



THE COMFY INN

~ A STORY OF
THE MACABRE ~

BY CHRIS HAZELTINE

By the third time my back tires fishtailed, I had to admit that I should have listened to my friends in Phoenix. They had warned me about traveling on the road during a mountain thunderstorm. Told me to wait. How bad could it be, compared to hurricane weather I was used to in South Carolina?

Leaving Payson, having skipped dinner, I drove east as the storm clouds started building in the twilight sky like enormous, bulbous, dark mountains...and with a speed I'd never experienced before. On State Route 260, while heading toward Heber, the rain hit.

I thought I understood the word deluge, but 15-minutes out of Payson, it was as if some giant, mountain god, out of spite and malice that I was driving my little rent-a-car on a pitch black mountain road, decided to dump bucket after bucket after bucket of rain on top of me. My weather-worn windshield wipers never had a chance.

Lightning punctuated the inky night and the wind mercilessly buffeted my poor little car. My tires were constantly hydroplaning and it was becoming impossible to safely drive. To the right of me was a sheer cliff and there was nowhere to turn off and wait out the storm.

Since I was the only car on the road, I slowed to a crawl and leaned in close to the steering wheel, trying to see the road in-between the wiper smudges and the lightning.

As I crept around a rocky bend, in the distance I saw a series of small, blue lights lining the road, like the kind of lights you see on airport runways, leading their way to a small motel.

I pulled into the drive way and braked, but there was so much water on the gravel that my car continued to slide to a crunchy stop, tapping the giant, cut log used as a parking barrier with its bumper.

I sat there, in the dark, trying to catch my breath, the rain incessantly drumming on the car roof, the "Welcome" sign flashing deeply green.

Suddenly, a different light, a bright light, to my left, pierced the rain and illuminated the interior of my car. I turned and saw a man, standing in the doorway of the motel, waving me in with his arm. I unbuckled, grabbed my leather notebook, stuffed it under my t-shirt – I didn't bring a jacket; my friends in Phoenix were right, again – and stepped out of the car.

Instantly, I was soaked. I slunked my head down and jogged toward the man, trying to miss the big puddles and, instead, managing to step in all the little ones I didn't see. I made it to the landing and the welcome dryness of the porch.

"Son, you are wet," said the man, as he put his arm around me and guided me inside. "Let's get you in."

"Welcome to the Comfy Inn Motel," he said. "Let's get you settled in." He was a congenial man, much taller than me, and his blue eyes, peering through almost translucent, pince-nez glasses, had a quality of seeming on the

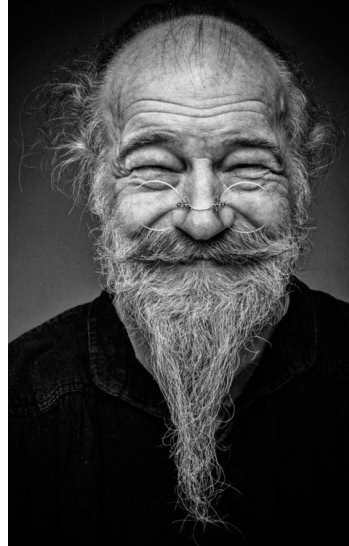
verge of laughter. His long beard, grey and twisted, had an abundance that greatly expressed the lack of hair that he had on top. As he sat me down at the bar and handed me a towel, his enormously large hands worked with an aged dignity, with the nimbleness and strength of doing things, of causing things that would be remembered.

I sat, drying off, as he disappeared into the kitchen. Just as quickly, he returned with a plate, on top of which was a large Sloppy Joe sandwich, steaming and savory, resting between an onion-dome bun.

“Figured you’d be hungry,” he said, as he grabbed a whiskey bottle from the back shelf. “And thirsty.”

“No!” I said, too abruptly. “I’m sorry. I mean, yes to food; no to a drink. Been going on eight years, now.”

“Gotcha! Coffee for you. Whiskey for me.” He poured himself a shot, made a squinchy face, and shook all over as if he were infused with a fireball. “Whew! Now, eat up. I got a pot brewing.”



To say this Sloppy Joe was the best sandwich I had ever eaten would be a colossal understatement. It was simply, utterly fantastic. “This is ungodly good,” I said, with sauce dribbling down my mouth, as he walked back in. He poured me a cup of coffee.

“It is good, isn’t it. Had some guests here, a while ago—family of five. Two twin girls—they were so sweet. Enabled me to make a big ‘ole batch. I got plenty for a while. Now, don’t you worry about getting’ water on my floor; you’re the only one here. Grab your stuff and come on over by the fire.”

I followed this man to what I guessed was the lobby, but felt more like a living room. Next to a large fire were two leather, high-backed chairs with small tables next to both chairs, and a large, Navajo rug on the floor.

“Sit,” he said. “Now, I haven’t lost my manners; just thought I’d get you comfy first. I’m Jed Sabba. I own this place. Now, tell me why hell were you out there, tonight?”

As I finished my sandwich, I introduced myself and told him about me, about being a professor, my travels from Clemson University to here, and about being a folklorist.

