

# Sappho and Baking Soda

Read before the Literary Club March 14, 2016

Those of you whom are both learned and dirty minded may, from the title be eagerly awaiting a discussion of some previously unknown lesbian sexual practice. You will be disappointed.

One of my goals when on vacation is not to collect material for a lit club paper. I have not always been successful. This trip however seemed like a sure thing. We were returning to the Canadian Rockies where we had been many times and where I had collected lit club material, but this trip was different. There would be no skiing, ice climbing or any climbing at all, just some easy hiking. For the past two years I had been bothered by a nerve problem with pain radiating down my left leg. My knee may have been involved as well. The doctors could never agree and never diagnosed the problem. One orthopedic surgeon advised me to do as little as possible, another my primary care physician told me to do as much as possible. Naturally I decided my primary care physician was correct and embarked on a vigorous and self-designed rehab program. I eventually got better but I was not a hundred percent and I did not trust the leg so my plan was to do some easy hiking and see how it went.

We flew into Calgary and supplied up there. We typically stay in cabins where we can cook for ourselves, the food is better and cheaper but you have to lay in supplies while you are still in civilization. We also bought bear mace. Bear mace, commonly referred to as bear spray, is high strength pepper spray sold in 10 Oz bottles. We always buy bear spray when we are in grizzly territory but bear spray is a pain. You cannot fly home with it so at the end of the trip we donate it to the park service and for two canisters that is \$80 down the drain. You just have to think of it as insurance. I always buy the strongest and thus most expensive available. If a bear charges you you do not want to have gone cheap.

From Calgary we drove to our cabin at Castle Mountain Junction, which as the name implies is a road junction and really nothing more. But it has a few cabins, a scenic view of Castle Mountain and a very convenient location for hiking in Banff and Yoho and Kootenay National Parks. The first few days it rained with temperatures in the upper thirties and low forties but we had the clothes for it and the hiking was fine although there were no mountain vistas. After that it turned hot and cloudless with temperatures soaring into the mid- nineties. The heat brought out a healthy population of mosquitoes as well.

For my first long hike in several years I decided to hike to Nigel Pass. In previous years I had done most of the other hikes near the Ice Fields visitors center but not Nigel Pass. The hikes near the Ice Fields are all spectacular. You cannot actually see the Columbia Ice Field from any of the trails but you get stunning views of glaciers, glaciated peaks and at the right time of the year meadows of wildflowers. It was hot and Claudia did not feel like doing a ten-mile hike with a significant vertical gain, in the heat so I was hiking alone.

Never hike alone, that's what everyone says but I like solo hiking and so do most of the climbers and hikers that I know. It does change your risk calculus. A sprained ankle or broken bone is now much more serious. On crowded trails you are never alone and it makes no difference but on remote trails and particularly off trail you may be the only person for miles around. It's a different feeling then, and it's one that I like.

The trail to Nigel Pass was not crowded. Mine was the only car in the parking lot and I had the trail to myself. I had not gone far, maybe a mile when I saw a sign. It read "No Stopping Next 200 Meters, Grizzly Bear

Study Area". I like bears. I have seen lots of bears, both grizzly bears and black bears. Many of them up close and bears do not usually make me nervous. But the sign coupled with the shoulder high berry bushes overgrowing the trail did, and I cautiously walked the trail with my bear spray in my hand ready to use. I did not see a sign marking the end of the Grizzly Bear Study Area. I thought I had walked more than 200 meters but it was hard to know. And even if I was out of the area did the bears know it. Were these bear literate and even if they were, could they tell distances and did they care about Grizzly Bear Study Areas. I suspected not. Eventually the terrain opened up and no longer surrounded by berry bushes I began to relax, but I was surprised and disheartened by how nervous I had been. Upon reaching Nigel Pass and the end of the trail I continued on, crossing from Banff National Park into Jasper National Park and dropping into the Brazeau River Basin. I had lunch at a scenic spot by the river. It would have been a lovely spot for lunch had it not been for a large population of horseflies. Relaxing as much as one can while swatting away horseflies I decided that I had not lost my skills but that I had lost much of my confidence. But it seemed to be returning and I felt pretty good about myself until I spotted a man on the other side of the river ambling toward me. He it turned out was

coming back from a five-day solo-backpacking trip in the Brazeau River Basin. Kind of put me in perspective. Eventually the horseflies drove me off and I hiked back to the trailhead feeling much less nervous. This may have been due to the fact that on the way back the only sign I saw was one that said "Leaving Grizzly Bear Study Area".

