trevor?" Lips strange.

"He's fine. He's right here. We're going to send you both to Calgary as soon as we get you fixed up."

Blackness bundled inside of me. Afraid again.

Going to cut your clothes off. Put big hot-water bottles all around you. Wrap your head with dressings. Warm you up. Morphine fuzz, in and out. Don't hurt. Just drift. Shaking. Don't let me fall on the floor. Warm around me. Cold inside. Head feels big. Pain fuzzing.

"Trevor's okay?"

"He's fine. He's right here."



Papers flipping, footsteps to and fro, carts, machines. Warmer now. Oxygen to breathe. Shivering. Drift. Safe here. No bear. I won't die. We won't die.

---

In the ambulance, I'm baking with the hot packs. Still shivering. They are so heavy. Can't move. It must be night by now. So dark. The attendant has a female voice. Take these things off me. She won't. Not yet.

"Is your head sore?" More morphine. Drift.

I have to pee. Try the bedpan. Can't. Laughing. Can't pee. So funny. Time twists around me. Patricia way inside me, laughing. Floating.

Calgary. We've slowed down. Oxygen on. Foothills Hospital. Good. They'll put in a few stitches, and we can go home.

Emergency. More sounds. More bright lights. Can't see. I'm scared. Noisy all around.

"How's Trevor? I have to pee."

"He's doing fine." The hand warm and reassuring, holding mine. A catheter and relief. It's so dark. Hurting. Not me.

"We're going to call your parents now."

A male voice. A flurry through my head. Call my parents? No! They will be so upset. Don't. Have to. A bear. Oh God, no. I want to scream.

Up. X-ray. Trevor's mother says hello. She's crying. Can't see her. Above my stretcher. Why is she crying? We'll be fine, Sarah. We're safe now. I smile under my bandaging. Reassure her. Drift.

Another male voice. "We're taking you to the operating room." Me? "We might have to do a tracheotomy."

I'm moving. On a stretcher. To the OR? In and out. No way! I don't want a trach. I can breathe. I can talk. But what's wrong with my face? Panic engulfs me. No no no. Drift away. On the stretcher.

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## The Hospital

### Eileen Van Tighem (mother)

*The morning is dreary. Overcast. It is a Sunday, and as we ready ourselves for Mass, I am restless. I feel that something is wrong, but I don't know what. At church I am agitated. My husband, John, is sharp with me. "Sit down!" he whispers. I can't. I go to the back of the church.*

*At home, we don't have long to wait. The phone rings. It's a doctor from the Foothills Hospital Emergency Department. Patricia and Trevor have been in some kind of accident. We call the Precious Blood Sisters. They will offer their prayers.*

*On the drive through yellow trees, up the busy Crowchild Trail, we question. Where? How? Why? Through the glass sliding doors, then into a small waiting room. The emergency doctor comes to see us.*

*"It was a grizzly bear," he says.*

*Oh God!*

*"You can't see her. She's going in for surgery."*

*Alone in the little waiting room, we are in shock. A young student nurse comes in and sits beside me, holding my hand.*

*Hours and hours and hours of waiting. Trevor's mom and family, John and I. Waiting and waiting for the surgeries to end. Trying to keep each other's spirits up. Someone tells us that Trevor had yelled across the emergency room, through his bandages, "Trish! How are you?" and that Patricia had yelled back, "I've had better days!" We laugh. A nurse reprimands us.*

*At last, Patricia is back. She is alive.*

*Her head is swollen grotesquely. There are sutures all over, tubes and a strong smell of hospital. When I look at John, I see the anguish in his face.*

*The first week I am not aware of anything but discomfort. There seems no place to put my swollen head, and my mind keeps carrying me back to where I don't want to go. The anaesthetic and the painkillers sedate me heavily. I feel alone, though the nurses are in and out all the time, monitoring vital signs, checking grafts, doing suture care, administering medications. My left shoulder and hip hurt; so do my head and my stomach. I hurt. I can't stay conscious. Trevor is being cared for next door, they tell me. Sometimes someone is holding my hand. Still, I feel so alone. I am blinded, my eyelids cut and swollen shut. Blackness is all around me and within.*

*I hear quiet crying. Someone's face is close to mine. Soft breathing. A whisper.*

*"I love you, Patricia. I love you both so much."*

*I want to smile. I want to speak. I can't. My mind floats. Bonnie. Trevor's sister. What is she doing here? Soothing words. I love you. Cradled in darkness, I fall down, down, down and away.*

## Jane Durnie (younger sister)

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I am twenty years old, the last of the ten of us living at home. I sleep late that Sunday morning. My Auntie Gerry, who is visiting us, comes down the hallway to my room. She startles me awake with cold hands on my face. "Jane Ellen? There's been an accident."

