

# River Characters

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*Deep Thoughts and Shallow Stories  
about Fly Fishing*

By Walter J. Wiese

*BWO Books*

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# Cold Day in the Shop

“Boooonnniiiiieeee,” I called as I rose from my tying station, scissors in one hand and fragment of beef jerky in the other. Boonie the Shop Dog woke immediately and jumped to his feet like a puppy, knowing from past experience what was about to happen. He trotted over to the rack of neoprene waders, where no one ever goes, and hid behind the sun-faded bootfoot waders hanging there. As he trotted, that lovely, lovely white tail caught a ray of sunshine that had broken temporarily through the low overcast, and seemed to glow.

Eventually, the beef jerky won out, and Boonie emerged from hiding long enough for me to snip a clump of white hair. Forty seconds later I was securing a perfectly stacked wing on my Skykomish Sunrise. There wasn't a single steelhead within five hundred miles, but I could plan. Besides, steelhead

flies were more entertaining than another damn dozen foam beetles for the shop's fly bins.

Planning for future trips and entertaining yourself are what slow days in the shop are all about. At the fly shop where I work, in early June, when the Yellowstone fifty yards away is still running filthy and the overcast might mean rain or snow down here in the valley but definitely means snow up high, there's a lot of time for both. On occasion we'll see only two or three customers all day, and one will just want to use the bathroom.

After the Skykomish Sunrise, I moved on to Bombers. I didn't have to chase down the dog for materials to tie them, and since the only fish I've ever caught on steelhead dries are cutthroat out of pocketwater creeks and rainbows in the Yellowstone during the Salmonfly hatch, I figured they might actually prove useful. As I tied in the tail of the first, Phil, one of the other shop guys, came back in, fighting to shut the door behind him against the blast of north wind, clutching his third cup of gas station coffee of the morning.

Boonie emerged from hiding again, looking as cute and innocent as a twelve-year-old Border Collie/Blue Heeler mix can manage. "More treats?" he seemed to say.

Phil only patted him on the head, but he looked over at me like he was going to offer me a treat instead. He stuck his hand in his jacket pocket, grinning.

"I don't want any," I said.

He pulled his hand out of his pocket and, voila, revealed a Super Ball. "I found it in the street," he said. He bounced it to me.

I forgot about tying flies. I go through a Bomber about once every three years, so bouncing a rubber ball across the shop was far more important. We proceeded to bounce the ball to each other across the shop for the next twenty minutes, pausing once to direct a Japanese tourist looking for fleece to the camping store down the street. The woman looked shell-shocked. Clearly, it was not 38 degrees and spitting rain in Tokyo. We only ended our game because an errant bounce sent the ball flying into the office/warehouse in back, into which the fly shop's guide trip clients must carry rations when they go back into the stock room try on rental equipment. The ball will be found by archaeologists 3000 years from now excavating a fly shop tentatively dated to the 1970s. Only the fossilized lost foam hoppers they'll find in the ductwork will suggest their dating might be incorrect by a few decades.

Fun ended, Phil announced he was taking lunch. Boonie went with him, willing to brave the elements on the off chance there'd be a piece of cheese or smoked whitefish in the offing.

What to do, what to do? The cane rod on the rack behind the counter caught my eye. It's a 1970 Orvis Battenkill that never sold, and probably never will. It's never been fished, but it's sure been cast. There was no way I was going outside, but with a handful of old fly line we use to practice our needle knots and the rod's tip section, I could practice my accuracy casting indoors. The framed 8x10 picture of the nine and a half pound brown a client caught a few years ago was as good a target as any, and it is a straight shot from the picture to the far wall of the store, a good distance over which to practice my double hauls.

This practice got old in a hurry. Without a reel, it was too easy to shoot the entire line across the room to puddle against the picture. Oh well. On the plus side, I'd noticed a few almost empty fly bins on the display while I was casting, including the blond CDC & Elk Caddis that represent the White Miller caddis that would soon hatch on the Firehole. Time to earn my wages.

I got half a dozen done before Phil and the dog returned from lunch. Boonie was still licking his chops. Phil had his latest kitsch creation, a giant Trude made of yarn, paintbrush fibers, and pipe cleaners tied on a shark hook. A fly for catching tourists instead of trout. So far this season he'd sold two similar flies. The new one was still missing hackle, so it looked like he wanted to be productive for a while as well.

