

The One That Got Away

It's the first of the month and the place is pretty full. I've been off the stuff all winter, but I go down just to see everyone. It gets kind of lonely in the room, watching the same shows every day, my Louis L'Amours falling apart, covers gone from half of them, pages missing. Most days I go to the library to check out the box scores. It's a place to go, waiting for the mission to open, before dinner. I watch the people.

It's not like before, people in the living room at Mom and Dad's, Sunday dinner: pies on the hutch, turkey and dressing on the table. I always looked forward to that. Especially in the summer: it made the long hours in the field seem worth it, not that I didn't like working. I did, too much. I would have been better off finishing school, learning a trade. I'd have something now, a living room with people in it. The Lucky Penny's OK, but it's not a living room.

Everyone is in a good mood; pockets full of cash. When the checks come in I can drink all night for next to nothing. My schooner is never empty for long what with the pitchers lined up. But I am sticking to Pepsi. Christmas day was pretty bad, the sheets caked in what I'd eaten the night before and me too sick to do anything about it, just lying there in it. I decided I had to do something, and there was only one thing to do. It was hard at first. Seems like one day drags on just like all the others, not much more than the tube and Louis to occupy me. It can get to you. A little buzz lifts me out of that, talking to the guys at the Lucky Penny, feeling good for a change. Things go easier if I am half way there; if I could stop half way it'd be all right. But I never do, so I am drinking Pepsi.

The girls are down, too, it being the first and all. They know when a guy's got some cash. It makes it more fun, havin them around, and I don't have to worry about money. I'm not expecting much, but it's OK listening to them laugh, the stories they tell, if you know what I mean. Keeps it friendly, unless a couple of guys are set on the same one. But none of us are rutting too hard at our age. We're mostly past that stuff.

Most of the guys are here. Willie and Dale have the big table in the corner. Willie retired on disability from the railroad after getting twenty years in, so he's usually pretty flush this time of the month. He and Dale each have a honey sitting by them. They have their grin on, cigarettes glowing, with a half full pitcher on the table plus two others. There is a big blond sitting alone next to Dale's girl. I say alone because Willie and Dale are pretty busy with the gals they've cut out and this one is sitting not talking or anything, just staring ahead, twirling her schooner around and around. She is a big girl, strong looking with a pug nose and hands like a logger, but she has a pair of jugs on her. I think maybe, her being left out and all, I can get something going with her, someone to talk to, you know, so I slide in next to her. Willie says to get a glass and fill it up, there being plenty of beer, so I tell him I am off the stuff for a while.

"Suit yourself," he says.

Bethune is her name. Says she grew up in Ola, but now she is living in Sweet, working on a dairy. Says she likes working with cows; been around cows her whole life she says, since they had a few on the eighty acres in Ola. It isn't like the old days though, where she would walk to the pasture twice a day and talk to the girls as she led them into the barn. Back then she milked them by hand, just the few they had, never more than three or four. She says she misses the old barn, the hay stacked in the loft, steam rising off the

cows' backs while they munched on the grain, cats meowing in anticipation, the warmth of the teat in her hand.

“It’s all production now,” she says. “Big business. The barns have been replaced by giant parlors, milk a hundred cows at a time. It’s all machines now,” she says. “It’s cows, though.”

It takes me back to our old place in Indian Valley, about the same as hers by the sound of it. We had a few cows, too, but I didn’t get out of it what she did, getting up before dawn and rounding them up. They were just stupid animals to me, but I milked them just the same or I’d of had to deal with Dad and his belt. I didn’t see any romance to it, not then anyhow, but listening to Bethune I kind of think that I had missed something. Oh, I liked the farm all right, but I remember different things than her. Like stacking hay, balancing on the stone boat behind the old Case tractor, the sound of the runners through the stubble, one bale after another, the steady throw of the hook and jerk, leather chaps on my thigh as I kicked the bale up onto the boat. I remember the ache of my muscles and the smell of my skin, sweaty and brown from the sun, the clouds billowing up over West Mountain, the haystack growing square and tall, as beautiful as any building.

