

It was a seven-hour drive from our home in the San Francisco Bay Area to Independence, California. We stopped in town so we could get “take-out” for eating when we reached the campground. Neither of us had eaten Kentucky Fried Chicken for years, but it seemed important to have a last taste of civilization.

At Onion Valley’s trailhead, we set up camp among the quaking aspen. Ralph walked down bright and early the next morning to the ranger’s outpost because there was a quota system in place; it was first come, first served for unreserved permits. We were lucky in two respects: we were setting out for Whitney on a Sunday whereas the “kids” who came up to do Whitney from Whitney Portal (the east side approach) on the weekend were already enroute. Secondly, we were starting north of Whitney and would reach the mountain from the west side several days later. Still and all, if getting a permit had been up to me (not a morning person), it’s hard to know if we would have gotten the requisite pass.

We fixed our breakfast, locked the car, and shouldered our packs. And all I could think was, “Everything around me is higher than I am now.” The trail went up, up, and up some more, headed towards Kearsarge Pass. It was August and the weather was good — clear, with neither rain nor wind.

We found a comfortable enough campsite. We were above timberline, which in this case meant that there were only a few trees, none much taller than we were. Certainly there was no place to hang our food that wasn’t a joke to any self-respecting bear. But Ralph, who grew up in national parks because his father had been a ranger in Yellowstone and Sequoia, didn’t see the lack of trees as a problem. “Bears don’t come above timberline,” he assured me. We made camp, ate dinner, leaned our packs against a nearby granite slab, and went to bed.

It was the middle of the night when we were awakened by the sounds of something large moving just outside our shelter. We heard the sounds of a pack being dragged away. We didn't have to actually see it to know that a bear was out there. We tried to spot it, but the amount that we could see with our penlights was minimal.

My pack was missing. Ralph's pack was now leaning against a nearby log; in disarray. Obviously we had interrupted the bear taking it. The rustling sounds continued. We banged cups against pans.

It was quiet, but we knew the bear was nearby. I lay in my sleeping bag terrified — my body rigid and quivering with tension, my jaw clenched so hard I could hardly speak. Ralph, after trying to calm me by telling me (once again, I might add) that black bears weren't going to hurt us, that it was only our food the bear was after, settled back into his bag.

Occasional scrapping and thumping sounds reminded us that our buddy was not far away. Gradually the sounds of the bear diminished and all was still. We looked around. We could see that my pack was some 20 feet away, but we knew that retrieving it in the darkness, with the bear in the vicinity, was not a wise choice. Ralph announced that we would survey the damage in the morning, rolled over, and went to sleep.

For what seemed like hours, I couldn't go to sleep. I heard the bear return and then its rustling and scratching sounds off and on throughout the night. When daylight came, we inspected my torn pack and inventoried our remaining food. Gone was the Chunky chocolate bar and the salami and cheese, which I had thought would be great treats for exhausted hikers at the end of the first challenging days. Tooth and nail marks indicated where the bear had ripped into the packets of dry milk, cereal, and soup mix.