

A Fine Vacation

By Dave Frazier

The early morning air was cold and it made him shiver. A few inches of new snow and more up high covered the ground in the high Montana Rockies near West Yellowstone. Goosebumps rose up on Sam's arms and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He heard a howl from a coyote that was far from his view.

Soon some wolves answered the coyote chorus with yelps and howls of their own. The canine music echoed continually throughout the valley.

The sunrise was orange at first, then broke out into a cloudless blue-jay sky as it rose up from the east and gained brilliance. You could almost hear that "CRACK" at dawn. This was to be his ultimate solo elk hunting vacation that he planned to make for so many years. As the outfitter drove away, he was finally alone at his drop camp. Sam became surrounded by the purest wildest nature that he knew of. Heaven couldn't be any better than this.

As the sun came up in the eastern sky, it's first rays of light felt warm upon his gray bearded face. Sam's wrinkles and furrows were etched deep into his sun tanned face from thirty years of hard labor and swing shift work. His face steamed in the cold morning air. Small icicles formed in his grayed mustache above his upper lip as he breathed the frigid mountain air in and out. Sam's long coarse gray hair squirted out from under his black woolen stocking cap every which way. He let his hair grow out for several months, especially for this trip. He wanted to look just like "Grizzly Adams," when he got to Montana, and he did. Although he was an avid outdoorsman, he was not anything like "Grizzly Adams". "McGuyver" would have suited him better, he could fix just about anything and could make useful tools out of odds and ends.

The snow crunched under the pressure of his boots as he trod forward carefully toward his ultimate destination. The rifle and backpack that he carried felt much heavier than it had the day before. His eyes scanned the new dawn horizon for a good spot to set up a perch for the day's hunt. The air was fresh and clean, unlike the smog and pollution that he inhaled daily at the steel mill back in Indiana. I worked in that mill with him.

I knew him very well. Sam was one of my best friends.

At home, Sam was surrounded by a bunch of grandkids who loved him. His ex-wife and two sons could have cared less about him. This was his chance to finally be alone in nature and do what he loved, observe wildlife and hunt for late fall trophy elk.

He soon realized every tree looked the same and that he was hopelessly lost. The drop camp was nowhere in sight. A drop camp is when an outfitter sets up a fully stocked camp site on hunting grounds for you. It's for a hunter who is comfortable being on his own. Sam was beginning to wonder if this hunting trip was such a smart idea. All the years of planning didn't prepared him for the total lonesomeness he was experiencing.

Sam was hungry, so he decided to sit up in a tree and try to bag a deer or something smaller. Something that could sustain him for a few days or more in the cold Montana weather. Finally he spied the perfect tree for a hunting perch. He climbed into its branches, the rifle's strap catching on the smaller branches on his way up. He took a seat straddling a large dry branch with his back braced against the tree to help absorb the rifle's recoil and settled in. One hour passed, then two before he saw a wonderful ten point buck deer in a clearing about two hundred yards away. He raised the rifle to his shoulder slowly and aimed through the scope carefully. He was breathing slowly, steady, and calmly. "Don't rush the shot", he said to himself.

"Now hold the next breath and squeeze the trigger slowly". As he held that last breath, the dry tree limb collapsed beneath him and sent him plunging to the snow covered earth below. The rifle discharged and the deer scampered off over the ridge, his white tail waving in the wind like the white flag signaling the last lap of the Indianapolis 500. "Damn, no deer meat for dinner tonight", he said in a cursing manner, brushing himself off. On top of that he wasted a round of precious ammunition.

Sam was getting cold. He started to gather dead dry branches so he could build a warm fire. In a small backpack he carried two boxes of waterproof matches, a water testing kit, a small banged up well used cooking pot to boil water in, and a partial box of thirty-aught six ammo. He also carried a leather strapped thirty-aught six Remington rifle with a scope mounted thin ice that covered a nearby crystal clear mountain stream.

The only real danger that there might be was, "Ole Grizz," a giant lumbering grizzly bear. Ole Grizz was a local legend, just like "Bigfoot" on it. A bone handled, ten inch long razor sharp hunting knife was sheathed and attached to his belt.

He thought that he might try to club a rabbit after he warmed up next to the fire that he carefully built. If he failed to bag a rabbit, there were always fish to be taken from under the thin ice that covered a nearby crystal clear mountain stream.

