

NEXT TIME

BY JOHN BARSNESS
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Streams usually cut a deep hole just below bridges. Abutments are spaced to accommodate normal water levels; during floods the widened current accelerates through the gap and carves away at the streambed. The hole on the downstream side of this one-lane wooden bridge, even in low August water, was “deep enough to float your hat,” as an old ranch hand I worked with used to say. There was no railing, and I leaned out the open window of the pick-up and looked directly down into the deep water, thanking whoever makes trout streams it was not gin clear.

The pool was a translucent green, the color of a trillion phytoplankton yearning to breathe free. I reached into the ashtray for a new penny and dropped it into the pool, risking arrest for heavy-metals pollution. It disappeared a couple of feet below the surface. As it disappeared a fish tried for it, a green-silver curve deep in the water.

“How’s it look?” Eileen asked, from the other side of the cab.

I turned and looked past her, upstream, where the shadows of cottonwood trees leaned across the water. The evening light between our





bridge and the cottonwoods was filled with caddis flies, appearing white as they flew through the sun against the shadows, vibrating like a quick galaxy. "It looks good," I said. A blue heron took off, unfolding out of the shadows and heading upstream, made nervous by our stopping. Eileen pointed. "Too bad he left," I said. "I was going to ask how the fishing was."

The home place was a half-mile back, a two-story white frame house at the end of a gravel road bordered by more cottonwoods. The rancher had just sat down to eat, he said, otherwise he would have shown us where to fish, a half-mile downstream. "It's too thick by the bridge," he explained. "Lots of trees and willows. Not many folks fish there."

"That's okay," I said. "We'll take our chances." We thanked him, and he said if we were to come by again, just go ahead and fish, don't even ask. He'd know our outfit.

There was a place to pull off just on the other side of the bridge, a barbed wire gate leading into a hay field. We sat on the tailgate and pulled on hip boots, then walked along the edge of the field to the cottonwoods, Eileen carrying the rod. Near the trees a whitetail buck jumped up from the tall grass, summer antlers full grown and thickened with velvet, as brick red as the rest of his body, and stood for one terrorized instant before running upstream through the trees, high tail visible like a firefly even after his body disappeared in shadow. We stood and watched, then walked through low rose bushes under the trees to the edge of the stream. Both upstream and down from the cottonwoods we could see willows lining the bank, but the tall trees shaded out everything underneath them except the roses. Everywhere was the taste of late summer, heat and dust and the sweet-raw taste of willows and hay in our mouths.

A gravel bar angled across from the far shore, curving into the bank below us. On the far side the water looked deeper, and as we stood and looked I saw a trout rise in the bubbles below the bar.

"There's your trout," I said. That summer she had decided to learn to fly fish as the water dropped and I started catching more trout on dry flies than she did on spinners. I pointed with my rod. "Over there, in the deep water."

She shaded her eyes and looked. "I can't see it."

"It looks like the bubbles, except slower." I watched and saw the same trout come up, and then another, farther downstream. "There's

one below him now, in the slick water."

"I see that one. Are they eating those flies?" She pointed at the caddis in the air.

I shook my head. "They're rising too slow. Those are all in the air, anyway, not the water." I watched the trout rise again. "They probably eat anything that comes floating along." I squatted down and sat back on the edge of the bank, then eased my legs into the river, onto the firm gravel. Suddenly my feet felt pleasantly cool, and the shadows seemed cooler too, as if the riverbed held two rivers, one of water and one of cool air flowing just above the water. I turned and held her hand as she eased into the water, then started across, angling up the gravel bar, the water less than shin-deep. In the middle of the river I looked upstream. The water quickened again above the pool in front of us, but beyond I could see the current slowing into another pool.

We shuffled our feet slowly under the surface, moving within a short cast of where the lower trout rose. She whispered, as if we were stalking the whitetail buck. "Is the fly on my line okay?"

"You don't have to whisper," I said. "Just don't splash." She looked at me, frowning. She likes to get close to anything wild. She likes to fool all their senses, and was extremely disappointed to find wild turkeys can't smell. "Let me see it," I said. It was a small, sparse Elkhair Caddis that had been on the leader for a week now, since I'd last used the rod. I took a plastic container of line grease from my vest pocket and worked a little into the hair and hackle. It was an old fly, made before I had started crushing every barb in the vise before I tied a fly, so I flattened the barb with the needle-nose pliers from my vest.

