

## 18. Teddy Bear Cholla



I took this picture years ago on South Mountain, the largest city park in the nation (and possibly the world) and I have always called it it "The Dance of the Cholla."

"Hey, man. We're going to go out and take an hour's hike in the desert. Wanna come?"

"Sure! Can I bring my dog?"

"Is he a desert dog?"

"Oh, yes—desert dog."

If you are from Arizona, you know what a desert dog is. It's a dog that knows about cholla cactus and won't get stuck in it and ruin the trip. A dog only gets stuck in cholla once.

My father used to say occasionally, "If you're ever convicted of a crime and the judge says, 'You have a choice: two years in jail or we throw you into a stand of cholla,' take the two years!"

Cholla hurts. Teddy bear cholla is the worst. I'm looking for a book now somewhere on my shelf that has an illustration with the words, "Teddy Bear Cholla, the Most Fiendish of Them All." I can't remember the book's name but it's got to be there. If I find it, I'll add the picture here.<sup>1</sup>

"Kids, let's all get out and hug the teddy bear cholla!" joked my Uncle Mole as we rode down the desert road with my cousins in the early 60s.

Teddy bear cholla is silver blond in color and its sticky sharp spines are simply murder to remove. Yet pull them all out you must—with pliers no matter how much it hurts.

Once in the very early 60s, we were camped on a dirt side road high up on the Beeline Highway in Arizona. I awoke in the night and walked over to see my parents shining a flashlight in the back seat of the station wagon. They were illuminating something black and gold. I suddenly realized that it was the paw of our dachshund Heidi, who, though a desert dog, had gone out in the darkness and stepped on some cholla. The road wound around a little hill and ever since, whenever we have passed that way, we look out and say, "There's Heidi Hill!"

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<sup>1</sup> It would appear that I haven't found it. However, while searching, I ran into a photo of cholla in the book *Arizona Outdoor Guide*. Its caption reads: "Teddy bear cholla cactus. Not cuddly at all! Avoid all contact."



Landslide on the Beeline Highway near Payson. This is near Heidi Hill and the photo may very well have been one from the same trip and also, judging by my spelling ("Peyson"), one taken by me as a youngster.

Cholla is also called "jumping cactus" because if you even lightly brush it while passing by, cactus balls will seem to have jumped upon you when they fall off of the plant and adhere themselves to your flesh.



This calls to mind the day that I unwittingly made myself the cactus's victim. I was young and destructive throwing rocks at a Teddy bear cholla, knocking the spiny cactus balls off of it, and calling it names. I continued until there remained but one ball on top and when, with youthful rock-throwing precision, I struck it, the stalk of the plant bent back and flung as though an *atlatl* the spiny ball that impaled itself into my shin.

One day, my parents came up with the grand idea of transplanting a Teddy bear cholla from South Mountain to our front yard. It was not more than five minutes before a neighbor's dog got stuck in it. It was a disaster, and my parents got rid of the cactus the same day.

Every now and again I imagine a tidal wave approaching our beach house in Sonora, Mexico and in my daydream I envision myself making my way to the roof where I await the wave and then heroically ride its crest off of the roof as the water and I race inland across the dunes.

And then my reverie is spoiled by the thought of what lies in wait not far away: endless acres of cholla across the dunes that in my dream now float on the water's surface fiendishly anticipating my arrival.



The expanse of Teddy bear cholla in Sonora