The only real danger that there might be was, "Ole Grizz," a giant lumbering grizzly bear. Ole Grizz was a local legend, just like "Bigfoot". However, this grizzly was for real and not some folk lore myth. The

outfitter had told him stories about the giant grizzly bear as they drove to the drop camp. The outfitter warned Sam to steer clear of that mean old grizzly.

If Ole Grizz chased him off of his catch, the bear would get an easy meal. Sam wasn't going to waste any of his bullets on this tough old grizzly at the risk of being attacked. He would surrender his catch and clamber up the nearest tree out of the grizzly's reach. "Well, maybe I'll be lucky and get me a furry little rabbit for dinner tonight", he mumbled, as the reality of going hungry ran through his mind. In order to conserve ammunition, he stumbled around looking for a branch large enough to serve as a club. Here he was, lost in the middle of nowhere, looking for a club and a furry little rabbit that he could invite to dinner. An elk hunting trip in Montana turned into a fight for survival.

Meanwhile, Ole Grizz was patrolling his turf, sniffing at the tree trunks, bushes, and the ground trying to identify his strong urine markings. He used urine to map out his turf. Other bears would smell his urine scent and steer clear. He wasn't the type of grizzly bear that would pass up an easy meal either.

This grizzly would never back off from a vicious fight. Ole Grizz had a golden coat of coarse brown fur with a large patch of white hair that ran between his massive shoulders that showed his age. He had numerous small round scars on his massive body, as well as claw marks from a number of great battles with other large bears. All the scars were hidden under his coarse fur coat. The round scars came from bullet wounds inflicted by many two legged hunters. When he stood on his rear legs he towered at seven feet. He weighed in at over eight hundred pounds and could run close to forty miles per hour in a burst. A human could never outrun him. Neither could deer, a prime food source for this grizzly. Ole Grizz had picked up the scent of an intruder, a scent that he had smelled before. One that he knew meant danger for him. Suddenly, a deer darted out of the thick pine forest just a few feet in front of him. This deer was the same deer that Sam scared off over the ridge with his errant shot.

The deer ran away from Sam for about a mile.

The bear gave chase, this deer would become a meal. Ole Grizz gave pursuit and brought the deer down after one swift swipe of his huge paw. His claws were eight inches long and just like sharp razor blades. Blood stained the new fallen, pure white snow crimson after the first swipe of his giant paw. Ole Grizz didn't need to give the deer a second swipe. The deer collapsed in a heap upon the snowy white earth. Ole Grizz buried his face deep into the deer's side, and with one bite of his vast orifice, tore out a large portion of meat in the right half of the deer's body. The deer's internal organs were exposed, again he buried his face deep into the internal organs of the deer and ate. Steam rose out of the deer's warm mangled carcass into the cold mountain air. Ole Grizz's mouth, face and front paws were covered in the

deer's blood. The bear ate until he was full and then lumbered away a few yards and laid down on some fallen pine tree boughs that made a fine, soft, sweet smelling bed. He needed to sleep because he was old and he tired easily. He only hunted for food when he was hungry and slept more now these days. If he awoke again it would be to feed on berries and pine nuts or to eat on the carcass of the downed deer. It was fall and he needed to gain weight for the winter hibernation.

An experienced elk hunter in the Montana Rockies knows to steer clear of a bear's fresh kill. Sam wasn't one of these hunters. The biggest game he had hunted was deer, back home in Indiana where there are no bears. He was very hungry.

While searching for a suitable club for his rabbit safari, he came upon the fresh deer carcass that belonged to Ole Grizz.

Quickly, he pulled his razor sharp hunting knife out of its sheath and began to carve off large chunks of meat from the freshly killed deer carcass. "Wow, I'll eat well enough tonight and tomorrow anyway", he commented as if someone was listening to him. Sam continued to cut the deer meat and stuff it into the back of his hunting vest. The hunting vest that he wore had a long plastic lined game pocket built into its lower back. That somewhat prevented blood from soaking through the warm vest. Sam felt like he weighed a ton, between the rifle, the ammo, and lots of fresh deer meat he was weighed down. He felt that he could hardly move.

He started hiking back to where he had lit the fire.