I just wanted lunch.

After I ate, I returned to tying, keeping at it until I had two dozen caddis on the table in front of me, enough to fill the bin through at least one good caddis day. Then it was back to tying for myself. Tired of steelhead flies I might never use and not interested in puzzling my way through a tourist-trap fly like Phil was working on, I decided to make something that might be useful at some point in the near future. The only question was what that might be.

"Did you go take a look at the river when you went to get lunch?" Phil said.

"No, didn't see the point. Why?"

"It must be below freezing up high. There river's cleared out a bit—there's probably eight inches of viz. Want to go out after work?"

Did I really have to answer that? It looked like giant stonefly nymphs were what I needed to tie. Keeping ourselves busy on a slow day in the shop with games and busywork is okay. Fishing—even on a cold, wet day when a handful of fish caught by dredging big nasty nymphs right on the bottom was all we could expect—is a lot better than that.

# As It Should Be

“Are you sure this thing will float with two people in it?” I said. My cousin Jack and I were standing on a boat ramp on the shore of a lake whose name I’m not allowed to mention, getting ready to shove off after loading fly rods, cooler, and a couple boxes of carp flies. The stern of the boat was still on dry land, for good reason. The boat was one of those cheap Bass Pro Shops hard plastic things that looks like the bastard child of a cracker box and a soap dish, and it had been used hard. At that time Jack usually fished alone, so to launch the relatively heavy boat he would simply push it off the roof of his Toyota Tercel and drag it down concrete boat ramps to the water. The heavier end of the boat, the end with the battery and motor, would grind against the concrete the hardest.

Jack fished *a lot*.

There was a hole in the stern below the waterline big enough for me to stick three fingers into.

“Sure, it’ll float. The stern just dips a bit. The thing is full of Styrofoam, you know.”

At the time, Jack was out of work and getting by on bargain store white bread, stocker trout, and all the panfish he could catch. Consequently, he was a skinny guy. This is an adjective that has never been applied to me. The boat was only nine feet long, and had a weight capacity of 450 pounds, presumably including water. Jack’s reassurances were not very convincing.

Well, I figured, the lake was warm.

On the other hand, it was also filthy muddy and full of... something. As the electric motor hummed us along towards the great carp gathering spot Jack knew about, enormous bow wakes would surge from the weed beds near the bank towards deeper water. I hoped they were big carp, but being a science fiction fan, I had visions of H. P. Lovecraft’s tentacled creations heading towards deep water not out of fear, but to set traps for us.

After three quarters of a mile, Jack turned us down a narrow creek arm where the water was noticeably clearer than it had been in the main lake. I started to wonder if the OX leader I’d tied on was going to be too heavy. Then I looked at the leader Jack was using, a level strand of 20lb test, and figured I was okay.

A hundred yards down the channel, around the first bend, a footbridge appeared. Jack cut the motor to slow and told me to get ready. “Get your feet set. The first shot is the best, and they’ll spook if they feel ripples from you moving your feet.”

I smiled and figured he was joking, though the channel was indeed smooth as glass. The banks were higher here than those in the main lake, and in some spots the trees almost met above us, giving the channel a humid, primeval atmosphere, broken only by the whoosh of cars on the highway invisible through the trees and the chatter and gasps of families standing on the footbridge, looking down at our quarry. “There wouldn’t be that many people there if there weren’t a lot of carp,” Jack said, and again cautioned me to get set.

He scowled at me as I moved my feet one last time, after he cut the motor. It was hard not to shuffle my feet. There were perhaps twenty carp hovering near the bridge pilings, all but motionless. Shadows loomed over the fish, people gawking at the colossal fish. The bridge led to a popular suburban nature center, and though it was now against the rules to feed fish from the bridge, it had once been popular. The carp remembered, and thus gathered whenever the nature center was busy. We were fishing on a Saturday afternoon on a nice day in September, when lots of people felt the urge to go for a stroll outside. Lots of people meant lots of carp looking for handouts.

Inertia carried the boat to within thirty feet of the bridge. I was in perfect casting position, in sight of more sheer poundage of fish than I’d seen outside of a hatchery. My fly probably would have worked in a hatchery, come to think of it. I was using a giant ball of white egg yarn lashed to a #8 streamer hook, soaked “Magic Sauce” dry fly floatant, the best big bug floatant on the market, to match the hatch, the bread that some people certainly still threw for the carp.

