

no claim

on the Russell Fork

By James Ruch

FRIDAY, DAY ONE

10am- The trees have gone to brown but the day is warm. Weather Channel forecasts clear skies and comfortable temps. Which means rain. But the Suburban fires up on the first try. The stereo cranks. Everything is groovy. Jack and I hit the Gas and Go for supplies.

12:30pm- Friendsville and running late. Croc's gone, driving his brand new Subaru Cutback. Despite what his wife might say, Croc is no dummy, he knows we got two reservations at the hotel. He'll get there first to score the best room and swipe the towels. He's picking up Prossciutto and another Shredder en route.

1:30pm- Ah, Morgantown, Morgantown. What a splendid town. Gray skies, gray buildings, gray people. We stumble down the stairs to Phat's flat. The gang's all there; Phat, KTB, Young Squire, Hero. Spirits are high. Jack heads for the fridge. I stake out a spot on the sofa.

3pm- The Suburban's luggage rack is a piece of crap. I hope the duct tape holds. The boys have loaded three kayaks and two Shredders with lots of rope. Phat takes the wheel. Spirits are really high.

4pm- Scenic Fairmont and cheap gas. We restock the coolers. Jack gathers useful sodomy information from the bathroom walls. As the youngest member of our party, Jack is the least burdened with dead brain cells. His memory works. But we refuse to let his vivid descriptions of Triple Drop and El Horrendo dampen spirits.

5:55pm- Phat freaks and pulls off the road. In the middle of godforsaken nowhere and he thinks something is wrong with my truck. I accuse him of driving stupid. Hero leaps out and jiggles the front tire. Bad bearing. Definitely a bad bearing. Phat laughs in my face. A collect call to my mechanic offers little reassurance "Get it fixed." "Drive slow." "Don't call collect."

6:30pm- No mechanics with spare Suburban bearings in sight. We decide to drive really slow. It is only another 150 miles.

9pm- The bearing grinds like a Soul Train dancer, but we might just make it. The road twists and turns like a rat snake on methamphetamine. Spirits are low. Phat is at the wheel. I mention the upcoming hairpin turn in Grundy. Phat mentions the lack of brakes. I accuse him of driving stupid and take over

the wheel. The peddle slaps to the floor. Phat's derisive laughter does little to lift my spirits.

10:30pm- The Gateway Motel greets us like the freakin Taj Mahal, like the Promised Land, like the Emerald City. The Suburban lurches and bucks in granny gear, the bearing screaming like a train wreck. I back into a mechanic-friendly spot near the basketball hoop and pry my fingers from the wheel. The balconies brim with boaters. The party has started without us.

11pm- Our room has two bowl-shaped beds. As RockHard Expeditions chief bottlewasher and head muckety-muck, I get one. The boys can fight over the other. Somebody will be on the floor. Which looks comfy. The carpet is dirt brown. So are the walls and the ceiling and the curtains and the tub. The heater doesn't work but the TV does. No lamps. Somebody has tequila. Spirits revive. We collect money and order pizza.

SATURDAY, DAY TWO

1am- The Gateway Motel is Party Central. The world's biggest pizza arrives like a half sheet of plywood splattered with sausage and onion. Sausage and onion? Who ordered that? We'll be sorry in the morning. I fear vomit. KTB has consumed much tequila and fails to recover his sleeping bag from the basketball hoop. I show him to a nice warm sleeping spot near the toilet but he refuses to retire. He prowls the motel in his underpants.

3am-Hero sleeps like awristwatch-wearin' turd on a rock. Poke him with a stick and he emits a bad odor but no signs of life. The watch beeps every hour.

4am- The watch beeps. The room is dark as a burnt sausage in a rental bootie. My mouth tastes of fur and sausage and rental bootie. The room smells of sausage and farts and feet. Jack's feet are in my face. Jack's feet smell like rental feet. I need to pee. Even with my eyes closed against the glaring light I achieve a respectable 60/40 bowl to floor ratio. Must remember to tip the maid. On the way back to bed I trip over KTB's face. Flailing wildly in the dark I stomp squarely on Young Squire's belly. Now I know who's sleeping on the floor.

5am- The watch beeps. Hero hits the head and humors us with half an hour of musical

intestines.