Suddenly, there was a long low growl. The type that makes your hair stand on end. Ole Grizz was on the move. Sam found that his load felt lighter, because of the hair raising growl he heard.

He found the nearest sturdy high tree and climbed into it with great speed. The strap on the rifle snagged one of the smaller limbs of the tree. The rifle dropped down to the cold snowy ground below with a thud. He had nothing for protection from the grizzly except that razor sharp hunting knife. Sam was barely out of the angry bear's reach, clinging to the tree so hard that his fingers bled. The bear bounced and shook the tree violently. He roaring with his mouth gaped wide, his face, teeth, and tongue were still gleaming red with deer blood. His breath stank when a thunderous roar came out of his vast mouth.

Sam was terrified beyond belief. Sam clung to that pine tree for dear life. Digging his fingers into the bark like they were cat's claws. He drove his fingers into the tree so hard that he almost broke his fingernails off. He didn't know if the substantial pine that he clambered up would stand up to the bear's never ending attacks. The tree bounced and swayed from side to side, like some perverted carnival ride. He feared that the tree would be uprooted, fall, and leave him at the bear's mercy.

Then Ole Grizz saw Sam's rifle lying on the ground. The grizzly turned his attention toward the rifle. First he sniffed at it, snorting like a great giant brown pig, let out a great loud roar, then attacked it. He took the rifle in his massive mouth and shook his head violently from side to side. The rifle broke apart into a thousand pieces, scattering the various mechanical parts everywhere. Sam was unarmed, except for the bone handled knife in a sheath attached to his belt. A grizzly generally won't climb a tree, especially when he's old, so Sam prayed that he would be safe on his perch. The bear made a couple more bounces against the sturdy pine tree and then wandered away, looking back over his shoulder with a defeated look in his eye. He failed to shake Sam out of the sturdy tree.

Just as the bear got away to a safe distance, Sam fell gracefully to the ground from his lofty perch. Once again, the tree limb that he perched on broke and sent him crashing down to the cold snowy earth below. Sam had a little problem with staying up in trees, you see. Sam was counting his blessing that the limb hadn't broken off any sooner. Otherwise, he would have been turned into a big steaming pile of bear crap by the next day. He still had some deer meat and a fire to cook it on.

At least that was a good thing. The bad news was that the grizzly totally destroyed his only means of protection and getting food easily. "Dammit", he cursed as he tore into the cooked deer meat with his teeth. Sam stood up and took the box of rifle ammo out of his backpack. He chucked it into the thick forest as far as he could. "Fat lot of good that stuff will do me now!" he yelled, "I don't got no damn rifle no more!" he added, as if anyone could hear him cursing and swearing. As Sam sat next to the roaring fire, he recalled how Ole Grizz shook that massive pine tree and dismantled his rifle. Then Sam shook, as a cold shudder ran through his entire body. "It's just the cold" he thought, knowing full well that it was pure fear that made him shake and shiver. The sun turned the western horizon a beautiful soft shade of orange, as it got lower in the cloudless sky.

Sundown turns to night quickly to the Rockies, the purple hazed, snowcapped mountains provide shade to the valley below.

Sam started to gather up as many dry pine boughs as he could carry to make fire from as the cold mountain evening shade moved closer toward him. He also made a soft fragrant mattress from green pine boughs. Day soon turned into night.

As he stirred the roaring fire with a long branch, he tried to put the events of the day into the back of his mind. He couldn't help thinking of all the things that had happened to him on this day and once again he felt terrified. He stored the deer meat filled hunting vest high up a tree. Hopefully, that would prevent any other grizzlies from paying him a visit during the night.

Fire is a very important thing when you are in the wild, it keeps most animals away. You don't want lions licking at your toes during the night or mean old grizzly bears either. The object is not to let the fire burn itself out while you are asleep. Sam had to wake up every couple of hours and add some of the dry pine boughs into the flames to keep it stoked.

As the fire started to die down, Sam awakened. He felt chilled and knew that the fire needed more fuel. When he threw the dead limbs onto the dying inferno, fire-fly sparks drifted into the star filled night sky. The owls hooted their songs and woodpeckers were tapping at trees searching for small insects.

