

Daddy Long Legs

Hunting camp in October is about guys testing the waters for the November deer hunt. Maybe get a few birds (partridge that is), play some poker, browse mature magazines, and listen to Bob 'Upta Camp' Marley CDs. Not to mention consume a few beverages.

At camp there's the usual testosterone filled bluster and related plans of action. The guys' wives/girlfriends are all too familiar with the golden rule of camp: what happens at camp stays at camp. Ok, whatever. They know the only thing their men have a chance of getting at camp is a hangover.

Some of the boys are characters, and by the end of their stay all of them are to some degree. Rock Bottom, however, is a *real* character. This is a typical exchange with the affable Rock regarding finances:

The camp owner, Bobby Jenkins, might say, "Ok, you each owe me twenty bucks to help cover expenses."

To which Rock would reply, "Jeez, Bobby, I'd like to chip in but I've hit rock bottom."

Rock always brings beer to camp, though—lots of it. Cases of white cans with just BEER on the label. He can't mooch off the others because they'd run him out of camp for depleting critical supplies. So plan B is to cart in undrinkable beer, and of suspicious origin no less—white canned BEER became obsolete years ago. BEER is

DADDY LONG LEGS

so lacking in body and taste that it doesn't even qualify as rot gut. Rock has BEER all to himself.

Rock liked the 'Rock Bottom' tag so much he legally changed his name to it. He's ample around the middle, a little pigeon toed, and has an odd gait that inspired Frank Rossi to declare that, "When Rock walks the walk he sure rocks the bottom." Or something to that effect.

*

This particular October, a pair of F-150 4x4's driven by Bobby and Frank ground their way through the last stretch of rocks, ruts, and mud pits before finally slamming to a halt in front of Bobby's remote western Maine camp.

"Hallelujah boys, we're finally at camp!" said Bruce Sturgeon as he bounced out of Bobby's truck. "And what's that I hear? Why, it's the Rockster—now that's a sight!"

Sure enough, Rock came sputtering up in 'Frankenstein', a Chevy LUV of unknown vintage given that the frame was the lone survivor of a burned out wreck and the rest of it consisted of salvage yard remnants. Customization allowed Rock to squeeze in and out of the cab...barely.

Rock plopped out, beer in hand. "Didn't crack the first one 'till we hit the 'highway', I swear!" The highway was a stretch of groomed logging road off Route 16 that eventually branched off to the camp road. From there it was three miles of single lane, four wheel, white knuckle driving—sometimes in four low.

"I see some empty Hoodsies in the cab Rock," said Roland Poulin, who rode shotgun in Frank's truck.

DADDY LONG LEGS

“It’s five of five Roly, happy hour is underway!”

“Let’s get the gear into camp,” said Bobby. “The sun’s low and I’m hungry, not to mention thirsty. At least there’s no need to get the wood stove cranked up seeing’s how it’s Indian summer.”

“Bobby,” said Roly, “look at all the daddy long leg spiders crawling around on the deck.”

“Technically they’re scorpions, not spiders,” said Harold “Albert” Weinstein, the third passenger in Bobby’s truck. “This warm spell has stimulated their reproductive instincts.”

“Sounds like Albert’s been poking around wikiville again,” said Roly.

“Who gives a rat’s patushie what Albert calls them,” said Rock. “They’re spiders—I hate them and I hate this jeezly warm weather too!”

Bobby had the final word. “Ok, let’s finish unloading, get supper going, and play some cards.”

*

The traditional first supper at camp was always spaghetti with Frank’s famous sauce: thick, robust, and loaded with his uncle’s homemade hot Italian sausages. That, and a few too many brews, usually made for a shorter than planned evening.

“Well, maybe I won’t go into town tonight after all,” said Brucie.

“Good decision,” said Roly, “because we’re in the freaking willie-wacks. Town is an hour’s drive away, the bar closes at nine, and all three female residents are probably home in bed by now!”

DADDY LONG LEGS

“Besides,” said Bobby, “there’s a new camp rule, effective immediately: NO ROAD TRIPS—especially for single guys!

“Look, I’m going to retire for the night. We have all week to play cards and listen to Marley. I want to get some hunting in before breakfast. We’ll clean up tonight’s mess after bagging a few birds in the morning.”

Roly, Brucie, Albert, and Frank all dittoed, but not Rock, who was bidding his first case of BEER farewell. The night was still young. Wearing just a tee shirt and cargo shorts, he waddled out to the small deck and plunked down on a faded but sturdy camp chair, BEER in hand, cooler at his side. It was warm, with a light breeze that occasionally pushed a witch cloud across the soon to be hunter’s moon.

*

Rock sank into the chair, his right hand supporting the can resting on his thigh. He experienced the stillness and silence of the deep woods in the trusting, unwary way of drunkenness. Time drifted by as the moon’s light filtered through the tall white pines, giving the deck’s graying pine boards a silvery sheen. Eventually, Rock’s eyes closed.

Now in the clutches of alcoholic stupor, Rock’s head fell back, and his mouth opened wide. After a while, he felt an urge to scratch his nose, and he had cotton mouth. As his left hand brushed his snout, something fell off. He then swirled his tongue around in his mouth, gagged, and shot out a wad of goo.

His senses re-awakening, Rock had a creepy feeling on his exposed skin. His eyes opened to the sight of daddy long legs (“...thousands of them, I swear!”) crawling all

DADDY LONG LEGS

over him, many of them stacked on top of each other. It was as if Rock were hosting a daddy long legs orgy. They were everywhere: the deck, the ground, even crawling up the side of the camp.