The words do not sink in at first. I dress, then speak with my father on the phone when he calls from the hospital. He asks me to give Auntie Gerry a scotch. Never having done this before, I pour her half a glass. The doorbell rings. Two huge policemen are there, asking for my mother and father. When I tell them my parents are already at the hospital, the policemen seem relieved. One of them lets out all his breath at once. "I can only offer you our extreme sympathy," he says. They turn back down the steps.

I call out to their retreating backs. "Wait. Where did the accident happen? Was the car totalled?" The men look at me in surprise.

"I'm sorry," says the taller one, "I thought you knew. It was a heart attack."

Fear is the biggest feeling. No one knows what to expect.

I am relieved when I first see Trish, because she is still herself. She is profoundly swollen, with many, many stitches, but she is still Patricia, and she will live.

The nurse speaks to me. Way above the steep black pit my bed lies in is her tiny head. They need an X-ray of my jaw, she says. They might have to wire it shut. Her voice is joined by several others. More tiny heads become hot-pink pixies dancing at the edge of the blackness.

I move my arms to check my position. I am lying crooked on the bed. I hear my mother's voice. When did she come? Oh, Mom, I wish you didn't have to know about this. They want to move me. Please don't make me move. Please. But I *am* being moved, onto a stretcher. I hear whimpering, then realize it's me.

Hands surround my head, placing a flat pillow under it. I'm propped on my right side. So tired. So sore. The stretcher moves, and I sense the brighter light of the hall. It hurts my eyes, although they are swollen shut. I hear whispering. We stop. Footsteps walk away, then return. A cloth is being placed on my head, very lightly. The stretcher moves again.

"What are you doing?" It hurts to talk. There's no answer. "What is the cloth for?" I know there's somebody there. It's hard to breathe under here.

"It's to cover your head."

To cover my head? Why?

"Take it off. Too stuffy."

They don't want people to see me. They are hiding my head. Oh God.

The cloth is removed. I try smiling at the voices. I can't see the staring anyway. My mind drifts away. What's wrong with my head?

The stretcher lurches in and out of the elevator. With each lurch, I hear someone cry out. The voices around me are gentle, patient. But I am afraid. They want me to sit, to stand up, to walk. The world whirls crazily. The X-ray has to be done with me sitting down, the voices explain. My head is enormous, and my neck can't hold it up. The voices talk softly, telling me the machine will rotate around me, will make noise. Hold still.

I hear something loud. I feel the machine brush my forehead, and I cringe. Please, don't hit my head. I'm in a panic, huddled and alone. One more time, the voices say. They fuzz over. I'm going to

fall. To slip. No! How do I get out of here? I want to go back to bed. Please. Help me.

~~“Just one more picture,” the X-ray voice says cheerfully. My nurse’s voice says no for me. No more X-rays today. I feel myself lifted onto the stretcher. The voices dull and disappear. The stretcher cuts through the black. I float.~~

My family is with me. There is always someone when I call out. My brothers come, six big men. I feel the large roughness of their hands gently touching mine. They take turns squatting beside the bed, faces close to my pain, their voices uncertain. “I love you.” “Hang in there, Trish.” “I’m praying for you.” Soft, whispered comfort wafting through the agony that is my enormous head, allowing me to drift and rest a moment.

### **Bernie Van Tighem (younger brother)**

*I get the call in Foremost, Alberta, where I work for a geophysical exploration company. It has been a short day, and it’s still light when I am summoned to the manager’s office. The message is “Phone home immediately, “with no reason given.*

*I think of many things while walking across the motel parking lot to the outside payphone. It can’t be anything, though. Nothing had ever happens to us, just to other people.*

*I am baffled when my parents’ part-time housekeeper answers the phone. She is noncommittal at first, saying only that none of my brothers are there to talk to me. I am confused. I can’t imagine why she is answering the phone, nor why any of my brothers would be at home. None of them live there anymore.*

*They are all at the hospital, she suddenly bursts out. I press her for a reason. As she responds, my throat closes up and my eyes fill with tears. “Your brother and sister were savagely mutilated by a grizzly bear,” she says. “Come home as fast as you can.”*

