

Round Top

Over the past year the winds of change had pretty much leveled the house that was my life. In my case, the tempest came in the form of my father's death, and reached its thunderous zenith with my divorce three months later.

But like they say, all good things must come to an end. It was finally time to abandon my ill conceived attempt at drinking dry the magical spring in Lynchburg that issued forth the charcoal filtered, and oak barrel aged amber elixir. I did give those Tennessee mountain boys a good run though.

So on a whim, and in a rare fit of sobriety, I decided to go back to the high country where much of my foundation had originally been laid. I guess I thought that going back to the roots of my youth would be a good place to start the rebuilding process.

The seven-hour drive from my home in Seattle, to my old stomping grounds in extreme Northeastern Washington, had served to cleared my head. I was more than ready to hit the trail, and excited at the prospect of tagging a nice bear.

I pulled into what I remembered as the last gas station before my turn-off into the mountains, intending to fill up my tank, and to pick up some beer for a nightcap at camp.

After parking by the ancient pumps, I went inside the dimly lit store.

"Gonna be a cold one tonight; there'll be frost on the pumpkin for sure." The grizzled old curmudgeon commented wryly.

"Yep, the forecast said cold and clear for the next few days. Any chance I could get you to turn on the gas pump?" I asked, as I set my six-pack of Coors Light on the counter, and then added, "I always like to top off my tank before I head up into the mountains."

"Damn good idea too, but I can't help you. The feds made me drain my old tanks, and I can't afford to buy the new double lined ones they want me to. Whereabouts are you headed anyway?"

"Up to the Idaho border. I used to hunt up there all the time, but it's been a few years since I've been able to get back. I'm hoping I can find a few berry patches and a decent bear."

"Heard tell from a couple loggers that there's still a few berries hangin' on up 'round Salmo." He offered, as he removed a greasy John Deere cap and ran a dirty hand over his shiny bald head.

"I'm going in south of there, up at Pass Creek Pass. I'm planning on spending the first night on the back side of Round Top, and then packing back into Mankato the next day."

I'd heard of people turning "white as a ghost", but until that second, I'd never actually seen it happen. This poor old coot started shaking so bad that he dropped my change all over the counter, and if I didn't know better, judging from his color, I'd swear all his blood had just been drained from his weathered old body by an unseen succubus.

"D, d, d, dooo yooou know what day it is?" he finally stammered after several heavy seconds of silence.

"Yeah, September twenty first," I answered, while silently wondering if the old goat had forgotten his medication.

"The fall equinox, and there's a blood moon tonight." He whispered almost reverently, and I unconsciously leaned closer as I struggled to hear his faint words. "It's been fifty years to the day."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, now totally confident that the old man had

a few screws loose.

He ignored me and continued to stare off into space, shaking like he'd just shoved an industrial strength vibrator up his ass. He wore a pained expression that deepened the myriad wrinkles on his face, so that it almost looked like a road map of Los Angeles. The 405 ran right alongside his purple veined bulbous nose.

"Can I get gas up the road in Metaline Falls?" I asked, not really expecting an answer.

When it was clear the old man's sudden onset of muteness wouldn't be cured anytime soon, I picked up my scattered change from the counter, and grabbed the bag that contained my beer and chips. I needed to get going if I was going to make it to my intended campsite before dark.

I opened the door, and as the little bells hanging above it tinkled, the old man whispered something that I couldn't quite make out. It sounded like "A night to die," but he was probably just stuttering "Goodbye."

It was enough of a difference that I thought I'd better clarify his parting words.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" I asked, as I turned back to look at where he had been standing. I hadn't heard anything but the unintelligible whisper, so when I realized that he had somehow materialized at my side, it damn near scared the shit out of me.

His bony and age spotted fingers clawed at my arm. "Don't go!" he yelled. "Stay away from Round Top on this evil night."

I'm just stupid enough to think that I could reason with what I now knew was a crazy old man.

"Don't worry old timer, I've been up there dozens of times. There's nothing to be afraid of, besides, I think my .300 Magnum can handle just about any critter I'm likely to see."

"It's the blood moon, a night to die!" he shrieked.

Damn. I *had* heard him right the first time. I've been to a lot of lonely places, and seen some pretty strange things, so I don't spook easily, but this old fart was starting to get to me. I could tell by the way the hair was standing up on the back of my neck and the goose bumps on my arms.

Now I just wanted to get out of there, the faster the better. I pulled his hand off my arm, and jumped in my Jeep.

The color had found its way back into his shriveled body and his bald head almost glowed with a crimson intensity as he ran alongside my Jeep screaming, "Stay away from Round Top!"

I watched him get smaller in my rear view mirror, and felt a tangible sense of relief when I rounded a bend in the road where he disappeared from sight. I still had the goose bumps though.

It was only a few miles further to Metaline Falls, and I was glad to see what was an apparently new Chevron station. Quite the amateur sleuth, I made my deduction from the "Grand Opening" banner hanging over the line of pumps.

