

Ursa

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A young man finds out what really goes on at Yellowstone National Park

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This happened up in Yellowstone. Rick was taking a year off of college, going all kinds of places. They have a swimming area up there in the Firehole river where a hot spring keeps the water nice and warm, and after a summer of people swimming there, he went through with a mask and snorkel and collected all kinds of coins, people's house keys, nothing real valuable, but of course it was all treasure because it came from underwater. Put all of it in a zip-lock bag. Sure enough, there was a ranger standing on the shore when he came out. She put his little plastic bag in her plastic bag, and marched him (handcuffed!) up to her truck. Were his protestations fruitless? Only a comparison to Janet Reno can describe this woman, she was that dour and federal. After sixty-eight minutes of wet-swimsuit-ass-torture in the back of the Grand Cherokee, Rick was ready to confess to doing Foley work on al-Qaeda's kiddie porn movies. Relief was not forthcoming; they pulled up to a charming log cabin, with PUNISHMENT carved above the door, inside which Rick sat for another two hours. The ranger lady who arrested him popped her head out of a door and asked, "You up here alone?" "Yeah. Yeah, just me," Rick said. He was scared, and he knew it showed. When the time came for his interrogation, the ranger cracked her first and only smile. Rick had to pee. The Park Prosecutor had on a black Smokey Bear hat with a chunky silver cross on the front. He handed Rick the output of his computer's printer: a single sheet cited the regulation against removing artifacts from the park and stipulated a \$250,000 fine and up to five years in prison. He let Rick read it over while he printed something else out; when he turned Rick could see two long parallel keloid scars leading up his neck where his ear used to be. "There's two ways this can go down," said the prosecutor, "I can refer this matter to the Department of Justice, or you can volunteer for a little project here in the park. Take about nine weeks." Two Indian arrowheads had found their way into the evidence bag with his coins and stuff. Rick was close to broke. His parents were on a Mormon mission in Africa for a year. He signed each page of a Plea Agreement and Waiver. Did you know they have a little jail up there? The four cells have carved tree-branch bars and a little wooden wolf that guards the doorway. They issued Rick two pairs of uniform pants and several souvenir T-shirts. They all had bears on them. The next building they took Rick to was another log cabin. The sign said VETERINARY CENTER. That's about all he remembered. Back in his cell, Rick peeled back a gauze bandage above his navel; nine stitches held shut a vertical incision. Just as it started to throb, they brought him some Lortabs with

his dinner. Rick had developed an affinity for opiates at school; Doc Arctos and nurse Jenny figured this out pretty quick after the surgery, and they seemed relieved at how readily he took whatever pills they put in front of him. Arctos told him, "You might experience some swelling around the incision. That's normal." The time flew by: they would take him for walks on the beach at Yellowstone Lake, buffalo burgers he got pretty used to, back to the jail at night. Rick was glad, really, to be helping out with an important project that would help the environment. The incision did swell; Arctos kept telling him that's normal, that's normal. Then one day they took him to the clinic. The nurses there didn't seem at all glad to have to deal with Rick; he had to wait a long time while Dr. Arctos argued with them. Finally they took him to a room with an enormous tree trunk sticking out from the wall. Its core had been hollowed out, and the nurse slid a little mattress out of there. He had Rick lie down on it, slid him in there, and three times told him to hold perfectly still. A humming noise came from inside the tree each time, then he pulled Rick out and sent him back to the jail. They gave Dr. Arctos a CD. Back at the jail that night, nurse Jenny gave him good news and bad news: Rick was going home in a couple of days, but unfortunately he had developed a deficiency of Vitamin K while he was there. She gave him a shot (Keta...something) to take care of this. Rick woke up in the back of a car, in the parking lot of one of the Park's all-wood gas stations. The prosecutor was there, standing next to Rick's car. Someone had just washed it, hadn't they? The hood was up, and an attendant was hooking up a battery charger. Dr. Arctos and nurse Jenny helped him out of the back of the car. His belly hurt, but the swelling was pretty much gone. The prosecutor was wearing those kind of glasses that turn dark when you go outside. He handed Rick a stack of twenties as tall as a hamburger and told him his efforts were much appreciated. Rick's car started up fine, but it smelled a little funny because he'd left some food in it when he'd gone down snorkeling. When the attendant closed the hood, Rick saw the prosecutor, Jenny and Arctos driving off. They had left him a few of the souvenir T-shirts. He headed home. Rick went through the money quicker than you might think. His parents considered sending him to rehab when they got back, but he managed to straighten out, and finished school. It was only years later that Rick read somewhere that a virus had nearly wiped out the grizzly bear population in the park. It was causing the bears to miscarry early in their gestation. An experimental program involving surrogate mothers, the article said, "had not proven workable."