7:30am- We meet with Croc the Outback Driver and Prosscuttio the Spicy Italian Ham in the other room. As expected, their room has all the amenities ours lacks; heat, towels, lamps, soap.

8am- Breakfast at the Whitewater Cafe. Over grease we discuss shuttle options. Eight boaters, one Subaru Outback. Our options suck.

8:15am-The Postman arrives. Three time WVa State ironman champion, rodeo bull rider, water carnage king; the Postman needs no introduction. He is fresh from a weekend of BASE jumping off the New River Bridge. The Postman greets us happily and mentions that KTB looks like sh"! He is not the first to make this observation. The Postman has a truck. Shuttle! Spirits soar.

10am- Phat is not fat. We call him Phat because of his love of fine food, goodwine and soft beds. Phat's a helluva nice guy and a great boater, but he has one glaring flaw. His gear stinks. Phat thinks his river gear will self-clean if left long enough in the hot trunk of a car. Phat puts on a polyester shirt that makes my eyes water. It makes my nose bleed. It makes my eyes bleed and my nose water. We forcibly eject him from the room, but the stink lingers.

10:30am- Betty runs the motel. Betty is a jolly, friendly woman with a healthy approach toward work. She would rather chat. I tell her my sad tale. She knows a good mechanic. Her ex-husband, Shotgun. Then she tells me about the kayaker who slept out back in a sleeping bag and got run over by a pickup truck. Squashed his pelvis. And then the weenie didn't even go boating.

12:30pm- We are on the river. Three kayaks, three Shredders. Hero paddles a Diablo. He knows the river. Croc and Prosscuttio paddle a Shredder. They have seen the river. Phat and Jack paddle a small Shredder. Jack has seen the river. Young Squire paddles an ancient UV degraded banana, KTB paddles a monster hangover. They saw a video. And I get to shred with The Postman. Paddling with The Postman is like being Clint's partner in a Dirty Harry movie; you know you won't be in the sequel.

1:30pm- The locals say the dam is a wonderful place to fish. Looking down on Triple Drop, I wish I was there. Triple Drop is no place to fish.

2pm- I begin to see the line. I discuss it with The Postman, "We don't go there, we don't go there, we don't go there." He tells me about his upcoming hip replacement surgery. I forge ahead, "We sneak that little chute there, run this hideous sh*! here pointed left, and paddle like hell to reach that eddy." Turns out The Postman has no cartilage left in his pelvis, just bone against bone. "Then we run that waterfall."

2:05pm- KTB gets hammered. KTB gets crushed. KTB gets his ass handed to him on

a leaking paper plate with no napkins. KTB flips and rolls and flips and rolls and gets sucked up into the hole and flips and rolls and flips and swims. He tries for the eddy but he ain't gonna make it, he's going for the big drop over the ledge eight feet down onto sharp rock, his boat right behind him. This is gonna hurt. I blow mywhistle helpfully. KTB scrambles on top of his overturned kayak and, in an awesome display of raw stupidity... er... courage, stands up and rides it like a surf board over the ledge.

2:15pm- The Postman and I run Triple Drop without incident. KTB is depressed. His stick caught an eddy on the right and disappeared under a massive undercut rock. KTB will be walking unless we can stuff Young Squire far enough under that rock to find the paddle. The sky opens up in cold rain. KTB heads for the train tracks, dragging his boat and grumblng obscenities.

3:15pm- El Horrendo is ghastly. El Horrendo must be unrunnable. No way a Shredder can make it through this apocalyptic nightmare. We're gonna die. We send Phat and Jack out as probes. They slide over a dry ledge and turn sideways. They suck back into a huge hole. The Shredder squirts and heads for the big drop. Jack is still in the boat. No sign of Phat. Jack has big eyes. Phat pops up next to the boat. His eyes are really big. He scrambles in. Just in time to slam the bottom hole and get packed under a rock.

3:25pm- The Postman and I hug each other in the bottom of the raft. We blast the hole and disappear into the froth. We get packed under the rock. My helmet gets a new gouge. We call it a clean line.

4:30pm- Cold rain falls on the takeout. Phat has twisted his ankle and it is swelling up quite nicely. No sign of KTB. I consult Rik, a local boater. "Where do those train tracks end up?"