"Okay," I said, letting the fly go. "Catch him."

She pulled some line from the reel and began false-casting, a little too fast.

"Wait on the backcast," I said. We'd gone through this all week, on the lawn.

She nodded, and did better. When she had enough line out she cast, the line landing in a snaking curve four feet below the fish. Her lips tightened and she breathed hard through her nose.

"That's okay," I said. "It's better if it isn't straight. Just let out a little more line and do the same thing again."

So she did, dropping two coils of line right on top of the trout's last rise.

"That's a little too much," I said. "He won't come up for a while now."

She shook her head, stripping in line. The coils caught one another and the line came up in a tangle. I held the rod while she picked at it. "You warned me," she said.

"About what?"

"About having to learn a whole new set of tangles."

He jumped three more times, twice in the downstream shadows, then the last time upstream in the sunlight, so bright he almost hurt my eyes.

"You remember. You always say there are too many things to remember."

"This is real—" She held up the tangled line. "None of that 'accelerate the cast' stuff." She smiled, looking up, the line finally untangled. "Now what?"

"The other's still rising, up in the bubbles."

She looked, bent forward like a heron. "Now I see him. When he comes up. It's like a longer, slower bubble."

I nodded. "Try to put it in the fast water at the edge of the rocks. Then let it float into the bubbles. He'll find it."

She nodded, very serious, and bent forward again when she let the line go. The fly landed perfectly at the base of the gravel bar. I lost it in the shadows but watched the yellow line. The trout curved up in the bubbles beyond the tip.

"He just took it."

She shook her head.

"Yes, he did. I saw him. Right beyond your line."

"Then he didn't eat the fly. I never felt a thing."

"You don't feel them. You watch, then raise the rod."

"You never told me that part!"

"Well, it's obvious. Look at the slack in the line. You have to raise the rod to hook the fish."

"I never had to before."

"With lures you always have a tight line. With flies, you have to strike as soon as they take the fly. Otherwise they let it go."

"You mean they spit it out."

I winced. "You've seen a trout's mouth. They don't have spitting gear."

"That's not what Milo told me, that time we went fishing up Rock Creek. He said the trout spit my lure out."

"It's just something people say. Besides, you know Milo."

"Yes, and you know everything, but you don't tell me to raise the rod when the fish eats my fly."

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, okay. I thought you'd watched me enough to know."

She didn't say anything, just started casting again. She false-cast for a while, drying the fly, remembering that, and then let the line go. The sun had moved over the head of the pool, and I could see the fly

floating between the bubbles, looking very phony. And then the trout took it, coming up in a curve so slow I could see his dorsal. "He—" I started to say, but the trout was already in the air.

"I got him!" she shouted. The trout jumped again, downstream, a rainbow bigger than I expected.

"Yes, you did."

She laughed. "What do I do?"

"The same thing you do with a lure. Let him go until he's tired. Let him have a little line if you think he's pulling too hard."

He jumped three more times, twice in the downstream shadows, then the last time upstream in the sunlight, so bright he almost hurt my eyes. After that he stayed underwater. She kept the rod up and when the trout began to tire I unhooked the net from the back of my vest and knelt down, feeling gravel and cool water under my knee, through the waders. "Back up and lead him over it," I said.

She held the rod up with both hands and waded backward, standing behind me, and the trout came up and slid over the black water and then over the aluminum rim. When I lifted the net he felt too heavy, like an aspirin bottle full of lead shot. I reached down and twisted the tiny fly out of his mouth, then held the net in the water, letting him breathe.

She squatted beside me, very elegant in jeans and hip boots, and looked at her trout. He had an olive back and a pale wash of pink over his gill covers and flanks, as if someone had painted a new chrome bumper with diluted nail polish. She shook her head. "Let me let him go," she said. I handed her the net. "He's heavy," she said, looking at me. I nodded. Then she tipped the net up and he went.

We straightened and looked upstream, at the bottom of the next pool. "Your turn," she said, and handed me the rod. I looked at her. "Thanks," she said. "Sorry I got mad."

I shrugged. "I've done it so long, I forget what I have to tell you."

She nodded. We walked up the gravel bar to the bottom of the next pool. The cottonwoods ended and there was a long stretch of undercut grassy bank above deep water. We stood and watched, but no trout came up.