It’s all about the same, milking and stacking, just some folks prefer one over the other, I guess. She and I are having a good visit, talking about how things used to be, her in Ola and me in Indian Valley. I can almost smell the pie on the hutch, if you know what I mean. Then I have to get up, my bladder not being what it used to be. I make my way back to the head, visiting along the way. When the bar is full like that it is hard to get from one end to the other. Back when I was on it I could drink three or four schooners just working from one end to the other, saying hello and what not. So I am probably gone ten, maybe fifteen minutes.

When I get back Shorty is sitting in my place. He's a fidgety guy, not more than five feet tall, the kind of guy who could blow away in a strong wind. I think about sitting down opposite them, wait him out, but then I think that with all the noise in the place I won't be able to hear them, so what's the point. I figure he won't last; no one can talk to Shorty very long, him being so fidgety. I sit at the bar where I can keep an eye on them, wait for my chance. I figure she might look for me, throw me a glance or something.

I'm sitting next to Bobby where I can see them in the mirror, no need to turn my head and make it too obvious. But then I worry that she might think I've lost interest, but I'm already stuck. Shorty can't hang in there all night, I think. His bladder can't be too big, small as he is. After a while I can see that I have figured this all wrong. They are getting along pretty good. They're putting the beer away and every time Shorty says something Bethune throws her head back and laughs like crazy. I can see that she has real nice teeth, straight and white as piano keys, and her laugh is kind of girlish, not like her hands. He's got her going pretty good. Then I see his little hand on her thigh, like a chipmunk on a log, and she doesn't seem to mind. She's looking at him like he's something special; you know the look a girl can give a guy, the one you hope you get. Shorty is getting it. Before long she has her arm around his shoulders. They make quite a couple, her twice as big as him. I start to think about how they might match up, his face in her tits and his toes not much past her knees, but then I stop that. I stop looking at them in the mirror. I don't like what I am seeing.

Bobby and me are talking, not about much. The weather, the box scores; mostly about how the monthly checks don't cover what they used to. I'm thinking I'll head back to the room. Everybody's having a good time, the

place is pretty loud, but I'm not feeling it. I'm having a hard time hearing Bobby even though our heads are just a few inches apart, leaning over the bar; it's like he's down a long hallway; I can barely see him. Soon as I finish my Pepsi I am going to go.

Then Bobby turns over his shoulder and it's Shorty. Says he needs a room, him living on the river and all. Girl is hot, he says; don't get many chances like this. Bobby looks back over the bar, taking a drag on his cigarette. He's not interested in helping Shorty out.

"I'll let you use my fishing pole," Shorty says.

Everyone knows how much his pole means to him. All he does is fish, practically lives on fish, in his camp up past the golf course.

"Come on Bobby," he says, "have a heart."

But Bobby just keeps studying the mirror, elbow on the bar, chin in his hand. When Bobby gets like that there's no turning him.

"I'll tell you my favorite fishing hole and even show you what to use," Shorty says. He's getting real fidgety now, dancing around like a kid that's got to pee, but Bobby isn't budging.

I'm thinking about summer evenings down on the Weiser, the water boiling with hungry trout rising to the hatch, pole bent over and line humming, the big one running.

"Isn't much but you can use my place," I say.

Shorty looks over at me, considering. "How's your place," he asks. "Bobby always keeps his clean." Like as if he's got a choice, I'm thinking, remembering why I don't talk to him much.

"It's clean," I say. "Where's your pole?"

"I got it in the back," he says. "Never leave it in camp if I'm not there. Always take it with me. Where you going to stay," he asks.

“With Bobby,” I say, like it’s all been arranged. “I can sleep on his sofa.” Bobby’s chin is still in his hand, smoke rings rising blue above him.

“You got the key?” Shorty asks.

I give him the key and then he goes and gets his pole and a plastic cottage cheese container. There’s some spinners and hooks inside.