“That’s a real job?” he asked, sincerely, but incredulously.

“Yep, it is.”

“What do you do, with a job like that?” he asked, rising up to poke on a stereo. Blue Grass music lilted out of the speakers. He sat back down, took off

his glasses, and cleaned them with a blue handkerchief.

I was used to this question. I got it all the time: from my family, from strangers, from my girlfriend. "I collect stories. Folk stories, to be specific."

He reacted in a way that I have seldom experienced. He brighten up excitedly. "Now that's worthy! What kind of stories? Can you tell any of 'em. No, wait. Hold on!" He practically sprang up from his chair and trotted into the kitchen. I expected him to return quickly, but he didn't. So, hoping not to be rude, I got up and looked around.

Outside, the storm raged on, with its freezing rains and sheering winds assaulting the windows. Inside, it was perfectly comfortable and welcoming. There were shelves upon shelves of old, leather-bound books; the furniture was western/rustic, but plush and clean. The large fire in the center wall of the room was framed in a mantle of stone and old wood beams. Above the hearth, hung a large painting that, I swear, had been signed by Fredrick Remington. It seemed real.

From behind me, Mr. Sabba trotted back with two plates, with two more sandwiches. "Is this real?" I asked, pointing to the painting.

"It is," he said, setting a plate on each of the side tables, licking his fingers audibly. "Mr. Remington painted that in his Prescott studio for my granddaddy, long time ago."

"Mr. Sabba, I must say..." he interrupted me.

"Please, call me Jeb."

"...Well...Jeb...I must say you have a wonderful place, here. Very alluring and warm. But, isn't it tough, doing all of this by yourself?"

"I might be alone, but I'm never lonely." His smile was grandfatherly warm. "Now, please, sit back down, eat, and tell me about the stories!"

At that moment, a blinding blue-flash, an instant snap of thunder, and the lights went out. Jeb was up, again, quickly lighting hurricane lamps and candles. "Not to worry. Happens sometimes. Got a generator that kicks in to keep the kitchen runnin'. Go on."

With my sandwich half-eaten in one hand, I reached for my leather notebook with the other. "I'm working on...I'm collecting the various regional version of the legend of the Mogollon Monster. Have you ever heard of it?"

Jeb exploded with enthusiasm. "Have I heard of it?" And now he giggled with anticipation. "'Course I have! Oh, you gotta tell me, you gotta tell me, which versions have you been told? He ran back to his chair like a kid and hunkered deeply into it like it was storytelling night at the library.

I set the rest of my sandwich on the plate, wiped my hands off, and got up to retrieve one of the hurricane lamps that he lit. Sitting on the edge of my chair, I rested the notebook on my lap, flipping through the pages until I found the right place to begin.

“Well, from what I can tell, there are three versions of the monster story. It’s named the Mogollon Monster, as you probably know, because it resides primarily in this area...”

“Son, I have to stop you right there. It’s pronounced Mogollon.” Here, he stretch the word out so it sounded like ‘Mug – e – on.’ “It’s not ‘Mog-go-lon. Kinda a dead giveaway that you ain’t from around here.”

I practiced the word a couple of times, finding it a bit hard to wrap my tongue around the syllables. Finally, I got it.

“There you go! Now, the area is called the Mogollon Rim. It’s a big mountain ridge that runs from here all the way to Prescott and Williams and Winslow and Payson. But, most of the time, when you say Mogollon Rim, people are thinkin’ around Payson and here.”

“Okay. Didn’t know that.” I took a moment to correct some of my notes. Jeb was patient but eagerly waiting. “Anyway, the monster resides in this area, mostly. Now, I’ve got three versions, from four different people. “When I was in Payson, a Mr. Christian Tibshirany...”

“Old Man Tibs! I know him well. What’d he say?”

“He claims to have seen the monster once, when he went muling...”

“That would be packing up in the mountains with his three mules.”

“Okay. Anyway, he claims that in 1984, while muling, at night, he came across the creature rummaging around in his belongings. He says, ‘The god-awful racket woke me up. I come outside my tent and there, standing still, less than four feet from me was a monster-like man. The creature was huge. Its eyes were deep set and hard to see, but they seemed to look right through you. His chest, shoulders, and arms were massive, especially the upper arms – easily six inches in diameter, perhaps much, much more.”

Suddenly, there was a deafening crack as Jeb slapped his large hands together and burst out into laughter that would have made Santa Claus envious. “I was hoping you had heard that version. Come. Get up, let me show you something.” He grabbed a lantern and grabbed my arm, practically whisking me up and toward the gift shop, near the front door. He stood me by the glass case while he went around the other side. Inside the case were arrow heads, cheap, handmade straw baskets, and crystal rocks professing to have ‘healing’ powers. All the kinds of things tourist would love to remember their visit.

From a cavity at the bottom of the case, Jeb pulled out a large, cardboard box. Reaching inside, he pulled out what looked to be a large, long, chalky-white plaster pancake. He handed it to me. “Turn it over,” he said.

