



STRANGERS IN A GHOST TOWN

By Artemis Savory

The art fair was on the green next to the gas station in downtown Stanley, Idaho. On that blue-skied afternoon, darkened tents proffered objects made by traveling strangers: homemade bracelets and necklaces, leather chokers and framed photos. I was in my early 20s and spending the summer working at a guest ranch down the road.



A photographer's stall caught my attention, and one print in particular interested me: the photo of a long, empty hallway with uneven floorboards and light pouring in from doors on either side. There were others, too: of rooms with peeling paint, and a table with a broken leg sinking into the floor. These eerie images reminded me of houses long abandoned and left to rot. Like a typical journalist (I'd graduated with a journalism degree the year before), I wanted to know their stories. The photographer, Cora, a woman in her 50s, told me that she'd taken the photos at Bannack—a ghost town in Montana.

"That's so cool," I said. "I wish I could see it. I love ghost towns."

She smiled at me. "Well, I was planning on taking my granddaughters up for a visit in a couple of weekends, if you want to join."

I'm from Massachusetts, and the default east coast mentality is fear. A year earlier, on a road trip with my boyfriend, he went off to a music festival in Tennessee, and I drove into Great Smoky Mountains National Park for some exploring. I didn't have fun. My friends and family had warned me not to talk to strangers, and to be especially wary of guys. My parents said not to tell anyone I was alone, because a girl alone is never safe. I took all of this advice and tried to follow it. I set up my tent, and when I couldn't get my fire started I gave up, instead of asking the guys next door if they could help me out.

While I was hiking a five-mile mountain trail, a man started talking to me, and I found myself telling him that my boyfriend was waiting at the car, because he didn't want to hike. I mentioned my boyfriend frequently, but we also talked about the landscape as it morphed from swamp to old growth forest, to tall dead trees. He told me about other trails he'd hiked, and I listened, happy for company, but still wary of a stranger; focused on his every move.

When Cora offered for me to join her and her granddaughters to see the glorious ghost town, I accepted. That summer, I had decided, was all about taking chances, making friends, and figuring myself out. We made a plan, and I counted down the days until I would get out of Idaho and into Montana, where I'd never been.

I drove south to Challis, where I admired the half-camper that leaned into the bed of Cora's pickup truck. I met her granddaughters. Shawna was a skinny redhead all in black, and Angela was not unlike her, but with light-brown hair and wearing brighter clothes.

We drove north for a couple of hours, and left the camper at the Bannack State Park camping area before checking out the town. Cora, eyeing my pathetic point-and-shoot camera, offered me her backup: big, professional, and with the ability to take amazing photos. I wrapped the cord around the back of my neck and made my way carefully through the ghost town, terrified I'd break the borrowed device.

The town itself was flat. A dirt road ran down the center, with old houses on either side. Wide hills rolled up and away from town. The sky was Montana-big: blue and cloudless. I was new to the west, and so much space left me feeling exposed. I missed my gray-soaked skyline.

In the first house we visited, a closet door swung slowly open and closed, although there was no breeze and the room didn't feel angled. We spent hours walking around, going into and out of the dilapidated structures and taking photographs, making up stories about who had lived here and what they had been like.

Later, I would see ghosts everywhere in the purple spots in my photos: above the 20-foot-long stove in Hotel Meade, in front of a creaking shed door, next to a giant bush of sagebrush, and hovering in the dark of that first house's closet. There were orbs of light in the pictures I took of a run-down house whose walls were bleeding yellow gunk and old newspapers.



Images on this page by Artemis Savory.

There were no orbs in the pictures I took of a junk-filled shack on the hill, where the girls put their faces in a window framed by a frayed half-curtain and yellow newspaper, or in a photo of Angela staring at me through the bars of a jail cell. I got a picture of Shawna in her copper hair and all-black outfit with her head angled down, glaring up at me; she's standing in a doorway, and the walls behind her are peeling wallpaper that looks like paint. When I said, "Shawna looks really demonic in this picture," her grandma replied, "That's probably her natural state." Shawna half smiled.

I may have seen an orb in the church, but not at the gallows on the hill.

These potential ghost sightings were thrilling and frightening. (Later, my boyfriend would scoff at my excitement about the orbs, calling them a mere trick of light—typical solar flares.) And hanging out with Angela and Shawna was fun; they could have been my long-lost cousins, and Cora a distant aunt.

Back at the camper, Cora had only three camp chairs, so she told the girls that they'd have to share one. We sat outside and told stories until bedtime. The sky was an all-encompassing black flecked with pinpricks of light. A river ran beside our site. Cora and the girls slept above the truck cab, while I took the table that folded down into a bed.

Following our adventures, we went back to their place and I met their horses. Cora saved the pictures I'd taken onto three disks so I could keep them.

When I was traveling alone, I learned that it's wise to be aware of your surroundings and the people therein. But my weekend with Cora and her granddaughters taught me that sometimes we can choose what we are afraid of. That weekend in Montana, I was not concerned by living strangers, only by the ghosts of dead ones. **R**

Artemis Savory is a writer and editor with a love of travel and old photos. Visit her website at artemissavory.com.