Okay, to be honest, we had a loaf of bread, too. It was against the rules to feed the fish from the bridge, but we weren't on the bridge, and chumming for non-game fish is perfectly legal in Missouri. The bread was of the same brand of cheap white bread that Jack was living on at the time. Indeed, over the course of the afternoon he ate about as much as the carp did.

But the chum was only for after the carp got spooky and sank down out of sight into the muck. Now, I had a clear shot at fish near the surface, and I took it. My big white fly settled a foot in front of a group of three carp, all between about eight and fourteen pounds. Average fish for this lake. The fly was about as dense as a piece of bread, and settled like one, to hover in the surface film in an amorphous blob.

A carp awoke from its nap and finned to the fly. It came lazily, and rose with agonizing slowness. It sucked in the fly, and as soon as it started down, I set. Then the fish was off to the races, or would have been if I didn't immediately palm down on my spool, testing the OX tippet almost to its limits. The fight was not flashy, but by the time I brought the carp beside the boat, far up the creek, where the fish had run, my right arm was quivering. The fish weighed twelve pounds, the largest fish of any species I'd ever landed up to that point, on the fly or otherwise, and still in the top five.

After we shuffled past each other, my cousin taking his place in the bow and me in the stern, on the motor (I noticed immediately that the boat was down significantly at the stern), my cousin got ready for his shot. I had used my eight weight, a rod suited to the

task. He was the one who had the carp fishing on this lake dialed. He had caught eight in one afternoon a few weeks past. To up the ante, he chose to fish a 7'6" four-weight. I told him he was insane.

The fish were spookier now, and many had scattered as my fish thrashed. A handful still hovered near the bridge, however, in more sheltered spots, up among the bridge pilings and near the logs piled against the bank, deposited there in some long-forgotten flood. It took several casts, but Jack finally interested one that hovered up in the shadows deep under the bridge. A moment after he set, the fish dove for the bridge pilings. Jack put what I thought was way too much pressure on the fish, making good use of the rope-like twenty pound test he was using, bending the little rod all the way to the cork. The fish turned from the logs, but shot off down the creek channel towards the main body of the lake, with occasional lunges towards the weed beds.

Jack screamed at me to follow, and after a moment of fumbling I popped the motor to full power and gave chase. The water filling the stern slowed us, and line peeled off Jack's reel. It was a cheap reel, and he didn't have an inch of backing on it. People were gathering on the bridge now, pointing. They had probably done the same thing when I was hooked up, but I had been far too busy to notice.

Soon we were far enough away that the gawkers lost their show, but the fish was beginning to tire, and though its lunges towards the weeds were still its best chance at freedom, it now came up and rolled on the surface at times. The boils it made gave credence to my Lovecraftian fantasies during the ride across the lake. The fish had been indistinct beneath the bridge;

now its true size was revealed. My carp was its younger brother, maybe infant brother. It could have eaten the entire loaf of chumming bread as a nice midnight snack.

I don't remember anything Jack and I said when we saw how big his fish really was, but I'm sure we screamed loudly enough that the people on the bridge could hear. I'm also sure we said some things to cause the tourists to cover their kids' ears.

At last Jack brought the fish up beside the boat. We each got a hand on it and dragged it in for pictures. The carp was so big that estimating its weight was at best an educated guess. Based on the terrible pictures I snapped, we estimate it went twenty pounds, maybe even more. Jack has size fourteen feet, and one snapshot I took shows one of his shoes next to the fish's head, heel beside its snout and toes barely past its gills.

The fish was big enough that Jack couldn't even hold it at arm's length, in the traditional perspective-destroying grip and grin pose. It still looked huge.

We eventually got the carp back in the lake and made our way back to the bridge. The crowd was still there, but they departed when it became clear that another fish would not soon be forthcoming. As I had quickly learned when I first tried for a carp and failed utterly at it, carp are not stupid, and after having not one but two of their brethren dragged away, the rest sank to the bottom and scattered. It was time to break out the bread.