"There has to be one in there," she said, whispering again.

I nodded. "Probably, if there are rainbows like you caught so close to

Writer and editor John Barsness lives with his wife, Eileen Clarke, in Townsend. Nora Wildgen is an environmental artist in Minneapolis. This essay is from Montana Time by John Barsness © 1992. Used by permission of The Lyons Press, lyonspress.com.

the road.” I took a small box from one of the bottom pockets of my vest and found a deer-hair grasshopper pattern. I bit off the light tippet and tied the ’hopper onto the heavier leader, curling up the tippet and Elkhair Caddis and putting them in the box. Then I greased the ’hopper up like an English Channel swimmer.

The undercut was all in shadow and I first cast down at the tail, in six inches of water. At dusk you never know. Nothing happened, so I took a step upstream and cast again. By the time we’d reached the middle of the cut bank I had the range just right and was tossing the ’hopper into the loose overhanging grass about half the time, pulling it out to drop along the edge of the bank.

Then the water bulged up under the fly like the surface of a Florida pond when a sunken alligator decides to leave, and I jerked my rod hand slightly, involuntarily, and then stopped it voluntarily, because I could still see the fly. The slight jerk pulled the fly toward us, sinking it. Then it bobbed up again, and the trout hit it, head coming out of the water like a small ’gator. The rod was already halfway up from my involuntary jerk and the fish hooked itself when it turned back toward the cut bank, water flying. I leaned the rod sideways trying to keep the fish out of the shadows, and the trout rolled on the surface.

“Brown,” somebody said, and I realized it was me.

“Catch him,” Eileen said. “Catch that sonofabitch.” She gets like that, the city Irish kid who finally learned to fish. She would have been a good poacher, back in County Mayo, having that hard need to possess wild things, no matter what the cost.

The heavy tippet held and the trout held in the deeper water below the bank, bending the rod rhythmically in the slow cadence of a bass drum. I’d seen other big brown trout fighting the hook and could imagine his length bending, like a muscular hinge, as he tossed his head.

When that didn’t do him any good he turned and headed downstream through the shallow riffle, sucking the slack line through my fingers until it all disappeared and the reel whirred. I stuck my left hand inside the reel and touched the hard-wound line to slow the spool. He made it over the lip of the bar and I followed, walking fast through the shallow water, not caring if I splashed now, feeling the trout tossing his head again as I wound line back onto the reel. I held the rod high, standing above him at the edge of the pool, feeling sweat on my forehead, suddenly cool in the evening. Then he stopped bending, holding steady in the stream. When I leaned back he came toward me, then ran across-stream, still strong but not uncontrollable, and I knew I had him.

Eileen knew it too. “Let me take the net,” she said, standing behind me.



“I don’t know if he’ll fit.” I pumped the rod now, dropping it as I reeled, then lifting again, and he came halfway across the pool, then ran again, not as strong.

She took the net anyway, unhooking it from my back, and by then I could see him, turning in the dark water. He was lean, not belly-heavy like the rainbow, lower jaw hooked like an osprey’s. When I leaned back to try to move him toward the net he came and then turned again. Then I said the hell with it, I’d either break him off or land him, and brought him up and over the net, at the edge of the bar, and Eileen lifted.

His head hung just under the aluminum frame, but his tail stuck up above the other side. He was the color of the gravel under our feet, an old bronze, with red spots broken up by his scales. I breathed out and thought about killing him. He’d taste fine, cut into steaks and broiled with some butter and garlic and basil. Then I twisted the grasshopper out of the bone of his jaw and said, “Let’s get him into the water.”

We both knelt again, in the same place we’d knelt to release Eileen’s trout. She dipped the net and I held the trout, both my hands under his lean belly, weightless in the current. His gill covers worked and he breathed among the bubbles.

“There’s lots of air in that water,” I said. Eileen nodded. “Sometimes I wonder,” I said, holding the trout.

“Wonder about what?”

“Wonder about making trout swim up and down streams until they almost kill themselves.”

She nodded again.

The trout moved in my hands. I took my upstream hand away, holding him gently by the wrist of his tail. Then he swam away, blending in a slow cadence, the same color as the new penny I dropped over the edge of the bridge.

“Next time, trout,” I said. “Next time, I’ll eat you.” 🐟