The brightly colored, dry fall leaves rustled against one another in a gentle breeze. They sounded like sandpaper running lightly across a rough wooden board. The nearby stream danced and babbled as the icy cold water rushed over the rounded, water worn granite rocks. Again echos of coyote and wolf yelps and whines could be heard in off in the distance. It sounded like a wildlife opera, conducted by God Himself. Sam was just hoping that he didn't wake up to an added rhythmic rattle of a snake seeking warmth next to the fire. As he heard that they do. He put all those fears aside as the sweet fragrance of pines and cedars filled his hairy nostrils. Although he was alone, he still enjoyed all of the sounds and smells in nature that surrounded him. He drifted off into a deep sleep, feeling warm and comfy next to his big roaring fire.

When he awoke again later to add more fuel to the fire, his thoughts where turning toward finding a way back to his drop camp. Come morning, Sam would climb the ridge to survey the landscape. He almost knew the way that the Indian outfitter had driven him to his drop camp on a private hunting preserve. All he needed to do was to head north and he might find the camp.

"What the hell, it should only take a month or six to get back there using foot-power", he wryly said to himself. The only thing that stood in his way were the Rocky Mountains with six feet of snow in spots, a couple of icy cold mountain streams, and one pissed off mean ole grizzly bear. He knew that he couldn't hike out of this place and that he would be here for some time. He would have to wait to be rescued. Meantime, he would need to use all of his outdoor skills to stay alive.

He kicked the snow around in disgust, then he looked down.

There he saw a small mound of black glassy stones frozen together amid the snow and earth. Sam recognized these rocks.

They were obsidian. These rocks were used by the Indians to make crude arrowheads and spears. They used granite stones to chip away at the obsidian and form it into crude tools used for hunting and protection. Obsidian in Montana was formed by ancient volcanoes eons ago when the earth was very young. Once the obsidian is chipped, it becomes razor sharp. There were plenty of branches and young

trees around, so he could make a bow, some arrows, and possibly a spear. Sam lost his rifle, but now he'd have something else for his protection and for hunting game. Constructing these items would require some effort on his part, but he knew that it would be worth it.

Sam took some of the discarded deer hide and cut into very thin narrow strips. He found some thin straight twigs from a nearby tree. He found a flat piece of granite for an anvil, and a smooth oblong stone for a hammer. Then he fashioned some arrowheads from the obsidian by striking it as it laid on the flat granite anvil. He carefully split both ends of the thin twigs, then he inserted a arrowhead into one of the ends and wound some of the thin deer hide strips around the arrowhead to hold it securely in place. The other end of the arrow would hold some discarded feathers that came from a small wren's nest. The feathers would ensure the arrows had a stable flight path. Sam continued making arrowheads and arrows, carefully binding them with the deer hide strips. His next chore was to make a few spears. He had several larger pieces of obsidian left which he would use for the sharp end of the spears. He chipped at the obsidian carefully, but managed to fashion only two spears that were suitable. He took some of the longer deer hide strips that he had cut and braided them into a strong bowstring. Then he found a suitable sapling, one that was very supple. Cutting it down, he attached the newly fashioned bowstring to each end of it forming the bow. He also constructed a crude hut out of pine boughs and branches to keep the fall snows off of him as he slept.

Ole Grizz worn out after bouncing on that tree, needed more food. He went back to the deer kill and he ate from it.

The bear soon regained some of his strength, and went back to his pine bough nest to rest once more. Ole Grizz was still upset that some other creature had invaded his hunting grounds and fed upon his deer. Still he had to sleep, he was old and totally exhausted. It was time for him to rest again.

Sam was truly on his own here. He had been divorced for only a few years. The kids were married, grown and gone. He and his ex had nothing left in common. "Maybe one of my sons will be worried", he said. Then he remembered how his own sons felt about their Dad. A feeling of sadness overcame him. They hadn't shared anything in common with them for many years. Things got a little better when his grandkids were born, but not much. His sons didn't really care about their Old Man that much. A teardrop fell from the corner of Sam's bloodshot eye to the icy ground below. "Hell, nobody back home is gonna miss my dirty old ass anyways", Sam muttered. "Well, maybe them grandkids would." he said sadly. "Them kids might cry so's much that their Daddy's would take pity on me" grinning a bit through his tears as he said it. "Maybe then they'd form's a search party for the Old

Man”, he thought. He knew that no one expected him to come home for a week. He had to use all of his skills to survive in the wilderness. For the sake of his grandkids.