On the underside was an elongated footprint in plaster. It looked to be the footprint of a beast at least eight-feet tall, or more. Jeb snickered as if he had a secret conspiracy.

“We make these,” he said, “for the tourists. Old Man Tibs and me. We go out, make big old prints with a fakey foot on a stick. Then we sell ‘em.”

He was practically gleeful as he shared his secret with me. We walked back to our chairs. Jeb grabbed the coffee pot and freshened my cup.

“So...,” I said. “There’s no Sasquatch.” I air-quoted around the word “Sasquatch.”

“Afraid not,” he said, sitting back down. “The Mogollon Monster is me.”

“Swell. Okay. What about the story I heard, about an Ed Jenkins being the monster?”

Suddenly, Jeb was serious, almost aggressive in his reaction. “Who told you that story? Did Janice Buckley tell you that story?”

I flipped through several pages before I found my notes. Looking down the page, I found her name, circled in pencil. “As a matter fact, yes.”

He looked genuinely pained at hearing this. “Son, please, don’t write about Ed. He ain’t the monster. Janice Buckley used to be Janice Sheridan. She’s the only surviving member of the Sheridan massacre. Yes, it’s true that Ed killed that whole family. It was gruesome, but it was forty years ago. Ed was touched in the head, bad. And he died, in prison. He was killed in prison. And Janice never stops flapping her lips and telling stories. I feel bad for her, I do, but her fabrications just make so me mad. I’m sorry.” He removed his pince-nez and wiped his eyes with his handkerchief. In a moment, he had returned to his original self.

“Well, it’s kinda been a strike-out night for me. The only other version I’ve got is of skinwalkers?”

As if he pitied me, Jeb just looked above his glasses, grinned in the way you would toward a child who should know his multiplication tables by now, and shook his head.

“Well, hell,” I said, closing up my notebook and dropping it to the floor.

He laughed warmly and got up. “Do you want another sandwich?”

I just shook my head, dejectedly.

“Cheer up, son,” he said. “I hate to see you so disappointed. You haven’t heard my story. I’ve seen two of ‘em, you know.”

I sat up, surprised. “Two? You mean there’s more than one?”

“Um, hm,” he voiced, as he poured more coffee in my cup. I took a deep drink just to bring me back to the present.

Jeb returned to his chair with a look of thoughtful remembrance on his face. “Sometime ago, I think, there were two.” Momentarily, he looked at his large hands, and seemed to absently rub his thumb on his palm. “Anyway, this is how my daddy and granddaddy taught me. He’s not human, that part of your story, or what you were told, is correct.”

“How do you know?” I asked, curiously.

"Now hold on. You'll find out. Let me tell the story. Anyway, the monster – always seemed, I don't know, not right, calling him a monster."

"Well, it is a legend."

"True. So, the monster is a luring monster. See, up here, in the mountains, it's particularly hard to find food, to hunt for food. See, when it gets like this, all rainy and cold – like tonight – food is scarce. So the monster, he learnt to lure.

"I don't get it?"

"See, he lures his food, makes it come to him. Whole lot easier than hunting it down. You know?"

"How?"

"Oh, I suppose in different ways. I don't know. Maybe he uses sounds that are pleasing, know what I mean? Or smells. Good smells. Or maybe something inviting – what was that word you used a little bit ago? Alluring? Maybe something like that."

Suddenly, it felt as if all the palpable, tangible senses evacuated out of my body, like a ghost; and all that remained was a dead-numbing. It was harder to breath; harder to speak. I couldn't move.

Jeb went on, unconcerned. "See, as the years moved on, the monster learned the ways of his prey. Like technology, and things like that. I remember, one day, sometime, I had a veterinarian -- a horse doctor – and he had a whole mess of these little vials. Something called Tracrium. I looked it up on the Google. Found out it's a paral...a paralotical... oh, hell, it's something that makes you not move. And I thought, that's a good thing. Guess it's poisonous if you drink it; supposed to be injected. But I don't mind. Doesn't seem to affect the food."

My eyes stuttered toward the coffee cup. It was empty. Three times empty. I felt nothing, now. My breath was gasping, strangling, and fleeting.

"Oh, look," he said, "the fire's going out. Be right back."

Even my eyes would not move, now; they were locked on to his empty chair. I could hear him rummage behind me. When he returned, I could not see all of him. When he left, he was the size of a man; now he was significantly taller, bigger, and hairier. His pan-sized hands, with long, razor-like fingernails, carried a large bundle of clothes, suitable for a family of five. He threw the clothes in the fireplace.

He held onto a small, pink jumper with little kittens patched on. His voice was now deeper, more primal. "Isn't that just the cutest thing you ever did see?" He tossed it into the fire. Looking at me, he smiled a slavering, greedy smile. "Looks like you're about ready for dinner."

He hoisted me, with one arm, over his shoulder. "We need to make more Sloppy Joe's. You never know when another guest will be lured to stay.

A COLLECTOR OF
STORIES SOON
DISCOVERS THAT
SOME STORIES ARE
BEST LEFT.. ALONE!



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