“Take this silver spoon and hook a big worm on it,” he says.

“Where’s the worm?” I ask.

“That’s your problem,” he says.

Then he turns and puts his hand on Bethune’s shoulder, whispers something in her ear. She says something to the girls with Willie and Dale, finishes off what’s left in her schooner and stands up. The top of Shorty’s head is at her armpit, and I start to get that same picture in my mind. Shorty’s got his arm as far around her as it will go when they walk out the door.

Bobby lives in a one bedroom house between downtown and the river. It belonged to his wife. She’d grown up in some small town in Nebraska or Kansas, some place like that. Her dad owned the general store, so they were set up pretty good. One summer when she was a girl they took a trip to Yellowstone. After that all she could think about was the mountains, being from the flatland and all. That was how she ended up here. Then her dad comes out to visit and by the time he leaves she is moving into this house. Not long after she meets Bobby and he moves in. Turns out she gets some disease called Huntington’s, but Bobby stayed with her, took care of her, wheeling her downtown so she could feel like a part of things, cooking for her and cleaning up, that sort of thing, right up until she died. Then she left him the house.

It could use some paint, that's for sure, but it's pretty cozy, her having bought the furniture and all. You can tell a woman's been around. I don't mind going there, I can tell you that. We sleep in the next morning. I'm not in a hurry. I have all day.

Bobby has some eggs in the fridge, and he fixes toast, too, and coffee. I feel pretty good after. I just sit on the couch thinking about breakfast, how good it was. Bobby cleans up. When he comes in the front room I ask him if he wants to go with me, up the river.

"Might as well," he says.

"What are we gonna do about worms?" I say. We both sit there for a while, Bobby picking the lint off his shirt. He's like that. He likes order. I get Shorty's pole out and study it. There are about five different pieces of leader tied together on it and the line is the same. I figure Shorty must have found pieces of it along the river and tied them together. I dig the spoon out of the cottage cheese container and tie it on the line.

"We could look around the neighbor's garden," Bobby says.

"What for?" I ask.

"Worms," he says.

"Be a place to start." I say. "You got a shovel?"

"Neighbor might," Bobby says.

I follow him around back to the neighbor's garage. Bobby goes in the side door like he owns the place. There is a shovel in the corner. It is pretty cold out and the digging is pretty hard.

"If there are any worms around they must still be hibernating," Bobby says.

"Fish like marshmallows," I say.

"You got any?" Bobby asks.

“And salmon eggs,” I say. Then I think about not having any of those either. “How about corn?” I say.

“I got corn,” he says.

We go back and Bobby gets a can of corn out of his cupboard.

“You got anything for sandwiches?” I ask.

“Sure, just take everything I own,” Bobby says. I can tell he’s not too serious. He gets out some baloney and mayonnaise and cheese.

“Cheese might be OK,” I say.

“Now you’re getting picky?” he says. He likes the company as much as I do.

“For the fish,” I say.

We put our coats on and I get the pole and lures, Bobby has the bag of sandwiches. It’s a long walk up to Shorty’s camp, about three miles. It’s cold, you can see our breath, but the sun is out. There are a lot of people walking the path along the river. They all seem happy, just to be walking. I kind of like it, too. The cold on my cheeks feels good, and after a while my body gets warm, my legs are moving pretty good, better than they have in a long time. I try to think of the last time I was on the river. I can’t remember.

We walk like that for a good half hour without saying a thing, just taking it in: the people, the scenery, our muscles working. Then we come to a place where there’s a creek that comes into the river and a wooden bridge. Beyond the bridge the creek widens into a pond, and beyond the pond, beyond the cattails and marsh grass, is a big lawn with flower beds and fruit trees and an enormous two story brick house with white trim. In the middle of the lawn is a bronze statue, a golfer with his club on his shoulder, watching the flight of the ball. At the far end of the pond there’s a dozen ducks. The ducks are floating in pairs, hens in front and drakes behind. Sometimes the drake

catches up and taps the hen's back with his bill, like he's the boss. But wherever the hen goes, the drake follows. Then they stick their head in the water and tip so their tail feathers are sticking straight in the air; feeding on the bottom. Bobby and I stand there on the bridge, arms resting on the rail. It's more than we can get ahold of, but we can't stop looking.

