

Fat Cowboy Horror Story

by Brandon

The Kuskokwim River vaults down the flanks of the Alaska Range, and its vivid turquoise snow-fed waters roll all the way through the heart of the Last Frontier, meandering and looping south towards far-flung Bethel. Past Bethel the rapid, narrow channel shifts character to an expansive, nearly stagnant thumb of silt-filled glacial melt, and the melancholy stream loses itself in the desolate waters of the Bering Sea. The terrain in this region is spongy deadened tundra spattered with a thousand nameless lakes which have never seen a boat. Inhospitable and forbidding, the land rarely feels the tread of a man.

High in the hills, the spruce grows thick over slopes of scree and silt. At this time of year, early December, it stands nearly bowed to the ground with snow weighing heavy on its strong limbs. In a certain stand on a spur of the Alaska, a lonely shanty was hidden near the Kuskokwim's headwaters. From cracks in the weather-beaten walls an orange light spilled. The cabin and its glow were the only sign of men for fifty miles besides a tiny airstrip several miles east, which was completely unusable for the eight winter months. The little gravel field was the only way in or out, barring a hundred-mile hike over impassable terrain to Anchorage. Wind-driven snow lay deep over the land. The mercury was far below zero, but in the cabin's one room three rugged big-game hunters warmed themselves over a smoky fire. Oil lamps hung from the rafters of the tiny shack as the flames roared in a crude hearth.

The three men were unrelated, yet there was a clear resemblance between them- lean, muscular men with unshaven careworn faces in flannel shirts and threadbare trousers. Boots which had seen better days adorned their feet, with their heavy greatcoats and gloves and big-bore Henrys stacked in a cluttered pile by the locked door. They were men of the bush, who had passed their entire lives in the backwoods and considered Bethel a bustling, cosmopolitan metropolis. It was impossible to determine their age, no one was to say whether any of them was twenty or sixty. Having flown in from Fairbanks in the short Alaskan autumn, they were riding out the winter where they could not be disturbed. When the opportunity arose they bagged a kill, although game had been scarce that year and a couple of six-point bucks had been the only fruits of their toil. In other, more plentiful years, the shack was stacked with dried meat by the end of the winter; whitetail, bull moose and grizzly, with many skins of the plentiful hares to boot. This year, however, had lacked promise.

Night falls like a trap in the Alaskan interior. The sun slips under the horizon after rolling in the southern sky like a bleak, faint billiard ball for two short hours. On this night the northern lights lit the sky, invisible from the ground due to a thick blanket of clouds. Fresh powder had fallen that morning, and the hunters knew more was on the way due to the freshening gusts of frozen air rending the night outside. A vague sense of doom hung in the winter air, yet no man spoke of it to the others. It was tangible but mysterious; how could this night be any different from the hundreds of others each man had passed in cabins like this? The night grew older and the fire burned low. A single grouse had been the only result of the men's excursion that day, and each felt strangely robbed. All were fatigued, yet none slept. They sat in a ring in their crude chairs around the hearth, discussing events of the day, the near-absolute lack of game, and other varied aspects of existence. Vaguely the sense of dread and doom hung in the air, but it was allayed in the mind of each man by the company of the others.

Stronger gusts of wind started blowing as the night dragged on, and the distinct hiss of driven powder which Alaskan men know so well began to play around the cabin. Flakes blew in through gaps in the boards, but quickly expired as they neared the hearth. The fire had nearly burned down to coals when the tallest of the men stood, stretched and yawned hugely and piled on several more logs. He absentmindedly stirred the red-hot coals with a poker, and then elected to start supper. Due to the dearth of game the men had been forced to use up their stock of canned goods which

they had brought from Fairbanks. But fortune had smiled on the group, as they had discovered a mysterious crate filled with baked beans by the gaping mouth of an exceptionally foul-smelling cave in a hillside on the day's hunt. The tall man returned with two ample cans of the find, an old scorched pot, a coffee percolator and a flask. He carefully stood the pot on a wire stand above the flickering fire, placed the percolator by the coals, and uncorked his flask. It was half filled with Scotch whisky and the men gladly passed it around. Then each took a tin plate and spoon, and spat their chews into the brass spittoon by the hearth.

The tall man stuck his knife into both cans of baked beans, and emptied them into the pot. He carefully ladled water in with the beans, sprinkled brown sugar and dashes of salt here and there, and soon the pot was bubbling and giving off a comforting, homelike aroma. The aroma went up the chimney and dispersed far and wide over the stands of trees and barren marsh.

Several minutes passed. The snow hissed around the shanty, the trees bowed and creaked in the gale, and the clouds raced overhead. Throughout the wild night not a living thing stirred. Drifts covered the frozen river. Presently a large crashing and rumbling sound was heard. The ground shook and snow tumbled from the delicate branches of the spruces. A gigantic, round black silhouette exploded out of the forest on the other bank of the river. With one bounce it leaped the frozen channel, landing on the other side and flinging open the door to the cabin as if the lock were made of butter. Its eyes lit on the empty tureen of beans and the discarded cans and a scream of rage carried for miles through the frozen night: "YOU ATE MY BAKED BEANS!!!! YOU ATE MY BAKED BEANS!!!!"

There was a great commotion from within the rustic cabin. Several gunshots were fired, followed by howls of extreme anger from the creature. There was a chorus of screams and yells, then a tremendous stomping and trampling sound, a great gulping, chewing, and snapping, and finally a blast of prodigious flatulence. The massive creature burst through one of the walls of the cabin as if it were a house of cards, and stampeded off whooping and screaming into the blizzard. A haunting silence fell.

Six months later a party of hunters traveling upriver came across the ruined cabin. At first glance they were elated at the prospect of a secure shelter from the night. Then they spotted the hole in the wall and what lay inside. Three piles of chewed bones with bits of flannel shirt were stacked on the floor. A pair of boots sat beside each one. Three big-bore Henry bolt-action rifles were bent into knots and flattened on the floor. Nearby were three flattened cots with torn mattresses. Scratch marks scored the pine floorboards, which were broken in spots as if some great weight had pressed the sturdy wood into submission. A horrendous smell hung in the air, and empty cans of baked beans littered the entire area.

The hunters sadly shook their heads. One had a young son of barely eleven who was up the Kuskokwim for his first year. The lad stared in shock, and stuttered "G-grizzly"? His father looked down at the boy sorrowfully. The lines and crow's feet on his worn face stood out like the deep gorges of the Mackenzie Range. The hunter seemed to have aged ten years in the past two minutes. He said slowly: "Much worse, son. You're still too young for this. We'll tell you when the time comes." The group trudged away heavily in the rapidly gathering twilight, making sure not to follow the path of the Western-style boot prints deeply indented in the soft ground.

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