As afternoon faded and the light got flat, we cruised at the motor's slowest possible speed up and down the creek channel, looking for the bronze flashes of carp feeding against the banks. When we

spotted a fish, the man on the motor would toss slices of bread towards the fish like frisbies. Most often, the bread was ignored. When, once in a great while, a fish would tilt upward to suck in the watery morsels, the angler would drop a cast in the fish's path. Now the carp were more cautious, however, and save for a single six-pounder that tilted up like a trout towards my fly but flashed away with a boil at the last moment, none paid our offerings the slightest attention. Jack tried creeping a nymph along the bottom beneath the bridge for a few minutes, but one of the sunfish that usually hovered among the carp picking up their crumbs was his only reward.

At last, when the light was far gone, we broke down our gear and turned for home. The battery was starting to go, and there were enough snags between the creek and the ramp that to return in total darkness was unsafe. We said little as we made our slow way back across the lake. A quarter of the way home, a night fisherman in the distance turned on his boat lights, attracting both insects and fish. Jack's boat lacked lights as well as a sound hull, and its electric motor was silent and not powerful enough to leave a wake. Though we passed less than two hundred yards from the other boat, I saw no sign that the angler in it noticed us. Only the boils of carp far larger than the one Jack had landed darting for deep water suggested that anything at all noticed us, which is as it should be.

# First Day

*Yellowstone River, April 25, 2006*

Later in the season, I wouldn't have called the Yellowstone fishable. After a four day warm spell that turned the river to concrete with runoff, on the 24th it had turned suddenly cold and blustery, with snow above the 6000-foot level in Yellowstone and on the mountain passes Interstate 90 crosses between Livingston and Missoula. I knew about the snow because I had driven through it hours before, making the long drive east to Gardiner, Montana after my last quarter of grad school and last month of solitary steelheading in northwest Washington State. I thought the Yellowstone would be just a touch off-color, with big trout slashing streamers as though they hadn't seen a baitfish before. I felt a visceral need for this to be true.

But that warm spell hung around like a bad hangover, and the river had at best a foot of visibility even immediately below the Gardner's mouth, though this smaller river flowed almost clear. Away from its clear tributary, the Yellowstone was a filthy mess. The trout would be shivering on the bottom, unwilling to move more than a couple inches in the cold, cloudy water.

Richard said Dailey Lake would be fishing, and he was probably right, but Dailey Lake was thirty miles back towards Livingston and inhabited only by hatchery-bred quasi-trout, perch, and walleye, and it was already late afternoon. With the cold, the fishing everywhere would shut off once the direct sunlight was off the water. Any activity would likely be happening now, either here on the Yellowstone or on the lake. I was standing right next to the Yellowstone, so that's where I fished, even if the conditions were far from right.

To be honest, I probably would have fished the Yellowstone if it had been so blown out that trees had been careening downstream like canoes piloted by drunks. After my last trip to the Skagit, back in Washington, I needed to fly fish for trout that bad.

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My six-weight felt like a toy after the giant spey rod I'd fished exclusively through the winter and early spring, Boy's First Fly Rod or an accessory for Fly Fisher Barbie, maybe. It would not feel this light again that season, since a six-weight is about as heavy as I typically fish for trout, but that afternoon I handled it more delicately than I needed to, marveling at the lightness in its tip, at the reel less than five inches in diameter. The 3X tippet and 4X dropper were more

miraculous yet, spider silk after the 12lb Maxima and OX fluorocarbon I'd fished all winter. I hadn't fished a tippet weaker than 2X since October, when I'd landed three steelies in an hour and a half on the North Fork of the Stillaguamish using 4X. I have fond memories of that afternoon. It was well past now, though, and it remained to be seen if I'd snap the lighter tippets the first time I had a strike, forgetting for a moment that I was trying to drive home a #12 nymph twenty feet away rather than a big Intruder eighty feet away.

I started with a giant tunghead rubberleg Copper John, a refugee from one of my steelhead boxes, above a Bead, Hare, and Copper, one of those nymphs that can be just about anything and whose stocky profile and heavy copper rib would help it stand out in the murk. A commercial fly tier I knew had fished the same stretch just before the warm spell, and had caught thirty in a couple hours fishing the nymph (which he invented) beneath a stonefly (another of his patterns), with all the hits coming on the Bead, Hare, and Copper, an endorsement if ever there was one. I expected my results would be similar. The Mother's Day caddis were just waiting, down in the gravel and among the cobbles and boulders, and the Hare & Copper does a fair job matching their pupae. If a fish ate the Copper John I wouldn't complain, but I really chose it to serve as weight.