The weather stayed punishingly hot and Claudia decided to stay at the cabin and paint and draw while I hiked the Sulphur Skyline trail. The trail about a 60-kilometer drive from our cabin in Jasper started at Miette Hot Springs parking lot. Miette Hot Springs is popular resort featuring cabins, a hotel, restaurant and of course the hot springs. I got an early start from Jasper with the aim of beating the worst of the heat and doing at least some of the hike in the cool early morning. On the drive from Jasper I passed Punch Bowl Falls. I had never seen these falls and they were an easy quarter mile hike from the deserted parking lot. I knew that on my way back in the afternoon the falls would be overrun with throngs of people so I hiked down to them while I had them to myself. At the trailhead I saw a note about a missing dog. I paid almost no attention to it except to cast mental aspersions upon the careless owner. A lost dog would not last long in this wilderness. But I had seen

countless signs for lost dogs and cats over the years and had never seen the cat or dog in question, so I paid it little mind. After enjoying the falls in solitude I resumed the drive to the trailhead, turning onto Miette Hot Springs road driving slowly and looking for wildlife. After a mile or so I saw an animal moving along the edge of the forest. I was sure it was a coyote and stopped to watch it. We had already seen a couple of coyotes on the trip and I always enjoy watching them. A quick glance showed that it was not a coyote; it was medium sized mostly white dog, about 50 pounds. I dimly remembered the lost dog sign had described a dog about this size and anyway how many lost dogs could there be here. It had to be the dog. I stopped the car, more or less in the road and got out. I had no plan, but I knew that if I did not get the dog into the car it would die. It looked thin, cold and scared with cuts on its legs. I stuck my hand out and called softly to it. I am normally good with animals but I could not get the dog to come to me and I was afraid of frightening it back into the woods. It lacked a collar so there was nothing to grab onto. I recalled no contact information for the owner. It had been on the note but I remembered none of it. In any event I could not leave to find the owners, the odds of ever finding the dog again would be slim. There was no cell phone reception so I could not call anyone. I had to get the dog into the

car. The dog would not come to me but it seemed to sense that I was a conduit to its previous life and hung around the forest margins. A passing car slowed down, no doubt hoping I was looking at a bear, and then drove on. Finally I had a bright idea or at least I thought I did. I had a couple of power bars in my pack. I dislike power bars but I always carry a few in my pack in case of emergencies. I got my pack out of the car and rummaged in it, hoping the dog would stay put. The first two bars I found were chocolate. Shit, can't feed a dog chocolate. Finally I found a bar that I thought wouldn't harm the dog and unwrapping it I held it out to the dog. Despite being starved the dog would not come to the power bar. I later learned the dog had been lost for five days. The power bar company would not be pleased; "So bad a starving dog won't touch it" is not a good jingle. I considered seeing if the dog would eat my lunch, then a car stopped. The guy was on his way to work at Miette Hot Springs and had heard about the lost dog. He had a blanket in his car and we decided that we would try to get the blanket on the dog, which was shaking with cold. We hoped this would calm the dog and with the blanket to help control it and protect us, we could grab it. We briefly got the blanket on the dog, but scared, it snarled and snapped at us throwing off the blanket.

With no real plan I suggested that we approach the dog diagonally, one of us on each side and try to least move it toward the road and away from the forest. What we would do then neither of us knew. It worked and the dog moved onto the road, looked at the car, clearly thought, “Oh, a car, I should get in that car” and walked over to the rear door. I cursed myself for a fool. How was I going to get the dog in the car if I had not opened the door? Trying not to spook the dog I slipped behind it leaned over and eased the rear door open. With some difficulty but no hesitation the dog climbed into the back seat where it promptly curled up. I closed the door.

The guy who had stopped to help me, I never knew his name, asked me if I was OK by myself with the dog in the back. I assured him that I was. The dog had snapped at us earlier but appeared to be asleep now. He gave me directions to the Miette Springs warden’s station and drove on to work. I hopped in the car and drove to the warden’s station only a few miles away. I knocked on the door of the warden’s office and got no answer. The door was unlocked but there was no warden. The warden’s residence was next door so I knocked on the door and woke up the

