
Bad JuJu

Location: The Ram's Head Lodge

Date: September, 2003

Intent on running an 80-mile stretch of the Main Salmon River, it's late by the time Bob Carson, Tom Wilson and I roll into Shoup, Idaho population 35. Situated on the edge of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, the hub of this micro-metropolis consists of a café that doubles as the local post office. Surrounded by an eclectic mix of weather-beaten wooden shacks, it's my guess one of them is the Ram's Head Lodge.

Pounded by violent rain squalls earlier that afternoon, another cloud burst appears imminent. Stepping down from my mud-spattered truck, the darkened sky overhead matches my mood. Besides the cook, the only people inside the café are the owners Bill and Sandy. They're also the caretakers of the lodge. It's just us and them. Nobody else. As might be expected, the chit-chat during supper centers on a recent rash of flashfloods and landslides that's kept the main road closed for most of the past month. According to the cook, a self-proclaimed climatologist, another monster storm is brewing up in Alaska and the odds are good it'll arrive within the next 24-36 hours. Although I don't know it yet, this foreboding forecast will be the least of my worries.

After leaving a generous tip, we're taken on a tour of the lodge by Sandy. A sprawling 1960's ranch-style home surrounded by a bright green lawn and little apple orchard, its got five bedrooms, two bathrooms, a big kitchen with a rear deck overlooking the river. The wall to wall carpeting in the king-size living room looks and smells brand new. Everything's spotlessly clean inside and out. In addition to a fabulous stereo outfit and big flat-screen color TV with satellite pickup there's a full-size pool table to boot. I'm pleasantly surprised to discover there are no



other guests; as an added bonus there's also no telephone either. Before leaving she reminds everyone once again that the generator automatically shuts down at 11 p.m. and the lights don't come back on again until 6 a.m. My general impression was very positive. It seemed like we'd hit the jackpot for once. However, something in the back of my mind, something I couldn't quite put my finger on, warned me something had to be wrong.

Despite these misgivings the illuminated portion of the evening went by rather uneventfully. Bob and Tom shot a few games of 8-ball. After that we watched the second half of Monday night football, enjoying plenty of ice-cold beer, chips and salsa in sufficient quantity to cause a person to relax and drop his guard. I was feeling no pain around 10:45 when I decided to call it a night and head for my room

over in the far-west wing of the house. Sleep doesn't come until the generator that sits on a concrete pad right outside my room finally shuts down and this racket stops. Replaced by absolute silence, I have no idea what time it is or how long I've been unconscious when I'm awakened by the sound of the closet door in my room rattling loudly.

Sitting up bolt-upright wondering what the hell is going on, it doesn't help matters that I can't see a goddamn thing. Of course, a flashlight sure would come in handy. However, if I recall correctly, mine's buried at the bottom of a dry bag lying on the floor at the other end of the room. Frustrated, I take the time to congratulate myself out loud: "Yep, Smith you haul a half a dozen flashlights all over God's creation but when you really need one, either the batteries are shot, or it's out of reach." Feeling around for the curtains I pull them back to look outside. My first thought is that gusts of wind must be blowing down a roof vent causing the closet doors to shimmy and shake. Wrong. The dim silhouettes of what appear to be trees are motionless. Shortly thereafter, the distinctive sound of someone's footsteps on the hardwood flooring coming down the hallway could be heard. This was followed by the sound of the bathroom door closing on the other side of the wall not more than ten feet away.

Naturally, I'm puzzled as to why Tom or Bob would be using my bathroom since their room is clear over on the other side of the house and it has its' own toilet. Wide awake with nothing better to do I just lay there waiting for the sound of a flush. After a prolonged period of nothing happening, I decided to get up and investigate. First things first. I need to find the doorknob. This takes some doing. Eventually, I locate it using the Braille method. For the record, I knocked on the bathroom door but nobody was inside. This seemed pretty weird. However, the focus of my full attention quickly shifted to putting an end to the source of racket still coming from the closet inside my bedroom. Since I knew there was a kitchen door leading out to a back deck, I began the process of elimination my groping my way down the hallway. Once outside, I started searching for a possible opening a family of raccoons might be using to enter and exit the building. Nothing of the sort turned up until I walked completely around the house and found the front door standing wide open. That's when a burst of adrenaline suddenly shot straight up my spine.