Ole Grizz fathered kids and grandkids too. Many cubs were sired from his loins. His harems numbered in double digits at times. He would take on all other grizzly males who tried to take the harem from him. He often fought off his own offspring when they became of breeding age. Ole Grizz always came out with a few more scars on his body, but he always kept his harem.

The old grizzly felt a little older now, and moved a bit slower. His bones and joints ached and his muscles hurt from all of his terrible battles. He expected to be killed and eaten by another grizzly while in a battle over a carcass. He knew that the young bears were getting a little too strong for him to drive off anymore. He might have to battle one of them to the death. He didn't want to drop over dead from old age and become carrion for some vulture. He would rather be killed and eaten by his own kind after a great battle. He could even be killed by one of his offspring, it didn't really matter to him. He did have some pride left.

In the meantime, Sam took his newly made bow and arrows on a small game hunt to test them out. He was looking for a rabbit or a squirrel. Thirty yards away from him, he saw a rabbit foraging in around in the light snow for some tender grasses and roots,. Sam brought his bow up to the ready position and loaded an arrow. He drew back on the hefty bowstring slowly, aimed, and let the slender arrow fly. The arrow pierced the rabbit's body cleanly. It died instantly with no pain. Quickly Sam retrieved the rabbit. He took his knife and skinned the fur off the meat, discarded the entrails and prepared the rabbit for his dinner.

“Guess I made me a pretty fine bow and arrow setup here” Sam said. “I'm gonna have me another fine meal” said he. “Maybe we'll go bow fishin' tomorrow” he laughed.

Sam thought that his best course of action was to etch massive letters into the thin fall snow cover in a nearby clearing spelling out the word “H-E-L-P”. Then he would build a large, smoky, signal fire. Just in case they started looking for him. Sam felt that if he sat tight at his base camp, it would be easier for a search team to find him.

Ole Grizz started to stir, he woke from his sleep and was feeling hungry again. As he went to dine on the remainder of the deer carcass he heard a floundering and thrashing in the thick dense woods. Suddenly, a strong young grizzly bear came charging toward him out of the green pine woods. Ole Grizz rose up to his hind legs quickly and a great battle ensued. The young bear wrapped his muscular front paws around Ole Grizz. The young bear drove his long razor sharp claws deep into the old grizzly's tough

hide. Both bears stood toe to toe, like Ali and Frazier in the middle of a boxing ring. Their mouths were locked together in mortal combat. As they shook each other and wrestled from side to side, blood flowed from their wounds and rained down upon the pure white snow in dark crimson droplets. They clawed and bit at each other viciously, ripping open the skin and hide on each other exposing the muscles beneath their golden brown fur. The muscles could be seen moving on the inside of their bodies as they fought the brutal battle for control of the carcass. Only the strongest of the two bears would own the deer meat. The other would have to die in combat or leave. Ole Grizz would never leave his kill, he would fight to the death. The old grizzly fought with the young powerful bear for almost an hour.

He was tired and weakened from the great loss of his precious blood. The strong young bear grasped Ole Grizz by the front of his neck and shook its head from side to side. With a vise-like grip the young one severed the jugular of Ole Grizz. Blood spurted out from the wound in his throat. Blood came out in a long steady stream until the heart pumped out all of the blood in his body. He laid on the snowy ground in a great fur covered heap with puddles of thick red blood surrounding him. Ole Grizz was dead. What Ole Grizz didn't know was that the young bear that battled with him was one of his own offspring. He died by one of his own, his pride was intact.

Although Sam had a large signal fire burning and etched the snow, help wasn't to be found. As he sat next to the fire enjoying the rabbit meat, he heard a rustling in a thicket of trees. He quickly grabbed one of the spears that he made and braced himself for the worst. The noise grew in volume as the object drew nearer to him. Branches snapped and the snow crunched he thought that it might be Ole Grizz coming back for round two. Then it looked as though it was another human being tramping through the thick dense woods.