*The blood rushes past my ears, sounding like a train. I press for more information. Who was it who was injured? But all she knows is that someone was attacked while hiking in Waterton and is now in serious condition at the Foothills Hospital.*

*“Come home as fast as you can.”*

*I pack, and the company arranges for bus tickets to Calgary. Waiting for a connector in Medicine Hat, I decide this is taking too long. I find the nearest car-rental firm.*

*The trip to Calgary is not the safest I have ever made. A few times I pull over to phone for updates and only as I enter Calgary do I learn it is Trevor and Patricia who have been hurt.*

*I drive straight to Foothills. I try to get information at the reception desk about Trevor and Patricia’s whereabouts, with no success. The receptionist will not even confirm that they are at this hospital. Luckily, my sister Jane and her husband, Greg, have already made it inside, and they arrive to get me past the gauntlet. I find out later that several newspaper reporters have attempted to sneak in for photographs and interviews.*

*Upstairs there is confusion and anger as a reporter is escorted out of the intensive care ward. I look into Trevor’s room. His dim shape lies still, and his family is crowded around the bed. I join my family next to Patricia’s bandaged form.*

*Back at my parents’ house, my brothers Tom and Greg and I decide we’ll go to pick up Patricia and Trevor’s stuff from Waterton. There is no urgency for the trip, but we need something to do. Waiting at the hospital is excruciating.*

*By the time we arrive in Waterton, they have located and killed the bear responsible. The warden*

~~offers to let us see her. Being in the presence of the bear that has wreaked such damage on my family is chilling. I don't know if it makes me feel any better, though, seeing her dead. She was just an animal doing what animals do.~~

*The next time I see Patricia, she is awake and coherent. I am at a loss for words, not knowing how to talk to someone so messed up. My mom has cautioned us not to dwell on Patricia's appearance, because she is concerned about it. When she rolls over in bed, I get my first good look at the part of her face not covered by bandages. I am struck by her resemblance to me. With the swelling caused by her injuries, her face is broad and round like mine.*

*"Now I see why people say we look alike." Too late, I realize I should have said nothing. Patricia wants to know what I mean, asking over and over, "Why? What's the matter with my face? What do I look like? What's wrong?"*

*It takes Mom sometime to calm her down.*

I am Queen Tut. I sit high above the world in a glass-walled room. My sister Jane and my mother are visiting. I can't see them, but I know they are there. My mother tells me I have received more flowers and my mind paints an enormous bouquet of vibrant colours. I laugh, sitting regally high on my soft eiderdown bed. I like flowers. I have so many. My glass room is filled from top to bottom. Behind them are bright striped curtains, shielding me from the other glass rooms up and down the hospital corridor.

The resident will be in soon to start my IV, someone says. They tell me his name. Ha! I know all about him. No way. No IV. Not on me. I am the queen. I don't want another poke. My hands are so sore already.

He's here. I gaze down at him from my bed, his white lab coat in sharp contrast to all my flowers. He is very small. His voice is kind, reassuring. But I won't let him win me over. He's explaining why I have to have an IV, telling me where he will place it. No. His hands are warm and gentle. No! I don't want the IV there. Put it in up higher, I tell him. I know my spot is better. But he doesn't listen. The needle pokes and stings. He's missed the vein.

"Sorry."

I want to scream and punch and cry. Queen Tut begins to shrivel. The resident tries again, and this time he's got it. But I don't want the IV there. It hurts. I can't bend my wrist. And how can I reach my suction now?

Sadness smashes down on my head. I'm in the hospital. I was mauled by a bear, and Trevor, lying next door, was mauled too. I hurt everywhere.

Queen Tut is gone. I'm just me, Patricia, wrapped in black. The bright flowers, glass walls and striped curtains are gone. If there are flowers in my room, I can't see them. My mother tells me there are. I want so badly to see. To know where I am. To orient myself. To challenge the recurring images of the bear coming at me in the tree. The resident is gone. The IV fluid pours into my vein, and I grip with my free hand for the flow control, cursing residents who always leave IVs wide open.

The room is hot. The nurses have finished my evening suture care, placing antibiotic ointment along the length of every suture line: across my scalp, over and over; across my nose and forehead and cheek; under my chin. I hate it. They are gone now, and I am alone, swollen and hurting.

But there are hands on my head. I hit at the air. Go away! Leave me alone! But no one is there. My hands cut through the space above my head. I'm frightened.

---

"Hello?"

No answer. I'm sure I heard someone come in, but no one answers.

The hands are there again. I hit at them. Nothing but air. Panic.

"Who's there?"