Rock, unfortunately, believed all of Albert's nuggets of information. Shortly after arriving at camp, Albert explained to him that daddy long legs were a friendly, communal species—rather social in nature. He said their feeler legs could penetrate a finger and you'd never even know it and that was why the medical profession, not to mention NASA, had been studying them for years.

“Suffering-gee-freaking-hose-a-fats! Guys, get out here, the jeezly things are everywhere! Help!”

The camp crew was lights out, no chance of being stirred by Rock's yells. Rock dropped his BEER, tripped over his cooler, and stumbled off the deck.

Arms flailing, Rock thrashed his way through the woods behind the camp, eventually, thanks to his condition, falling flat and crawling until he came to a familiar landmark—a massive, gnarled oak tree. The tree's image in the moonlight offered the perfect subject for a gothic painting.

Breathing hard, Rock slid his back up against the tree. His arms went limp and his chin dropped onto his chest.

*

Bobby, up at first light, grabbed his 20 gauge and stepped onto the deck. Rock's cooler was on the ground—cover open and BEER cans everywhere. Bobby went back into the camp and tallied the bodies—no Rock.

DADDY LONG LEGS

Bobby decided to head out and walk his usual loop through the woods. Maybe Rock had beaten him to it, but that would have been way out of character. The tree supporting Rock was visible from the trail. Bobby spotted his slumped body, took a few steps toward the tree, and yelled, "Hey Rock, wake up you drunken fool!" He took a few more steps. "Rock!" Bobby stared at Rock for a few seconds, then spun around and raced back to camp. Albert and Roly were up and ready to join him.

"Come quick, something strange has happened to Rock"!

The three of them bypassed the trail and slashed straight through the brush, stopping dead in their tracks about fifty yards from Rock. In unison, they turned their heads away and back peddled a few steps. From their vantage point, the slumped Rock was just a brownish blob.

"Cripes, Albert, he's covered with some kind of brown slime," said Roly. "I heard that can happen when the skin starts to decay after death and 'riga' has set in."

"That's absurd Roly, besides, he's not dead. Look at his chest, he's still breathing. There *is* something moving over there, though."

Brucie and Frank burst onto the scene.

"What in the blue blazes...?" Frank blurted out. Brucie just stood there gawking.

"He's alive," said Bobby. "We've got to get him out of there."

"But how?" asked Frank. "He might have the plague."

"It's nothing of the sort," said Albert. "I think I know what it is. I have my binoculars. I'm going to get as close as I dare and take a peek."

DADDY LONG LEGS

Albert inched forward, peered through his binoculars for a moment, then stepped back.

“Just as I thought, *dermacentor albipictus*.”

“Laymen’s terms for us idiots please,” said Roly.

“Female winter ticks, also called moose ticks. The larvae seek a single host come fall—usually moose, but other ungulates as well—and feed on them throughout the winter. The adults drop off in the spring. What’s odd is that they’re not known to cover an entire body, and they rarely seek humans. I guess with Rock they found five-star winter accommodations.”

“Ok Professor Einstein, now what do we do?” asked Brucie, having emerged from his trance.

“Well,” Albert replied, “I’d say climb the ridge and call the sheriff. Tell him we have a situation up here and need medical help, a game warden, and a biologist.”

“Hold on,” said Bobby. “We don’t need the local officialdom. We’ll figure this out. What happens at camp stays at camp.”

“So what do we do?” asked Roly. “There must be a nest chock full of those critters over there. We can’t get too close, but we should at least throw one of your tarps over him in case he has hypothermia.”

“Not to worry,” said Albert. “Even though it’s 45 degrees and he’s dressed for summer, I suspect he’s fine. Rock is a rare breed—part reptile if you will, given the anti-freeze in his system.”

*

DADDY LONG LEGS

Just then, Rock let out a healthy belch followed by a groan. He rolled onto his side, then onto his hands and knees, and, once stable, started to rise. After considerable effort he was upright, hugging the old tree. In a slow motion maneuver, Rock rotated one-eighty, thereby correcting his orientation.

With his head still down, he reached into a pocket, pulled out a BEER, popped the top, and downed it. After another belch he declared, “Gall dang it, I just love being at camp!”

The others watched this show with the demeanor of an audience once again duped by a familiar magic trick. Rock, the ultimate survivor, proceeded to retrieve yet another BEER from his trousers.

“Rock, are you ok?” asked Bobby.

Rock raised his head. “Sure Bobby, I guess I got a little blotto last night and passed out on the deck. I don’t know how I ended up here, but I sure had some bad dreams!”

Rock started walking. For every step forward, his buddies took a step back.

“What is it, do I have leprosy or something?” Rock asked as he raised the BEER to his mouth. In the process of doing so, he finally noticed his condition.

“Holy shinola! It’s worse than leprosy—I’ve got maggots all over me!”

Rock, a feared linebacker back in the day, plowed straight through all obstacles in a mad dash back to camp, continuing down the road until he tripped and splashed down in a large mud hole, launching his precious BEER into a similar body of water ahead of him.

*

DADDY LONG LEGS

Rock's companions wouldn't let him out of the mud hole until he had scrubbed all the ticks off his body. They took his word for it when he pronounced the eradication complete because no one was going to volunteer to perform an inspection.

All cleaned up and back inside the camp, Rock seemed a bit down. Bobby tried to prop him up. "Rock, weird encounters with spiders and ticks can happen to anybody in these woods."

"Oh, that was nothing Bobby. The thing is, we just got here and I'm already out of BEER, plus I'm broke. I've hit rock bottom."

With that, Bobby rolled his eyes and grabbed his keys. Guess there was going to be a road trip after all.