When I pulled in, I noticed the pumps were equipped with charge card slots for remote paying, and reflected for a moment before going inside to pay with cash instead. After the old man, I needed to hear another human voice before I went up into the hills, preferably a sane one.

"How'ya doin'?" a tall, gangly teenage boy with shaggy hair said in greeting when I opened the door.

“Fine thanks,” I replied. “I tried to get some gas down the road, but the old man said he doesn’t sell it anymore, so it looks like you get my business.”

“Oh you must be talking ‘bout Billy Brewer’s place. Most folks just pass him by now that we opened, unless they’re looking for beer that is. We’re still waiting on our liquor license from the state.”

“Guilty as charged. I did buy some beer from him. He seemed a little strange. He’s not a serial killer or anything is he?” I asked with a grin.

“Nah, he’s harmless. Just weird. My grandpa told me one time that Brewer was involved in some kind of accident in the mountains above Sullivan Lake.”

Now I was interested. “What kind of accident?”

“That’s the funny thing. No one ever figured out what happened. Brewer’s family, what there was of it anyway, his dad, uncle and a cousin, were going up into the mountains hunting. Rumor had it they used to poach the occasional deer, and since the season wasn’t going to open for a couple of weeks, the rumors were likely true.”

“Do you know exactly where they were going?” I interrupted.

“Um, let me think for a sec. There used to be a lookout up there, but the Forest Service tore it down after the accident. Hmmm. It wasn’t Hall Mountain...no, I guess I don’t recall dude.”

The goose bumps were back. Round Top still had the concrete corners and foundation from a long ago demolished lookout tower.

“Round Top maybe?” I offered.

“Yeah, that’s it. Anyway, they all go up the mountain, but only Billy makes it back down. He was covered in blood, and in the two days it took him to hike clear down to the ranger station at Sullivan Lake, all his hair had fallen out. He was like twenty at the time, but he’s still bald as a billiard ball.”

The kid really had my attention now. “So what happened to everyone else?”

“That’s the cool thing. It’s like our own Blair Witch or something, dude. The sheriff made Billy take him back to their campsite and it was all torn up. The deputies finally found the three bodies, scattered all across the hillside, but they never found the Brewer heads.”

“Brewer heads?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s what my Grandpa told me. The heads of the three Brewer’s had been ripped off, and the search party never did find them. At first I think the Sheriff thought Billy lost it and killed them all himself. But then, after the town doctor examined the bodies, he claimed the heads had literally been ripped off the bodies, and there was no way Billy could have done it.”

I’d heard enough. So much for the calming effect of a sane voice.

“Well, I’d better get going,” I said, and turned towards the door.

The boy continued talking as I walked away, “One of my buddies told me he broke into Brewer’s store one night, and the whole back room is full of maps and articles on Bigfoot.”

Since I never know when to say uncle, I turned around. “Bigfoot?”

“Yeah, you know, Sasquatch. Brewer claims it was Bigfoot that killed his family. He’s spent the last forty or fifty years doing research on the myth, and even claims that he’s figured out the beast’s migration patterns based on reported sightings.”

“So Brewer’s some kind of Bigfoot hunter?”

“Hell no. The only time Billy leaves his store is to come into town to play bingo at the VFW on Fridays. He’s scared shitless of the woods, let alone the mountains.”

I opened the glass door with the boy's "Good luck mister" echoing in my ears. I stopped at my Jeep and rested my hand the roof rack while I took several long and deep breaths of the crisp fall air.

This was stupid. I'd been hiking and hunting around Round Top for almost twenty years now, and knew that area like the back of my hand. If there were anything like a bunch of Bigfoot up there, I'd have seen at least one of them for sure. That was the rational part of my mind speaking.

The little voice in the back of my head was reminding me that although I'd spent literally thousands of hours in the backcountry, and seen lots of sign, I'd only caught a glimpse of a cougar *one* time in twenty-five years. If an animal didn't want to be seen, and was smart enough, maybe I wouldn't have seen it.

It didn't matter though; I needed the soul cleansing of this trip. I got in the Jeep and headed up past Sullivan Lake, and into the mountains.

The mountains were exactly as I remembered them, and for some reason that surprised me. I guess it just seemed that since nothing else in my life was the same as before, they'd be different too.

The road up the mountain had changed however, and I had to make a couple unfamiliar turns to find my way to the trailhead.

Once there, I quickly readied my gear, and locked the Jeep before starting up the trail. Ever the good citizen, I even took time to sign in at the US Forest Service trail information box.

It was almost an hour hike to the backside of Round Top, and daylight was fading fast as I staked out and pitched out my small tent, technically just a "bivouac shelter".

While I hurriedly set about the task, I unconsciously looked over at the old cabin, and noted that it was now nearly collapsed. The heavy winter snows had almost finished their assignment of leveling the structure, and would soon have to seek other missions of frigid mayhem.