No answer. I curl up, back to the side rail. Don't touch me! I pull the covers up to my chin. Everything's black. I want to tear my face off, find my old one beneath so that I can see again.

"Hello?" Tentatively this time. Still no answer. Am I going crazy? Those hands, picking at and rubbing my head. They aren't really there. Be calm, Patricia. It's just sensations. I cower in my bed.

Something is in my room, even if I can't see it. Somebody help me! It must be the middle of the night. Frantically, I fight with the bed covers to find my call bell. There are hands all over me.

Almost immediately, there's a voice. A kind, female voice. A nurse. Eagerly, I turn my head towards her.

Oh God!

It is black all around my pit. The kind voice is a giant bat, hairy, black and brown. It hovers above me, wings open wide. Huge, shiny, black eyes. I feel myself shrink down into the bed. Whimpering.

"What's the matter?" the voice wants to know. "Do you need something?"

I can't talk. I feel mouth-dry horror. It's coming down on me, coming down into my pit. It's the length of my bed. What can I do? Shivel into a ball. Away from that thing.

The voice is gone. The bat, too. I hear voices outside my room, in the hallway, then footsteps. I'm scared to raise my head. But I do. Help me.

I want to scream. There are two bats now, one on each side of my bed, hovering above me. Expressionless, huge, hairy faces. Teeth. Black. The voices are sympathetic, soft. A small, warm hand cradles mine.

"What's the matter? Can you tell me?"

I want to disappear into the security of that voice. I try to talk, but I'm crying. The bats hover above me, staring. Enormous, quivering bodies.

I'm burning up. There's sudden confusion. The room is full of voices, up and down. My brother Gordon. My mother. The resident. He's changing the analgesic order, he says.

The room is filled with wide wings and faces with pointy sharp teeth. Mom is real, I know. The bats aren't. I hear Mom's voice. I like it. I know that voice so well. Her small hands hold mine. I feel her wedding ring. The bats are there, but they are less threatening now.

The nurse is back with a needle. I don't want it. I'm agitated. Fearful. Hot. Yes, I hurt. Okay, if it won't make me wacky. If you're sure. I want to relax, leave the world behind.

Mom is here. And a pill, too. What is it? Never mind. I'll take it. And a fan. That's nice. Blow the heat away. Hold on to me, Mom, I don't know where I'm going. It's only early evening. I wish it were morning. I wish it were next month. Or last month.

The drugs carry me away. The bats are gone. I am just me again in my bed. Just me, sore and swollen and unable to see. It's black around and inside me. Quiet night, calm, cooler. Sleep.

**Kevin Van Tighem (older brother)**

When the phone rang, I jumped up and blundered into the kitchen in the dark. If it wasn't a wrong number, it had to be bad news, I thought.

---

At first, I didn't even know who it was. A man's voice, deep and choking, like he was drunk or something. Then I realized it was my father. He was trying to get words out past deep emotion. My heart almost seized up on me. Had something happened to my mother? I had never heard my father sound anything like that, and it shook me deeply. I tried to get him to talk normally.

"Something's happened," he said finally. There was a pause, then he started again. "There's been an accident. Your sister..."

I wondered which sister. I had an image of a car accident. "There's been a bear attack," he said, his voice stronger this time. "Patricia and Trevor are hurt. I'm at the Foothills Hospital."

There was a kind of relief at/least in knowing who and what. Now I could begin to wrap my mind around it. I asked Dad if I should come to Calgary. He said to wait until morning, as they were still in surgery. The injuries didn't appear to be life-threatening. I said something clumsy and inadequate about taking care of himself. I was frustrated when I hung up that I had failed so miserably at showing my feelings for him or for Patricia. It was one of those moments when I realize how much I withdraw emotionally when the people I love most are hurt or in need.

Lying awake in bed, I snuggled up to my wife's back, resting my hand on her pregnant belly in the darkness. I wondered if I should get into the car and drive to Calgary right away. I wished I had asked more questions. I tried to imagine how the attack could have happened.

Gail and I were so caught up in our own adventure just then — our first home, a baby on the way, my new job. I had just finished my last year of working on park wildlife inventories. I had been based in Glacier National Park, a part of British Columbia noted for grizzlies and black bears, dense vegetation and rugged terrain. I had started exploring the high country a decade earlier with an almost blasé attitude towards bears, but this past summer in Glacier had worn me down with one encounter after another.