warden's wife who came out in her bathrobe. Perhaps being waken by strange men knocking on your door is an occupational hazard for a warden's wife for she was unfazed by my presence. I said "I have a lost dog in the car" and she explained that the dog was an elderly service dog that had been lost for five nights. The warden was out walking their dogs but would be back in a minute. Minutes later the warden appeared with two large dogs. He looked in my car saw the dog and said, "Were you bitten"? I assured him I had not been and told him the dog did not have a collar. He put his dogs up and returned with a spare collar. Unfortunately we could not get the collar on the dog. The dog snarled and snapped at us every time we tried to put the collar on it and we were handicapped since we did not dare let the dog out of the car. It turned out the dog was named Sappho and that she had slipped her collar in a thunderstorm. The park service, volunteers and her owners had been out searching for her for days. Her owners were staying in a nearby campground but were scheduled to leave for another part of the park that day. Since we could not get a collar on Sappho, and her owners were nearby I suggested that I could just drive Sappho to her owners. The warden thought that was a great idea, he had apparently been reluctant to suggest it, and told me to follow him. The warden's wife

told me I would have good karma for the rest of the day and we set off. As a physicist, I do not believe in karma and more importantly, karma or least good karma did not believe in me. It was a good thing I had the warden to lead me because although the distance was not far, there were many turns on the dirt road leading to the owner's campsite and I would never have found it on my own. I sat in my car not wanting to risk opening a door and the warden banged on couples tent and said, " We have your dog". They emerged from the tent and the woman walked over to my car and began to cry. The warden and I simultaneously said " Don't open the door until we get a collar on her". The woman opened the door and my heart sank but around her owners Sappho was a different dog. She wagged her tail and the husband got a collar and a leash on her. A very insubstantial collar I noticed. The warden's dogs had been in harnesses. The couple thanked me profusely and the warden asked me if I would mind giving him my name and address so that he could close out the incident report, but that it was perfectly OK if I did not want to give my name. I am sure a US park ranger would just have asked for my name and address but of course I was happy to give him my name and address and with that I drove off to hike the Sulphur Skyline trail.

My plan to hike in the cool of the early morning was in tatters and the first part of the hike was now a hot uphill grind. Furthermore tall bushes on either side of the trail meant that there was no view. Since I was late there were people on the trail, which was unfortunate but did at least reduce my bear risk in the heavy brush. In three miles and 2,300 vertical feet, I neared the top and the view began to open up. I spotted a herd of big horn sheep on the slopes and on a crisp day the views would have been spectacular. But in the heat and haze of late morning the views were indistinct and disappointing. At the top I took my pack off, drank some water and ate a snack of nuts. Aggressive chipmunks surrounded me almost immediately. Some tried to climb my pant legs, others tried to get into my pack. I moved my pack around to protect it from the chipmunks and heard a small clink as my bear spray hit a rock. This was followed by a hissing sound and to my horror a stream of mace. I foolishly grabbed my pack and bear mace. The safety must have somehow come off. But no, the safety was still firmly in place. There should have been no way that the mace was going off, but there it was! A spray of high strength pepper spray laced with red dye. The dye enables the bear, or in this case the hiker, to be identified later. I should have

just stepped back but I kept thinking that I could stop the flow of mace. I couldn't and by now my arm and parts of my pack were covered in pepper spray and dyed red. The good news, I had at least lost the chipmunks. I have hiked with bear mace many times and nothing like this had ever happened. The only thing I could think of was that an internal piece in the canister must have sheared off when the canister struck the rock. It didn't hit very hard but the angle must have been just right or in this case just wrong. Not good Karma.

I got out my lunch napkin and with that and water from my water bottle got as much of the spray off of myself as possible. I hadn't got any of the pepper spray in my eyes so I thought I had gotten off Scott free. I would just have to remember not to touch my eyes or face on the way down. I was wrong. As I hiked down I began to notice a faint burning sensation both on my arm and on my sides and back. Pretty soon the sensation was no longer faint, it was painful. And it was spreading. It quickly became apparent that my sweat was spreading the spray. It was particularly bad on my back and under my arms. My pack's suspension system was contaminated and as I sweated my sweat spread the spray from my pack to my skin and to ever-larger areas of my skin. There was

nothing I could do about it. I couldn't abandon my pack and it was a hot day so I was going to sweat. It occurred to me that I no longer had bear mace so it would be best not to meet any bears. But as luck would have it, after a while the pain was bad enough so that I no longer cared about bears! Besides I needed to pee. I held off but finally I convinced myself that if I used my uncontaminated hand I would be fine. A few minutes later a sharp burning sensation told me that I had been wrong.

Finally I reached the hot springs resort from whose parking lot the hike started. I spotted a bathroom that I was pretty sure was for guests only, certainly not for scruffy individuals such as myself. I bolted for it, locked the door, stripped off my shirt and tried to bath in the small sink, slaving my arms and chest with soap and water. I washed the shirt out as best I could. None of this seemed to make any difference. Walking across the parking lot to my car I saw a herd of big horn sheep in the parking lot including several mothers with small kids. The highlight of my hike, the big horn sheep herd I had seen at a distance from the summit had just been sharply demised.