Over the next twenty minutes, I lost two Bead, Hare, and Coppers and began a musical chairs routine with the top fly, switching between various stoneflies, Copper Johns, and even a Thunder Egg, another steelhead refugee. I kept the Bead, Hare, and Copper on the bottom, still hopeful that a fish could

see it in the dirty water. Nothing else happened as I worked my way downriver, still following the rhythms of swinging a fly downriver for steel even though fishing upstream would have made more sense with the nymphs.

Then I came to a patch of water where the topography of the steep bank, lack of overhanging trees, and a momentary and minuscule break in the overcast allowed a beam of sunlight to fall on a twenty-foot run, whereas the water closer to the Gardner's mouth had been in shadow. In happier weather perhaps a few early Mother's Day caddis would have been hatching from this short stretch already, prompted by the sunlight and warmer water from the Gardner River fooling them into thinking it was time to hatch already, but today there were none. There were trout, however, three of them. I caught two little rainbows, the larger stretching all of nine inches. The third was a cutt-bow that flopped free as I brought my rod vertical to lift the fish from the river.

It was a start, but just that. While in the dog days I'd happily hit tiny mountain creeks in pursuit of high country brookies and cutts no bigger than those little rainbows, they weren't much of a way to start the year. Not necessarily because of their size, but because of their size in relation to the waters in which they lived. The Yellowstone through Gardiner has an average fish size smaller than elsewhere on the river, a function of its precipitous gradient here perhaps, but an average trout is still eleven or twelve inches long.

I'd come to Gardiner that year uncertain of what I'd be doing after the season ended, if I'd stay in Gardiner and attempt to eke out a living editing

brochures and web copy for local businesses, if I'd pursue an internship, or if a job far from the river would suck me in with the promise of several times the income I could expect to make on the Yellowstone or near it. Just guiding in the summer, with no promise of a winter job, was getting untenable. With my future after the end of the season unclear, I needed a symbol, something to tell me that I was where I should be. Getting an average fish, one not too small nor too large, would do the job, would be a symbol confirming that I'd made the right decision in coming to Gardiner so early in the year, rather than trying to get some temp job in Bellingham, Seattle, or back in the Midwest, or even chucking the guiding thing and trying to find a real job immediately. I'd had a signal that signified it was time to leave Washington, but without another to close the circuit I'd created in my mind, I might second-guess myself, think that perhaps I'd made a mistake in leaving Bellingham, or should have done something else with my spring or perhaps my life.

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### *Bellingham, Washington, Late March and April 2006*

Late March and April went like this: I'd wake up, and if it wasn't forecast to be too windy or too bright, and it wasn't a weekend when the hordes would be out, I'd go thrash the Sauk or Skagit, without result save for many lost flies, marabous and articulated leeches and Intruders that sank on their heavy steelhead irons to hang in what seemed like every rock. In hindsight I should have hung up the Spey rod at the end of February, when a friend and I had landed

a pair of bright native steelhead, mine a fish so recently ascended from saltwater that not a hint of color showed on her sides, not the faintest blush of a rainbow's stripe. She was only silver and gunmetal gray, like the weather that day.

On days when the weather or my inclinations kept me in bed, I'd wake at 9:00 or so, drink a giant cup of coffee, and furiously tie flies all day. By the time I packed up my tying gear for the move to Montana, I had a couple thousand tied. I've never been a speedy tier, so five dozen would take most of the day. Afterwards I'd flip through magazines and web sites, searching for more, looking for patterns I could tweak, turn into my own, turn into something that more precisely matched the *Flavilinea* in Soda Butte Creek. I rationalized all this by telling myself that I'd made tying my job, for March and April. Meanwhile, any time I left the house it seemed like a HELP WANTED sign glared at me, told me that my long preparation for Montana was a mistake, told me that I should be starting up the ladder. Which ladder was an open question. I should at least have been building up a bankroll to help sustain me through the next winter, which would be my first without at least the modest stipend of a grad student teaching the basic composition classes that all the real professors despised, to say nothing of the freshmen who had to take them.

