

PAYDAY

Ranger Austermann did not change out of his uniform when he left work early that Wednesday morning in February. Gene had a steady job as a U.S. Park Ranger. He was the regular night watchman: midnight to 7:30 a.m. As usual, he put his sidearm, and his holster, along with his hat, in his locker at headquarters. He quietly filled out his entry in the log book, reported to his replacement, Ranger Betsy Blair and wished her an uneventful, and good morning.

Blair had come a bit early. She might have relieved him, but it was too cold and damp outside to be so magnanimous. So Betsy had not bothered to tell Austermann she had arrived early, a courtesy she might normally extend. Instead, Ranger Blair prepared herself a cup of hot cocoa and mixed it with the remaining java that was still sitting scorched, on the hot plate of the Mr. Coffee in the rangers' mess. Sipping her hot drink held her for the twenty minutes or before Gene arrived at the ranger station to check out.

For someone in security trained to use a gun, to deal with medical emergencies, to handle a car in dangerous on and off road chases, his was the easiest of jobs. Five nights a week in the not-so back country of West Virginia, Gene patrolled the deserted streets of the historical town of Harpers Ferry in a converted electric golf cart. The worst that ever happened had occurred early that Wednesday morning.

The moon was continually obscured by heavy cloud cover. The air never got cold enough to reduce the bite of the moisture it held captive. A nasty and consistent wind was blowing from the north, bringing its chill from the frozen ridges across the Potomac. And so it was a particularly dark and inhospitable night. Not long into his watch, Gene was tired, cold, hungry and thinking only of food, home and sleep. It gave him solace knowing that he had one more Payday, his favorite candy bar, in his pocket.

The two weak headlights on Gene's little vehicle gave him a dim view of Shenandoah Street and the low street side porches of the historic houses on his left which included the John Brown Museum. He passed the old structures, heading first toward John Brown's Fort and then turned the corner up Potomac Street toward the train station.

But right in the middle of this historic street Gene was startled to find what appeared to be a large, wild beast on the icy road. The feeble and moving headlights projected the animal's shadow in a long, menacing silhouette on the old brick wall of the White Hall Tavern. The enlarged shadow revealed the menace to be a bear. From Ranger Austermann's vantage point, a low seat in a tiny golf cart with but a few inches of ground clearance, the bear, now magnified in its shadow, appeared enormous. It appeared to tower above Gene, perhaps with shoulders that rose above his own. Of course, in this dimly lit and frightening corner of the park, it was hard to know where reality stopped and imagination began. Unusually large perhaps, but far more certain, and far more important, it was also unusually awake. This bear was clearly not taking his expected winter's nap.

And it was the confluence of these facts that focused Gene's attention on the problems inherent in his current confrontation.

How was he to proceed?

Could he return to the ranger shack without the bear following him?

What would be the consequences of harming the bear?

Too much to contemplate, Gene stopped the vehicle for a moment of reflection. But unfortunately this action slowed the cart's generator – the headlights dimmed. In the dimmed light, Gene could see the bear was standing its ground, staring directly at the cart. It not only wasn't fearful but it now seemed genuinely curious about the small, and suddenly very quiet electric vehicle.

Gene wanted the bear to move along, away from the cart. And so he did what one would expect of a driver faced with a moveable obstacle. After all, Gene learned from experience. To indicate his displeasure, his impatience, he did what all urban drivers would do: he honked. Of course the sound emitted from the little cart was not quite the same as one might hear from an eighteen wheeler.

Indeed, Gene himself had not properly anticipated the sound. Nor did the bear. It cocked its head, and ambled a few steps closer to the golf cart. He, if it was a he, seemed positively attracted by the high pitched, toy-like, 'BEEP BEEP' of the horn.

The situation was marked by a worrisome downward progression. Gene's anxiety level was increasing. At first, he had only been startled, then concerned. But now as the bear approached, Austermann was frightened. Of course, he had training. As a ranger he knew one shouldn't run from a bear. He certainly was not going to run. He was staying with the cart. But even if he turned the cart around and floored it, the bear could easily out run the little thing. He also knew that a park ranger in Harper's Ferry who shot a black bear would have a tough time keeping his job.

Suddenly inspired, Gene did the next best thing. With a prayer in his heart, he threw the bear his last Payday candy bar toward the brick wall of the White Hall Tavern. As soon as the candy left his hand, the Ranger suddenly recalled the many lessons he had heard explaining why one should "never feed the wildlife." But apparently ignorant of these prohibitions, the bear accepted Gene's offering. The big bear, for it still seemed enormous to Gene, turned toward the sound of the fallen candy bar. Once it picked up the scent of caramel it was totally distracted by the potential feast. As planned, this left Gene free to turn and hightail it (at about 15 mph) toward the ranger station building. Arriving there ahead of the bear, he locked himself inside.

Within minutes of the latch being thrown, the bear followed the scent of his provider in full expectation of a course to follow the appetizer that had been given and also arrived at the small building. Perhaps had the bear quickly departed, Austermann's internal world could have settled down to a new calm. He might even have taken a work break - a snooze. But the mighty beast hung around waiting for another handout. Perhaps on a sugar high but certainly eager to get another candy bar, the bear banged and pushed on the sides of the small building. Gene's environment was insufficiently stable for a nap.

Eventually however, the bear left, frustrated and unsatisfied.

So it came about that in the very early hours of the morning, finding the bear departed, Gene wandered outside. He did his last night patrol of the park. When he arrived back at headquarters he was happy to see Ranger Blair finishing her hot cocoa and ready to relieve him. When she asked if there were any notable events on his watch he didn't identify any. Knowing that one ought not to feed the bears, Ranger Austermann wrote no entry in the event log.

Gene was looking forward to getting back to his cozy double-wide in Sharpsburg, the town he called home. He'd make himself an omelet. And, if he could catch an early sleep, he could even get a start on his taxes, and then maybe even take in a movie - after all, Gene had Thursdays off.

Walking to his Jeep he didn't look forward to scraping the thin film of ice from its windshield. But while scraping it off, he reminded himself to buy a fresh Payday when he stopped for gas on the way home. He then exited the Park's headquarters and took a sip of still-warm chicken soup from the thermos which he had absent-mindedly left in his car.

The next night Gene had off, and Murphy, a part timer took his place. Murphy, like Gene, made his rounds in the cart. Turning the same corner, at about the same time as Gene had done the night before, Murphy found what we can only presume was the same large, non-hibernating bear. The bear was expecting another treat, and approached the cart in a far more aggressive mood. Alarmed, Murphy, a part timer with less training, was unfortunately not in the habit of carrying a candy bar.

The shooting of the bear was in all the local newspapers and even on a PETA website. Murphy lost his job. Unfortunate. Unlucky. And how unfair that everyone knew "nothing of note ever happened" in Harper's Ferry during Ranger Austermann's midnight watch.

Wednesday, May 28, 2014