It takes us another hour or so to get up to where Shorty said to fish. There's a small dam across the river and a big concrete irrigation gate where a ditch takes water from the river.

"It's pretty good below the dam," Shorty said. "The dam churns up a lot of feed, and there's big deep pools for the fish to lay in. You should catch some there, all right," he said. "If you want a big one, try the ditch behind the gate. Don't look like much, but fish get in there and can't get back out to the river. That's where I caught the four pounder."

There's a rock, round and smooth, overlooking the river. I sit on the rock and set the pole and lures down. Except for the water rushing over the dam there is no movement; the world is hidden behind a curtain of sound and what I see is its pale reflection. I want to walk through the curtain, but this is as close as I can get.

So I just sit there.

"You want a sandwich?" Bobby asks. I'm looking at the river, the tree's skeletons on the other side, almost as high as the mountains beyond. The tops of the mountains are covered in snow. I imagine an elk up there, stuck in the snow, surrounded by wolves.

"Shorty said he saw a cougar out here last year," I say.

"You don't say," Bobby says, looking around like he just noticed where he was.

"They follow the deer down, mostly in big snow years."

“How was the snow this year?” Bobby asks.

“See for yourself,” I say. “Snow line’s pretty high up; shouldn’t be any cougars around.”

“Oh,” Bobby says.

Bobby came out from Cleveland and this is about as wild as he’s seen. It’s nothing like where I’m from, but it’s plenty good enough. If I pretend that’s West Mountain I’m looking at, I could almost be on the Weiser. My dad used to take me down there in the evening, after the hay was all put up, before the snow came. He had a bamboo fly rod that had been his dad’s; said it’d be mine some day. He showed me how to lay the line out soft so the fly would light gently on the dark water under a grassy bank. Seemed like every time he cast, a fish would strike. If there’s one thing my old man could do it was catch fish. I used to get so mad, him showing me how to do it and me not catching a thing, him catching a fish every cast, that I’d start bawling. That’s how mad I’d get. Then when he got one on he’d hand the rod to me so I could feel that fish tugging on the line, almost like our muscles were attached, and my tears would stop. You can feel your heart pound strong in your chest when you have a fish on.

“You gonna do any fishing?” Bobby asks.

“Not just yet,” I say. “Best fishing won’t start for another couple of hours.”

“Mind if I give it a try?” he says.

I help Bobby get set up. I put some corn on the hooks. I show him how to flip the bail out and hold the line against the pole with his index finger. Then it’s all about timing, I say. A quick flick of the wrist, more wrist than arm, I say, and let the line go. He takes the pole and tries it. The spoon crashes into the water at his feet. It goes like that for the first few casts.

“It’s all about timing,” I say. “Flick your wrist and release your finger about half way,” I say.

Before too long he’s sending it out there. I point out the good water.

“Right below where the water’s roiling,” I say. “The fish sit in there picking off what ever comes over the dam.”

Bobby stays at it for a while, but I can tell he is getting bored. “I thought Shorty said this was a good fishing hole,” he says.

“Fish don’t feed all the time,” I say. “Fishing’s about patience.”

“You can say that again,” Bobby says. “I don’t think they’re hungry today.” He’s been at it maybe twenty minutes.

“Why don’t you try the ditch?” I say.

“Where he caught the four pounder?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Behind the gate.”

“I was saving that for you,” he says.

“Go ahead,” I say. “I don’t fish ditches. You can save the river for me.”

Bobby reels the spinner in.

“Wait a minute,” I say. “Let me put some cheese on it.”

The corn is long gone, so I put some cheese on the hooks, a couple of big hunks. Bobby walks up the bank and across the path. The water in the ditch is running slow, but it looks pretty deep, like it could hold some big fish.

