

Just the Way I Like 'm

My brother, Jay, and I took my old Jeep and the tipi and headed up to the high lonesome for a few days R and R. Not to give away my favorite spot, I will tell you it's in the mountains south of Great Falls, Montana on pavement, then gravel road, then rocky four-wheel-drive trail, plus another seventy-five yards. Next to a bubbling spring in the subalpine fir on the edge of one of those high "parks" or open grassy areas common up there. Deer, elk, moose, bear. A short walk down to a fishing stream. A universe of stars at night.

I cut the engine and we just sat there for a while drinking it all in.

"Well, Jay, I guess we might as well set up camp."

"Ok, you roll out the tipi and I'll fire up the chainsaw and cut some firewood."

Now Jay is a good hand with a saw and more than willing to jump right in and do his share and more of the camp chores.....but he doesn't like to cook. He really doesn't like to cook.

We had the tipi set up just so, a stack of dry split wood next to our fire ring....and now it was time for supper. Just to see what he'd say, I asked, "Ok, Jay, which of us is going to be the camp cook?"

Pulling a deck of cards from his pocket (who carries cards in their pocket?), he said, "We'll cut for it: low card cooks."

"Well, I don't know about that," I said. "Is this deal just for this meal or for the whole trip?"

"Low card cooks until the other guy complains about the food. Then we switch."

"It's a deal!", I said. Of course he got the high card: I knew he would. But I had a plan. With the old Dutch oven and a skillet I whipped up a batch of biscuits and gravy and scrambled eggs. I secretly crunched up half an egg shell and slipped it into the eggs.

We sat by the fire to enjoy our meal. Presently Jay spluttered, "Ach,, there's shells in these eggs!...uhh, fixed just the way I like 'm."

I told him, "If you think that's good, just wait 'til breakfast." The next morning I made pancakes, leaving out the baking powder. Jay gobbled them down, saying, "Nice and chewy: fixed just the way I like 'm." Well, I still had faith in my plan: I just needed to dial it up a little.

With a pocket full of jerky for lunch, and bear spray on our belts, we spent the day hiking in a big circle around camp, just checking out the area. Up on the ridges were views all the way out to the flat prairie horizon. Down along the creek were tracks and droppings of elk and deer. At one place on the trail were gouges, tracks, hair and drag marks: unmistakable signs of a lion taking a small deer. In an area of beaver dams and willows there were moose tracks and droppings galore and even a young bull moose who looked at us like he knew his droppings didn't stink but he wasn't sure about ours.

Coming back to camp just at sundown we found the fresh scat of a very large, very well-fed bear right in camp; between the spring and the tipi. We keep a clean, bear-proof camp so the bear had only paused in passing, so to speak.

Supper was to be canned beef stew. You know the kind: with congealed grease and white lumps of potato that's not half bad if you get it good and hot and eat it in the dark.

By now it was past sundown and I was working by firelight to open a couple cans of stew and dump them into a pot to heat. Suddenly, I pointed back over Jay's shoulder into the darkness. "What was that!?" As he whirled around, clawing for the bear spray on his belt, I quickly threw a couple handfuls of moose droppings into the stew.

After a few tense moments Jay turned back to the fire." There's nothing out there. You're just spooked by that bear scat."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. The stew's hot; let's eat." I served him up a nice big bowl of stew. I took my time filling my own bowl and getting settled just so by the fire. Jay dug right in. After the first mouthful he gave me a sideways look and held the bowl into the firelight, poking delicately with his spoon. "Gaaack! Spittooie! These are moose droppings!" Then, taking another spoonful, "Fixed," shudder, "just the way I like 'm."