And I was still trying for another steelhead, a big one, the kind of fish that ate flies larger than the first two rainbows I caught in my first hour back in Gardiner. Steelhead remained an enigma to me: in two falls, two winters, and one full spring in coastal Washington, I'd managed to land nine. This was nine

better than many beginning steelheaders manage over the same amount of time, but I was just barely getting my double-spey cast down to the point where I could shoot line, and barely learning to see the steelhead lies amid the riffles, the water different from that enjoyed by the cutthroats, browns, brookies and 'bows that I could now read well. Soon enough I'd go, leaving the steelhead behind for the indefinite future, returning to water I loved, whose characters from runoff to the first tendrils of winter's long cold slumber I'd experienced enough to have a feel for the broad rhythms, if the specifics often enough surprised me.

Yet I'd also be going into something new, going to Gardiner thinking I might stay for good, this time, rather than leaving come near the end of the tourist season for other jobs or more graduate school and serfdom as a part-time composition instructor. And I was scared by this. A template lay open for me: get a normal job in Seattle or even working for one of the less heinous government bureaucracies, make lots of money, and fish on vacations and the weekends. Though an MA in English with a concentration in writing creative nonfiction is no ticket to fortunes, this template would have been easy enough to follow to the letter: even weeks after graduation several of my fellow grad students were stepping onto the beginning of this path, with something else filling the spot in my vision occupied by fishing.

So I was uncertain about my decision to leave the relatively green pastures of western Washington for the uncertainty of Gardiner, or rather the uncertainty of what would come after the upcoming guiding season, and my second thoughts on not

getting a job in the months after graduation was only a symptom. Then I went steelheading one more time, with the Skagit and Sauk at optimal flows and, the word on the street had it, the entire system chockfull of steelhead.

The first run where I stopped was already occupied by a fly angler. Not really a problem, as I had another couple runs on the other side of the river in mind, as backup options. It was early enough in the morning that I figured these runs would be empty long enough for me to fish them.

I was wrong. A boat full of bait fishermen, competition of a sort I seldom encounter in Montana, arrived at the first run just as I did. Who arrived first was an open question, but a neighborly thing for the boatman to do would have been to shove on down to the next run, leaving the slow, bank-bound angler (me) a run to himself. Boat anglers can fish every run on the river, after all. Instead the oarsman kept back-rowing, allowing the angler in the bow to probe every nook and cranny in the pool with his roe sack. It paid off handsomely, with a twelve- or fourteen-pounder, a bright, bright fish though I was fishing the Sauk far upstream of its confluence with the Skagit, half again as far from tidewater as the run I'd fished on the magic day in late February. I could have hit the boat with a cast, they caught the fish so close. Though I have no evidence for the belief, only the faith of a fisherman, I am certain the fish would have been mine, had the boat pushed on down.

That was strike one for the day's fishing, but I couldn't let one such minor tragedy ruin my day, so I fished down the run and moved on down to the next, directly across the river from the first run I'd wanted,

which is a named run called White Creek Run. The named run fishes better than the unnamed one on the back side where I was able to fish, but the run on the back side doesn't get fished much, so I had high hopes. The guy who had reached White Creek Run before I had was still there, and, since conversation was impossible over the roar of the rapid at the run's head, he spread his arms and shrugged his shoulders in the universal sign language for *How you doing?* I shook my head, signifying no action. He raised one finger, signifying a fish or at least a solid take; I decided I should have gotten up earlier.

My side still might hold a fish, so I worked downriver. I was swinging a modestly-sized Royal Blue, a pattern I'd seen in a tying manual and liked the looks of, but had never fished. I made it two-thirds of the way down the run without hooking anything except bottom, though I got my fly back every time it did. Then my rod bucked in my hands as though I'd hooked a horse. I brought up my rod automatically, heart leaping half out of my mouth at the strength of the take, but I hooked nothing, and furthermore I lost my fly. I stripped in line, expecting to find either a straightened hook or a pig's tail of line where my clinch knot had slipped. I found neither. Instead the second knot in the short, aggressively-tapered leader I'd tied to my sink-tip had failed. For the first time in my life, I'd broken off a steelhead on the strike.

Strike two.

I finished out the run, then moved down to a run on the Skagit near the mouth of the Baker. The run below the Baker is better and much longer, but there were already three other anglers thrashing it by the time I arrived, so I backtracked and fished the short

run upstream of the Baker. About halfway down I felt yet another thump, but when I raised my rod there was nothing, no sign that I'd had my second strike of the day, the only time I'd had more than one grab in a day and hadn't managed to land a steelhead.