"Elkhorn City."

"Is that close?"

"Hell no, and he better hope he don't meet a train in those tunnels." Rik is also a paramedic. He pokes at Phat's ankle. "Broken, definitely broken."

Worst of all, we have no beer.

6pm- Everyone beats me to the shower. Even KTB. All the towels are wet. Soggy, smelly crap hangs from every corner. But there is a beer store across the street.

11:30pm- Spirits are high. I wish I could sleep, but there's thirty-seven people partying in my room.

SUNDAY, DAY THREE

12:30am- Spirits are high. I wish I could sleep but there's forty nine people partying in my room.

1:30am- Spirits are jump-up-and-get-your-head-whacked-by-the-ceiling-fan high. There's one hundred and seventy five people and a large, drooling dog partying on my bed.

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3am- Hero's watch beeps. I listen to the gentle grunts and snores of my compadres. This is the life. 4am- Hero's watch beeps. I bounce a beer can off his temple.

8am- The motel room smells like buzzard barf. Like a buzzard that just ate a rental wetsuit and Phat's polypro and feet. Gad, I'm famished.

9am- After a hearty breakfast of greasy eggs and potatoes, I chat with Betty. A mechanic won't be available till Monday. I break the bad news to the boys. They don't care, it's not like any of them have jobs. Phat can't walk, so we make him run shuttle.

1pm- The Russell Fork is not a gradual river. Once it gets going, it gets going fast. Fist Rapid is only a micro-eddy past Tower Falls. Young Squire misses the eddy and runs the fan, impacting with a sickening crunch. Oh. That's why they call it Fist. Young Squire washes out, packed into his boat up to his armpits.

1:15pm- Triple Drop comes up too fast. The eddy at top is full. We bounce off a raft and curses follow us over the first ledge. We noseplant hard, catapulting The Postman head over buttcheeks. He faceplants the front tube and stands the Shredder vertical. I tumble out. Below, the big drop detonates. We race for the eddy. We swim like Olympic champions. We swim right up onto dry land like prehistoric fish scrambling out of the sea. The Shredder runs a clean line. One of our paddles joins KTB's stick under that damn undercut rock.

2pm- We only have one paddle. No spare. We could walk. We could try it with one paddle. We could carve a paddle. We could tie a rope to The Postman and scuba dive him under the rock. Young Squire shows us his purple ankle. Spirits are not high.

2:30pm- Between Triple Drop and El Horrendo is a wild, twisting water slide I call El Betweeno. We borrow a paddle but it does us little good, we pinball off of every rock. We run El Horrendo without scouting. Packed under the rock we congratulate ourselves for another clean line.

3pm- Spirits are high at the take-out. Phat meets us with both vehicles and beer. He still can't walk, but then neither can Young Squire.

6pm- The motel is quiet. Everyone with a life is on the road, home to their warm beds and jobs. KTB catches a ride, leaving his boat behind. I might have to sell it to pay the mechanic. Phat catches a ride with Croc and Prosscuttio, leaving his nasty, fetid, awful gear behind. I might have to burn it for my own sanity. Young Squire dangles his purple engorged ankle in the beer cooler. We munch fish burgers and watch Rainman.

MONDAY, DAY FOUR

tam, 3am, 4am, 5am, 6am, 1am, 8am- Hero's watch beeps.

9am- I talk to Shotgun on the phone,

"Chevy? Not a problem. Three quarter ton? Might be a problem."

10am- Betty's ex-husband's partner Matthew arrives with his wife and kid. Matthew is a pleasant, round guy with a shock of sandy hair. Matthew nips from a brown paper bag. I like him immediately. Matthew jacks up the Suburban and the wheel falls off. It starts to rain. My spirits plummet.

10:30am- Shotgun arrives with two buddies. Shotgun and Matthew discuss options. The axle and hub are shot, I need major repairs. "Might be a problem." Shotgun bums a beer. Matthew bums a cigarette. The buddies bum beers. I get the wife and kid a coke. I have a beer.

1:30pm- Matthew negotiates a deal with a woman up the creek. She has a trashed out Chevy sitting in the mud. Matthew pulls the damaged parts off the Suburban and heads up the creek. I repair to the room to watch soaps and goof on Young Squire's eggplant-looking ankle.