There he stood, a tall thin dark skinned Native American with long dark black hair tied back into a ponytail behind his head. There was a red bandana rolled into a sweatband and wrapped around the top part of his head. It was secured by a knot that sat just above his ponytail. He wore a light brown buckskin coat adorned with tassels down the sleeves and on it's chest. Around his neck he wore many multicolored beaded necklaces. There were several skillfully crafted silver rings on his fingers of his large callused hands. In his right hand he held a long heavy walking stick which could double as a formidable weapon. Around his waist he wore a red sash into which he slid a long deer-horn hunting knife tilted at an angle.

His buckskin pants were adorned with tassels that matched his coat. He spoke English quite well, and he said, "Are you lost, sir?" "You bet I am!" Sam said. "I saw all that smoke up here and I just came to see what was going on." said the Indian as he took Sam's hand to shake it. "My name's Soy-oka" the tall dark

haired Indian said. "Do you know how to get me outta here? I'm sorry, my name's Sam and I'm really glad to see you" Sam said in a nervous manner. The Indian said, "Well Sam, I tell you, your only about a twenty minute hike from the Indian trading post at Wallaway Gap." Sam looked at Soy-oka like the Indian was smoking some type of drug. "That can't be right, I went up the ridge over there, looked around and I didn't see a thing!" Sam said. "Well, you can't see the trading post from there because it's tucked into a low lying valley at the gap." said the Indian. Sam offered Soy-oka some of the rabbit that he had cooked. Soy-oka took it sat down and ate. "You know how to use an open fire pretty good, for a white man!" said Soy-oka jokingly. "Don't stroke me too much, Soy-oka." Sam said. "I'm the one really lost here" he quipped. "I'm real happy to see you though." he said. Soy-oka sat and admired the work Sam did making the bow and arrows. He handled the spears as if they were made of gold. Gently caressing them with his large rough hands and then bringing them up to the throwing position to test their balance and feel. "Looks like you were ready to stay here for awhile, Sam" the red man said. "I tell you what, if you lead me to the trading post you can have those things." Sam said. "I think the supply truck from town is due to come in later today."

Soy-oka said. "Well let's get goin' then you red devil!" Sam said with a big grin. Sam and the Indian extinguished the fire, picked up the spears, bow and arrows and started hiking toward the trading post with Soy-oka in the lead. As they were hiking,

Sam told Soy-oka the adventures that he had been through. "You actually didn't get eaten by Ole Grizz?" Soy-oka said. "Nope, he missed me by that much" Sam said as he raised his fingers an inch apart. "He sure tore my Remington up though" said Sam. Even as Sam and Soy-oka hiked toward the trading post, Sam was at ease now that Soy-oka found him. He still enjoyed the sights and smells of nature. He spotted a bald eagle flying toward it's nest full of young helpless eaglets. Screeching it's arrival at the nest, the eagle carried a large trout in it's talons. The eagle then fed the young eaglets bits of fish. Then the eagle soared up from the nest back to the open blue waters of the lake to catch another large fish. Sam realized that he was going to make it. He survived and he was going back home to Indiana. Back to all the things that he tried to escape from.

Soy-oka waved good-bye with his large callused hand as the supply truck pulled away from the trading post with Sam in it.

Soy-oka stood there proudly displaying the handmade bow, arrows, and spears that Sam gave to him as payment. Sam was headed back to civilization. He was a little teary eyed as he left his new friend Soy-oka and the natural surroundings that he so loved.

Sam didn't know till much later the reason no one had come looking for him. The outfitter who left him at the drop camp and was to check on him after two days, suffered a fatal heart attack. There was no other information about Sam's whereabouts.

The outfitter was the only person who knew where Sam was located. Sam never told anyone at work or at home his epic tale till much later.

A year passed by before Sam opened up to me and told me his

Montana story over a cup of coffee on one long, cold, slow midnight shift at the mill. That was two days before he was killed on the job. I guess he didn't want to admit to me, or to anyone else, that he gotten lost and was almost killed while in the Montana Rockies. He still had his pride, just like Ole Grizz. Sam asked me to spread his ashes over the Montana Rockies as they took him away in the ambulance. That was the last time

Sam and I spoke to each other. Sam died the next day while he was in intensive care. Then I realized why he wanted his ashes to be spread in Montana. It was the only place where he was all alone and truly close to nature. He survived in the wild and he experienced a great adventure that lasted four days. Yes, Sam did have a fine vacation.

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