And I still had a 60-kilometer drive back to our cabin. I needed to do something about the empty or maybe nearly empty bear mace canister. There is as far as I can tell no legal way to dispose of an empty bear mace canister short of sending it to a hazardous waste landfill. I turned down a little used dirt road and found a large trash dumpster which would clearly be picked up and emptied by machine. There was no one around. Wrapping the canister in a plastic bag to protect my hand I carefully slid the safety off, and depressed the trigger. Nothing. The canister was totally empty. I double wrapped it plastic bags, tied them closed and looking around guilty slipped it into the dumpster and hopped back into the car.

I got back to our cabin only to find it locked. I quickly found Claudia who had been painting and reading by the river. She was none to pleased to see me back so early. She had counted on having the rest of the afternoon to herself. I said, "I have to take a shower". "Oh you always have to take a shower" she replied "let me tell you about my day first". I explained about "my day" and hit the shower. It did not help. It may have made things worse. But removing the contaminated clothes did help and

eventually the burning eased somewhat. Claudia pointed out that I had large red welts on my back and under my arms.

There still remained the question of what to do with the pack and my clothes. Claudia favored throwing them out. I didn't. The cabin had WIFI and a quick Google search revealed that a paste of baking soda and water was supposed to neutralize bear mace. I stuffed my clothes in a plastic bag and we drove in to town where we bought rubber gloves, a large box of baking soda, a toothbrush and a bottle of Dawn dish soap. After all if Dawn is good for cleaning oiled birds, it should be good at removing bear mace. We found a Laundromat, stuffed the clothes in with a generous dose of Dawn and set the cycle to use as much water as possible. After washing and drying, the clothes seemed fine and I tried not to think about the possibility that I might have left traces of bear mace in the washer. Back at the cabin rubbing my arms with the baking soda paste eased the last of the burning. I put my backpack in the bathtub covered with baking soda paste and while wearing rubber gloves scrubbed it with a toothbrush. I rinsed it repeatedly and hung it to dry. It seemed fine except for some reddish stains, which it has to this day. I wore the pants a couple of days later and they were fine, but they

were water repellent and probably did not absorb much moisture. I wore the shirt a month later and within an hour had red welts on my back. So much for Dawn. Use baking soda not Dawn.

Several days later Claudia and I hiked the summit of the Whistlers. Well, technically we took a chairlift to the summit. You can hike from the base of the mountain but it's a long boring slog whereas at the summit you are above the tree line with great views and lots of interesting hiking. Almost everyone takes the lift. The Whistlers are so named due to the constant wind, which howls and whistles across the rock outcroppings on the summit. There were great views and the wind and altitude kept the temperatures cool. We were lucky enough to spot some Willow Ptarmigans and after a few hours tucked ourselves behind a rock and thus out of the wind and had lunch. We hiked a little more after lunch and then headed back down to the chairlift. Claudia had asked me what the dog looked like and I had been at a loss for a good description.

Medium sized, white with dark patches. A mutt. As we hiked down I saw a dog and said "it looked like that dog". We got closer and I said, "It is that dog". There was Sappho and it's two owners. I noted with silent disapproval that Sappho still had a flimsy collar on that she could

easily slip. She also had a blue vest on identifying her as a service dog and asking you not to pet her with out asking. I said, "I know you" and reached down to pet her. I figured I had earned the right to take certain liberties. No longer frightened and with her owners she did not snap at me but was happy to be petted. The women looked at me and said, "Do you know Richard Gass"? I said, "I am Richard Gass". I thought the question was strange. She said that she had asked the Warden for my contact information earlier so that she could thank me but that the Warden had not been willing to give it out without my permission. She told me that Sappho had been seen by a vet and was basically fine. We talked for a few minutes and then Claudia and I went down to the chairlift station. It's a large park, the odds of seeing them again were tiny. Maybe it was Karma.

The next year we went to Glacier National Park. In Kalispell I stared at the bear spray selection and considered not buying bear spray even though I knew from experience that Glacier was littered with bears. But I came to my senses and bought bear spray. Hiking alone to Iceberg Lake , one of my favorite hikes, I heard a ripping noise. I went cautiously ahead and there just off the trail 30 feet from me was a very large

Grizzly Bear. He was ripping a downed tree apart to get at the insects. He looked up at me and looked pissed. I backed slowly away, my bear spray in hand. He continued to look pissed but eventually moved off and I went on, glad that I had bought bear spray, and glad that on this encounter; I would not be collecting material for a lit club paper.