4:30pm- Matthew returns with twenty-five bucks worth of rusty parts. He cleans them with gasoline and Hero's toothbrush. Spirits soar.

6:30pm- Matthew is tired and ready for beer. I grab a six pack and we head out for a

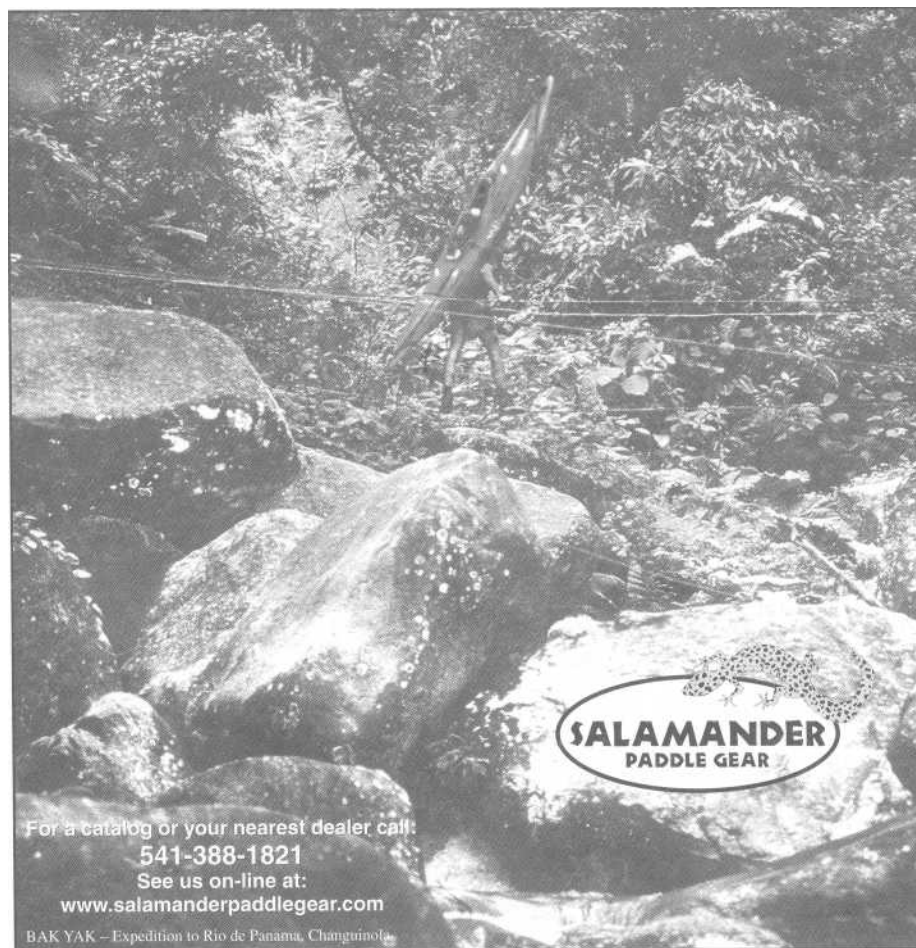
test drive. The Suburban is missing a hubcap and Matthew finds this offensive. We drive up to the trashed out Chevy and Matthew lifts a hubcap. The Chevy is actually sitting in the creek. On the way back, I learn some facts about Kentucky. Kentucky is where you throw your trash. Kentucky grows good pot. And if you need a regular paycheck to survive, get the hell out of Kentucky.

7:30pm- The Suburban runs fine. Matthew wants eighty-five dollars for his work. I give him a hundred. He gives me a handful of Xanax for my nerves.

8pm- A general feeling of well-being pervades the motel room. We decide to leave in the morning. Hero and I carry Young Squire across the street for our last meal at the Whitewater Cafe. I crave vegetables, four days of grease has left my bowels in an uproar. They serve up a tasty iceberg lettuce salad. For dessert we have Xanax.

10pm- I finally get a good night's sleep. I don't even hear Hero's watch.

Editor's Note: James Ruch is a well known WVa river rat and expert on fifth grade doodie humor. His work appears regularly on bathroom walls. He currently resides in Tokyo.



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