Strike three.

At once, I felt a deep longing grab me, a longing to fish water where I knew one missed strike, one broken off fish, and watching other fishermen catch something were not things to worry over. When I got home I e-mailed my boss in Montana and told him I'd be hitting the road in a few days, as soon as I could arrange storage for all my stuff that wouldn't fit in my Subaru.

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### *Yellowstone River, April 25, 2006*

On the Yellowstone I got another occasional strike as I worked my way steadily downriver but only picked up two more fish, one brown and another rainbow, both about the same size as the first pair of trout. The patches of river that still had sun shining on them were getting few and far between, now, and I was starting to get discouraged. I was far from despair, but this was not what I had expected when I decided to leave Washington early. The night before I left, an hour before I disconnected my phone and stuffed it in a box with a bunch of other odds and ends, a friend called to give me a report from his recent trip north of the border, where there are more steelhead rivers, many more steelhead, and fewer and more courteous anglers than there are in Washington. He'd landed four, along with a number of large resident cutthroat and bull trout. His partner had

hooked a twenty-pound spring Chinook salmon, and the salmon fishing would only get better over the upcoming weeks. I had never made it to British Columbia for steelhead, having dreaded the expensive license and the customs foolishness, and for a moment the prospect grabbed me, though ultimately I left the next morning for Gardiner.

Now, with only four fish landed and two or three missed strikes, and with only spotty fly shop work until late May and few guiding opportunities until sometime in June, I was starting to think that I should have stayed in Bellingham another month. I had experienced the Yellowstone and its tributaries in summer and fall, never spring. Now that I was here, I doubted myself. Based on my lack of success, it seemed the river in spring spoke a language I did not know.

Then I caught another fish. It happened without any particular effort on my part, I just saw my indicator hesitate, I set the hook, and I found myself attached to a fat thirteen-inch rainbow that darted out into the current and jumped twice in quick succession. It got slightly downstream of me, and with the current as its ally, put a moderately impressive bend in my rod. Since I still felt like I was using some sort of fairy wand, for a moment I felt a surge of what can only be described as panic. This fish, like all of the steelhead I have caught, scared me slightly, made me think that I was not in control of the situation. Then the moment passed, I let out the handful of slack I held and got the fish on the reel, and in thirty seconds or so I reached down and netted the pretty male rainbow, bulging from the caddis larva it had been eating when it decided to take my fake one.

I let the fish go without incident and nodded my head. That was more like it. It was also the last fish I caught that day, but that was okay.

The next morning the river was in much better shape. A ten-inch rainbow took on my first cast, and I skidded it home in a moment. Another took on my second cast, but it wriggled free before I could bring it to hand. I might have laughed then, as I tend to do this when I lose average or small fish and know that another will soon follow. After checking my hook to make sure it was sharp, I moved upstream.

# Things I Hate About Fly Fishing

I hate it when I'm hiking out after fishing and the game trail I'm following shows why "game" know how to use all four limbs, crumbling under me and sending me tumbling fifty vertical feet through sagebrush and prickly-pear and off an undercut bank into the Gardner River. Especially when the fishing has been slow, leaving me little reason to be happy about being back in the water besides the opportunity to wash out the prickly-pear spines.

Or when the lodgepole trunk I've stepped on dozens of times while walking to or from my secret run on the Yellowstone decides that, this time, it wants to roll under me, sending me falling headfirst downhill. Especially when I fall on a knob where a branch once was, a fire-hardened knob that catches me in the side and makes me think, for several

terrifying seconds, that I've cracked a rib or two. *Most* especially when I do this on my birthday.

Or when a herd of bison decides to cross the river where I'm fishing, forcing me to hide between two boulders, hoping they don't see me or hear me and decide to step on my face in case I'm a predator in two-legged disguise. Actually, at the time it's rather amazing, and is only irritating in hindsight, and when the fish is big. Especially when the fish is big (it usually is).