Approaching the front steps, it looked like the entrance to a coal mine. After tripping head over heels on a pile of our river gear, I made another painful journey across the living room and dining room, frequently encountering the sharp edges of wooden tables, chairs and low-slung chandeliers. Several times I ended up wedged into a corner, which only added to a mental state of high-anxiety. Never one to give up easily, I eventually stumbled into Bob and Tom's bedroom somewhat freaked out yelling, "GET UP! THE FRONT DOORS WIDE OPEN! SOMEBODY'S IN THE HOUSE! I HEARD THEM WALKING AROUND IN THE HALLWAY! To their considerable credit, they must have both been Boy Scouts because out came their flashlights immediately. Fully loaded, large caliber, semi-automatic revolvers would have also been welcome, but sadly neither one is a member of the National Rifle Association.

Marching single-file for our arrival in the living room armed with only two small beams of light, Tom dropped the first bombshell. Standing on the threshold peering outside he nonchalantly announced, and I quote here, "This door was open when I went to bed." Extremely agitated, at this point it's all I can do to stop myself from screaming YOU IDIOT! Instead, I yell, "THIS IS IDAHO TOM! We're in the

middle of friggin bear country! There's no telling what kind of nightmare is running around loose in this house!" Before I have a chance to regain my composure, Bob drops the other shoe. He informs me the sliding glass door behind the drapes on the other side of the living room is wide open. Under intense interrogation Bob finally cracks and admits to opening the sliding door in order to achieve better cross-ventilation. Despondent, all I can say is, "Great... That's just Great" and suggest we start conducting a room to room search for the intruder. Probing the darkness with two tiny flashlights, I can't help but be reminded of that little low-budget charmer... The Blair Witch Project. Any moment I expect to come around a corner and find some wild-eyed lunatic pressed up against the wall with a meat-cleaver ready to sever our heads from our bodies. Leaving no stone unturned, luckily, nothing leaps out of the shadows. Weary, we all retreat to our respective rooms.

The good news is the house is now closed up and securely locked. Even better, I found my flashlight and it works. The bad news is all's well until I crawl back under the covers. That's when the closet doors start rattling again. This racket is soon accompanied by the sound of approaching footsteps. Although unnerving, another close inspection of the closet can wait. I've made up my mind to scare whoever's walking around in the hallway to death first. For Bob and Tom's sake, this better not be some sort of practical joke. I'm ready to fight! Slipping out of bed I grabbed the doorknob with one hand and waited with my trusty flashlight aimed at eye-level until I was certain the mystery person had stopped right in front of my bedroom door. A split second later when I jerked the door open, any logical explanation for these preceding events simply vanished into thin air.

The hallway was empty. I couldn't see anything but something was there. I could sense it and was instantly seized by irrational fear. The worst kind of fear. The fear of the unknown; the fear that causes your hair to stand up on end and your skin erupt in millions of tiny bumps; the fear that threatens to take spontaneous liquid form in your underwear. Making matters even worse, all my usual coping mechanisms began to fail starting with my knees. They felt like they might buckle at any moment. The next few seconds felt like an eternity until I came sprinting back into Tom and Bob's bedroom at stop speed declaring, "I'M SLEEPING IN HERE THE REST OF THE NIGHT!" In hindsight, I thought they took this sudden announcement rather well and were soon sound asleep snoring again. However, it took a bit longer for my own heart to finally stop racing. As a result, the best I got was a fitful night's rest.

Although sunrise is genuine cause for celebration, I'm not in the mood. Having never been particularly superstitious, I am now. As soon as I confronted Sandy she went on the defensive claiming no knowledge of any ghosts roaming the Ram's Head hallways. If anyone was afoot in the house she said was the other part-time cook. Of course, this was news to me since she'd never mentioned any such resident before. Further investigation revealed his car was not parked in the covered garage, his room was completely empty of any personal possessions, and nobody else had seen the guy around for a couple weeks.

That's not the end of the story. Nope. In 2005, I came up to run this same stretch of river again with the Major and Whiplash Cavan. The night before we launched, a barmaid in Salmon Idaho confided that the lodge had a reputation for having different owners and caretakers, none of whom stayed for very long, including her and her husband. Apparently, it was also a well-known fact that several hunters and river runners had died violently in accidents while they were guests staying at the lodge.

Not surprisingly, when I passed by the place again in 2008, it was out of business and all boarded-up. As far as I know it's still that way today. So be it. Once was enough for me.

POSTSCRIPT

It should also be noted that the Ram's Head Lodge was originally recommended to me by Blackadar Outfitters. When I questioned John about his knowledge of the lodge's haunted past, he just laughed. Unable to control his emotions he was still laughing when I hung up the phone.