“Just try it out there,” I say, “over where the grass overhangs the bank. They like places like that.”

Bobby puts the lure right where I tell him to, but nothing. He casts a few more times, then all of a sudden his pole has a bend in it.

“Have you got one on?” I ask.

“I think so,” he says. He sounds excited now. “It feels like a big one.”

“Maybe you’ll break Shorty’s record,” I say. “Don’t pull it in too fast,” I say, “or he’ll get away. Just take your time. Play with it a little. Tire it out.”

“Do you really think I’ll break Shorty’s record?” Bobby says. I can see the kid in him.

“Never know,” I say. “We’ll find out. Just play him a bit. Don’t get in a hurry.”

“He ain’t jumpin’ or nothin’,” Bobby says.

“You sure that’s a fish you got, Bobby?” I say. “Could be a shoe or something.”

“There it is! There it is! I told you it was a big one!”

Bobby drags it in. The fish is rolled over on its side; I see the ugly under slung mouth.

“Looks like a sucker,” I say.

“What kind of a trout is that?” Bobby says.

“Not a trout, Bobby. It’s a garbage fish,” I say.

Bobby turns and looks at me, his eyes sinking the way they usually do.

“Can you eat it?” he asks.

“Never heard of it,” I say. I’m wishing I hadn’t said that about the garbage.

“Good for nuthin’, huh?” he says. He’s back in himself now.

“Makes good bait,” I say. “You can cut it up and put the pieces on the hooks. Oughta catch some fish that way.”

“Naw. You can if you want,” he says. “Think I’ll just head back now, if you don’t mind.”

Bobby hands me the pole. The sucker is gasping on the bank; the hook is still in its mouth.

“You got a spare cigarette?” I ask.

Bobby reaches in his shirt pocket and pulls out his pack. “Here,” he says, “take an extra. Need matches?”

Bobby heads back down the path. His shoulders are sagging; there’s a hobble in his gait. I take the hook out and find a rock so I can put the fish out of its misery. Then I clean my hands off in the ditch and pick up the pole. I’m hungry now, so I sit back on the rock and eat the baloney sandwich. It’s late afternoon; the light is getting softer. There’s a heron standing on one leg up the river; he’s standing still as can be, waiting, his long neck in an “S” shape. He’s watching, listening. I watch him the whole time I am eating my sandwich. I don’t want to miss the lift off, the long swooping grace of his wings. When I finish my sandwich I pull out a smoke. It feels good, sitting there by the river. It doesn’t get any better. The heron still hasn’t moved, not a muscle. That’s patience, I think. He’s a fisherman.

I think about cutting up the sucker, using it for bait, but I haven’t got a knife and I don’t want to touch the slimy stink again. Just as I’m ready to get up, put my line in the water, I notice something. A big black beetle is walking across my rock. It’s too cold for bugs, I think, but I’ll take it. I pick the beetle up and put it in my pocket. I’ll just keep it there, I say, for when the time is right. Shorty’s got a plain hook in his can, about a number twelve. That beetle will fit on there pretty good, I am thinking. I stand up with the pole in my hand and look up the river.

The heron is gone.

I’m on the gravel at the edge of the river. The diversion dam runs across the river thirty feet above where I am standing. It is maybe eighteen inches high, just enough to force some of the water into the ditch gate. The water is a deep murky green, then breaks into a frothy white. Below the dam the water swirls in eddies. Then the fall line drags the water into a current

shaped like a “V”. That’s where I want to fish, in the “V” where the current carries all the churned up food. That’s where a smart fish would be, I think, and smart fish get to be big fish.

But I start out fishing the eddies. It’s been a while since I’ve done this, and I don’t want to scare the fish away. I’ll just get the hang of it again, I say. I get the spoon dangling a few inches below the tip of the pole, press the line against the pole with my finger and release the bail. Then it’s just an easy flick and release. After a few times I’m sending it out there pretty good, maybe forty feet or more. I’m not getting any action, but it feels good standing there on the river like when I was a kid. The dam is kicking up all the water’s aroma. It smells fresh and wild to me. I can feel it in my skin.