I waited until I had my shelter fully erected before starting the butane stove to heat water for my gourmet freeze-dried dinner. In my mind, Mountain House had set themselves up for a class action suit by maliciously calling my evening meal "Chicken Cacciatore", but kids were still starving in Africa, so who was I to complain?

I popped the top on a can of Rocky Mountain Kool-Aid, and attempted to cleanse my palate after hungrily devouring my prepackaged meal.

The setting sun had taken with it all traces of Indian summer's warmth, and I dug a jacket out of my pack to ward off the twilight chill.

It wasn't until the jacket stopped my shivering that it hit me. Before I was consumed with panic, I tipped the can of beer back and tried to enjoy the faint lightheadedness that signaled the beginning of a good buzz.

It was too quiet. In fact, the silence was deafening. Normally when I made the evening hike in, I'd hear songbirds singing, squirrels chattering, or maybe even jump a mule deer. But as I scoured my memory, not once in all my trips here, could I ever recall the sound of silence.

The goose bumps were back. Big time.

I popped the top on another beer, and quickly drained the amber contents of the silver can down my suddenly parched throat.

The myriad stars twinkling in the firmament brought me no comfort. This was stupid. I was acting like a silly schoolgirl. I'd camped in this exact spot lots of times, and never once been attacked by a big hairy beast. Or even seen one for that matter.

The twilight took on a strange hue, and I noticed the first edge of the moon creeping up into the eastern horizon. But instead of glowing with its usual white brightness, on this fateful night, the great orb was covered with a crimson cloak.

The blood moon.

Now I felt that often spoken of icy finger trace a pattern up my spine.

I finished off another brew, and decided to call it a night. Tomorrow morning, I'd probably laugh at myself for being so spooked.

Then I heard it.

It wasn't much, just a light swish of a tree branch, but the sound seemed to reverberate through my very bones.

My hands instinctively sought the cool comfort of burled walnut, and I held my .300 magnum at port arms like a sentry on guard duty.

I wanted to yell out, "Halt! Who goes there?" but I managed to control the impulse.

I did check to make sure I had a round in the chamber before I backed into the tight confines of the bivouac shelter. I almost wished I had a pair of red shoes so I could close my eyes, click my heels together, and repeat to myself, "there's no place like home, there's no place like home." Where was Toto when you needed him anyway?

I wriggled out of my jeans and into my mummy bag, while struggling to keep the muzzle of my rifle pointed at the tent's opening.

After that one lone swish, the silence had returned. The only sound I could hear was my heart pounding.

I think I drifted off into a fitful sleep, but I can't say for sure.

What I can say, is that all at once, my nostrils were assaulted by the most foul odor I've had the misfortune of inhaling. If forced to describe it, I'd say it was a mixture of rotting flesh and obscene body odor.

In other words, I'd died, did not pass go, flew through purgatory, and landed straight in olfactory hell. Talk about a rude awakening.

And it didn't get any better.

I heard the sound of my shelter being shredded at the same time I saw the horrific shape outlined in the glow of the sky's bloody night-light.

My hands sought the comfort and protection of my rifle, but it was too late.

I was lifted from my shelter like a rag doll, and in the blood red glow of the moon, I glimpsed the holder of my horrific fate.

Never in my wildest dreams, or darkest nightmares, have I ever imagined such a creature.

Fangs longer than that of Bram Stoker's evil vampires caught and reflected the Merlot hue of the blood moon, as they flashed towards the soft and exposed flesh of my pulsing neck.

But it's the burning memory of the monster's eyes that I'll carry to my grave. They seemed to glow with the unholy fire of hell itself.

My hands dropped the now useless rifle, and I instinctively reverted to the law of the jungle. I screamed like a banshee and my hands clawed at the evil creature's glowing eyes, while my bare feet kicked at its hairy stomach.

I'd almost given up hope when an explosion rocked the clearing, and the vile creature trying to separate my head from my body released me from its clutches, then magically disappeared.

"Run! Run for your life! A wild voice loudly implored, and immediately,

amazingly, I recognized the voice as that of Billy Brewer.

Perhaps even more amazingly, I didn't question the instructions, but instead ran. I ran like the hounds of hell were nipping at my very heels, actually believing that they might in fact be doing just that.

The terror numbed my limbs and I was oblivious to the brush that wickedly lashed at my legs and the sharp branches that tore into my shoulders. I ran until I couldn't run any more, and then continued plodding until the sun's excruciatingly slow arrival at long last brightened the horrifically dark world.

Since time lost all meaning for me, I can't say for sure, but I've since been told that it took me almost two days to make it to the ranger station at Sullivan Lake. Fifty years had done nothing to shorten the journey.

I'm also told that the rangers found my shredded tent, and later, the headless body of Billy Brewer.

As for me, I think the worst of the storm has blown past, but not being one to tempt fate, I don't often stray from the glare of Seattle's light.

And somewhat surprisingly, women seem to be attracted to my baldness.