Or when a herd of teenagers comes floating down the river on tubes when I'm guiding clients in the drift boat. They go much more quickly than I do, and usually seem to get in the way when I've got the boat in position to fish a particularly good eddy or current seam, or they dive into a rapid right after I do, forcing me to dodge swimmers as well as Whitebeard waves that could swamp the boat, sending me and my elderly clients into the drink. This always happens when it's hot and sunny and the fishing is terrible, of course, and the kids seem to be having a great deal more fun than my clients and I. It's especially frustrating when my clients are southerners, comfortable in the blazing heat, and don't want me to pull the boat over to take a dip.

Or, when I'm working a good run, I really hate it when a guide comes along with his clients and high banks me, because I'm fishing good water that he wants his big-tipping clients to be able to fish. Especially when *I've* been guiding a lot, and have my first chance for some relaxation in a long time.

Of course, the thing I hate the most, the thing I really can't stand, is when I've been alone for a long time on a certain swift mountain creek with rapids

almost tall enough to be called waterfalls, the water's surface turning metallic with the last light of the fading dusk and the noise of the night birds and tumbling stream blending into one, is when I have to go home. Sometimes I stand at my turn-around point until all light is gone, bathed in spray from the plunge that gives the stream its power, a silver curtain over a hundred feet tall, whose waters seem to hold the light the longest, until it reflects only starlight.

# Four Scenes: Why and How I Became a Fishing Guide and Why I Still Am

## *One: Poolside, August 2000*

I stared out at the same pool where I'd been a lifeguard for the past five summers, a pool I now managed. In the shallow end, one of the ancient blue-haired witches who thought she owned the place scowled at the twelve-year-old girl drifting by on a raft. The breeze had pushed the girl across the pool into the old lady's path, an affront if ever there was one. The old monster shoved the kid out of her way, waking her up and making her fall off with a splash.

One of my teenage lifeguards was sitting next to me, making bedroom eyes when she wasn't watching the pool. In my idle moments, I made them right back, age difference and immorality of boss-employee relationships be damned. I needed something, anything, to break the monotony of what had been a long, long summer. Besides, she liked to fly fish. I'd been fishing myself all of twice since May, and both times Bennett Spring had been packed solid with morons aiming only to get their five stockers for the frying pan. To add insult to injury, the Pale Evening Duns hadn't revealed themselves, and there had been only one sporadic midge hatch. Not good.

In the deep end, that cop who was always off-duty was between his girlfriend's legs again. He liked to leave his wife at home with the kids when he was taking advantage of the pool's "cops swim free" policy. He came to the pool every day, for hours. I thought about telling them to cut it out, but only for a moment. I had been yelling at him and his skank all summer, and recently a friend had overheard the cop ranting about how he was looking for an excuse to arrest me, so it seemed prudent to lay low for another two weeks. Then I'd head back to school and I'd be free of that horrible job. There was no way I was going to be a lifeguard again. People shouldn't stay at jobs they start on their fifteenth birthday as long as I had.

I was barely 20 and already felt like I was at the end of my rope. It was time for a change.

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## *Two: An Apartment Scene, October 2000*

After class on Monday, I strapped on my Strat, dimed my amplifier, and proceeded to rock out. After

a few minutes, just as I was getting the kinks out, my roommate came home and flopped down on the couch. He turned *on* the TV. He turned *up* the TV. Since the TV was plugged into my stereo system, Jerry Springer got quite loud, loud enough to interfere with my playing.

I snapped off my amp and muttered something that would have gotten bleeped if I were on the show, the only sort of words I'd directed at my roommate in weeks. Normally I'd have gone in my room and played through headphones, but the midterm stress was bad enough only volume or fly fishing had a hope of cracking it. I'd fished the Table Rock tailwater on the White River over the weekend, and the browns and weird fall-spawning stocked rainbows had been running, which helped the stress. Every local knew they were running, which didn't. Elbowing my way into a patch of water amid the snaggers and trophy hunters was something even the 25-inch rainbow I'd caught on a Brassie and 7X couldn't quite make up for. Forty minutes of wholesome family hell while stuck in traffic in Branson on the way back to school was enough to bring back most of the stress.

Even college wasn't enough. Fly fishing in the Midwest wasn't enough. I needed to go back to Yellowstone.

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*Three: In Front of the Computer, February 2001*

Though there was some variation, no matter how I ran the spreadsheet program it always came out the same: if I had to live in Yellowstone flipping burgers at minimum wage in one of the hotel