Pretty soon they start feeding. I can feel them nibbling on the hook. Sometimes when I reel in they follow the spoon. They look too small to get the hook in their mouth. Lucky for them, I think. Then I catch a few. Nothing too big; just eight or ten inchers. I throw them back.

“Come back when you grow up,” I say.

It’s almost dusk now, almost time. Then I see some raccoons across the river, a momma and six babies. Momma is digging with her paws in the water. Crayfish, I think: dinner time. That’s when I know.

I crawl back up on the bank and get the cottage cheese container. There’s a pair of fingernail clippers in there that I use to cut the spoon off. Then I dig out the number twelve and tie it on the line. I tie a double knot just to make sure. I unbutton my shirt pocket and reach in with two fingers. The beetle is still there, squirming for cover. That’s good, I think. Go ahead, squirm: the more the better. I stick the hook in right under his head and roll him onto it so the hook comes out the back of him.

I go down to the gravel by the edge of the river. It's a ways out to the "V". There's no weight to the beetle; it's farther than I can cast. I step into the river. The water is cold, freezing. But I am a fisherman, I say, so I keep going till I am about twenty-five feet from where the current falls into a riffle. The water is up to my thighs and I am losing feeling in my legs. Then I take the pole back and cast the beetle to just above the beginning of the current. The beetle is flopping around pretty good, trying to save himself. The beetle is drifting slowly to where the current picks up, to where he will be swept away. Then, as he begins to move quicker toward the chute, I see the big green back break the surface and the smack of the tail on the water. I pull back hard, setting the hook. I ease up on the line and let him run. The reel is whining, emptying fast, and I wonder how much line Shorty has on. Then I see him jump, a good eighty feet down the river. Two times he gets himself completely out of the water, twisting with nose and tail both headed toward the sky before crashing back into the river. Each time he jumps I reel in a little, and when he is done I take in some more. He is tired from his run, from his aerial feats, his run for freedom.

He runs three more times, each time finishing with the explosive reach for the sky. His spirit is strong. I can hear my dad behind me, telling me how to play him. I do everything he says. Each time the fish tires I reel him in, and each time there is a fierce tug on the line I let him run.

"Don't get in a hurry. Let him do his thing. Feel him in your hands, right up your arms, Johnny. That's a boy," he says, "tire him out. He's a good one, all right."

I can hear the purr of the old Ford truck, the headlights on the willows. There's the smell of hot cocoa, a hand on my shoulder. Proud.

Eventually the trout is spent, his fierceness dissolved in the battle. I reel him in to my feet and pull him from the water. He is thick and sleek and long, almost two feet I'd say: a Brown. I think about tonight at the Lucky Penny, the Brown hanging behind the bar for everyone to see. What a fuss we'll cause. They'll be talking about us for a month, my fish and me. We could have a barbeque, invite everyone.

Then I take the hook from his mouth and walk back out into the water. I bend over and, holding him between my hands in the water, rock him back and forth. Maybe he has been weakened too much, I think. Maybe it's too late. But I can see his gills working, his jaw opening and closing.

"Come on," I say, "you can make it," I say. "Don't die on me, you bastard," I say.

Then his tail moves a couple of times and I can feel his muscles moving in my hands. It's like in slow motion, but they're working. I let go of him and his big back creases the water for eight or ten feet, then like a submarine he disappears into the deep green water.

I sit back down on the rock and light up. The smoke feels good in my lungs before it flows out into the fading light, hanging lazy above the water. I sit on my side of the curtain. Then I get to thinking. I think about the Brown, about his strength and dignity; about how good it was to be a part of it. I think about the stone boat and the haystack in the meadow, I think about the bamboo rod, I think about Bethune and her cows. And then it comes to me. I've got to do something, I say. I've got to do it soon.