In June, I had blundered into a large, dominant black bear in dense young aspen forest. The bear refused to retreat and, when I shouted loudly, lowered its head and laid back its ears, glaring at me. Legs rubbery, I was the one to retreat. Later that month, I encountered three grizzly bears in as many days, including one that sneaked within twenty yards to investigate the noises I was making. It was as startled as I was once we saw each other. I went up a tree, and the bear fled.

By the end of the field season, my nerves were badly frayed. In August, I had one habitat type left to sample for small mammals, an alder-choked avalanche path. Standing at the edge of the Trans-Canada Highway with a bag of peanut-butter—smeared Museum Special traps in a bag on my shoulder, I looked down into the green jungle and told myself that Parks Canada would just have to live without knowing what rodents ruled its tangles. I couldn't bring myself to face the near certainty of close-range bear encounters in such prime habitat. I went home, feeling off balance and wondering why my long fascination with bears was being overpowered by a sense of vulnerability.

The morning after getting Dad's call, Gail and I drove to Calgary. At my parents' house, Mom was tightlipped and strong, controlling her emotions in order to keep functioning. Soon Greg arrived. He is big and burly, with one of the biggest hearts of anyone I know. He walked in, went straight to Mom and folded her in a hug. She broke down and wept.

At the hospital, several people were waiting in Patricia's ward: Dad, our Auntie Gerry, my sister Margaret, and other siblings. Gail had to leave right away; the medicated stuffiness of the room reacted with her pregnancy to turn her stomach. Patricia spoke to us, and Gail said later that if it hadn't been for the voice, she would never have recognized the person in the bed.

I was shocked to my core at the sight of Patricia. I couldn't see specific injuries, but her face was

*swollen up like a soccer ball. She was groggy from drugs but was still able to answer questions. I didn't stay long. I didn't know what to say.*

---

What holds me together? I don't know. I am a bundle of soreness and stiffness, a beaten person. I swim in the blackness as someone helps me up. Fatigue hits me like a wind. Hands have a firm grasp on my arms. They are moving me to a chair, getting me off the sore right side that I've lain on for almost two weeks. Somewhere inside I am. This body encases me, but I am not it.

I listen with amazement to the mournful sounds coming from my mouth. Encouraging female voices blanket me. The chair is upholstered, they say. It will just be for a minute, while they change the bed and put a special mattress on it. My right side won't hurt so much then. I want to get up. I want to get moving. I want to get better. The inside me encourages but is amazed at the effort, the fatigue, the pain of the body.

Ease into the chair. Mouth dry, mind dull. Breathing fast. Head bulbous on frail neck sways.

I mumble words through thick lips. "Can I see Trevor?" There's a soft noise nearby, a hand on my arm.

"What was that, Trish? What did you say?"

"Can I visit Trevor? I want to."

My outside aches and stings with sitting. But sitting is halfway there. Maybe I could get up to be with him. I feel my mind and body beginning to come together, awakening to place and person and want. Gripping the arms of the chair, I speak to the kind voice beside me.

"Please? In a wheelchair. Just to say hi." Somewhere behind the pain and the blackness is enormous yearning.

"I'll run and get one."

Somewhere at the back of everything, in a small voice muffled by confusion, is a faint cry.

Trevor. I want my Trevor.

He was across the room from me at the party. Sitting close beside him, laughing up at him, was a blonde. A blown-dry, stylishly dressed and beautiful blonde. They had arrived together. He'd said hello to me and then gone to get her a plate of food. I'd come to this party because I knew he'd be here. I was drawn to his tall stature and calm mannerisms and precise, direct speech. Who was the blonde? I'd heard he had just broken up with his girlfriend. Did he have another one already? Why did he keep looking at me? Almost as though he were flirting?

A yellow balloon drifted across talking heads into my lap. A dark-bearded face peered around the bodies and motioned me to hit the balloon back. A pink balloon came across, and then a green one. Amid the chatter and heat of party bodies, we rallied balloons and grinned foolishly at each other. We finally met on the stairs, face to face. People were pushing past us to get to the washroom.

"Hi." Suddenly we were shy. Trevor was talking. He told me his family was at the party, too. The blonde was his fourteen-year-old sister. I laughed. Come, he invited me, and I'll introduce you. Did I like this party? No, I said, and yes. I laughed again. How could I tell him that I only came because I knew he would be there? Would I like to go somewhere else? Yes. Let's go somewhere else.

We left the party and drifted out into the cool fall night. We pooled the dollar-fifty we had between us to get a Cinzano at a nearby lounge, then sat in his rebuilt old sports car in front of my parents'



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