

About 825 words

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THE RATTLESNAKE HOLE

I can still see those trout down deep.

An old-timer told us about the fishing hole exactly when we needed it. Bill Chase and I were too awkward to catch fussy trout near town, too young to hold steady summer jobs, and too bashful to talk with the college girls behind the counter in Mammoth Hot Springs. Walking was about the only thing we could do right.

Our hike up the Yellowstone River turned out to be a prolonged stalk, because we had to catch our grasshoppers along the way and the sun got their metabolism working so fast that they would whir away before we could slap our straw hats over them. In human terms, those hoppers were all teenagers.

When we reached the fishing hole, however, it looked as good as the old-timer had said. A ledge stuck into the river and clear current eddied downstream, circling at just the speed trout like. We flopped onto the rock, cupped our hands around our eyes, and saw shapes cruising down there, neither shadowy nor shiny but more solid than the water and aware of us without fear. In the short time we looked, those dim forms echoed in the pit of my stomach. They did not strike a chord, exactly. More like a hormone.

My grasshopper spiraled deep at the end of a yellow silk line, a loop within the loop of the current, but leader and bait were invisible when the first fish took. I just saw it shake its head, and when I struck there was a throb at the end of the line. My trout came out on the rock, flopping and sparkling, and by then Bill's rod was bent too -- seriously bent, tip dipping into the water. His hardware-store steel rod had no more backbone than mine of bamboo. Each of our fish was a rainbow/cutthroat hybrid, big enough to feed us. There were six other mouths in my family, however, and three in Bill's, so we kept on fishing, pulling bright flopping trout onto hard granite.

The fish got a little harder to catch on each successive trip that summer. We surmised that those we pricked taught the others to nip bait off a hook without getting caught. One morning we rose early to get all the hoppers we needed, stripping them from the grass like beads of dew, but mostly we ran out of bait before we ran out of the urge to fish. The trout were not much

impressed with an imitation grasshopper I had tied, not when I weighted it with two split shot.

Our last trip came just before school started, and we caught only a couple of dinky fish each. I got bored watching swirls in yellow line and hiked upstream, looking for another hole. There was none, so I climbed down a shelf next to fast current. It did not look like a good place to fish, or a safe one, but I inched along upstream, casting my imitation grasshopper along the edge of the granite. A big head tipped out of the water, took my floating fly, and came close to pulling me in before I remembered to release the handle of my reel. On the next cast I caught another brown trout almost as big, probably the second of a pair on its spawning run. Bill gave me a hand up the ledge with a heavy creel.

During our hike back, I discoursed on the theory and practice of dry-fly fishing while Bill walked ahead, trying not to listen. He would have stepped right on the whirring sound if I had not noticed that it was too steady for a grasshopper. I grabbed his collar and jerked him back, which annoyed him until he saw the rattlesnake, all coiled up and vibrating its tail. We did not talk much about it afterwards. Fishing is an experience recreated in the telling, but serpent is revelation, instantly understood.

Eve had nothing to do with that snake, mind you, and it occurs to me that Adam might have blamed her for the kind of trouble that young men are capable of finding on their own. It is

true, however, that we might have stayed closer to town if we had known how to talk to the girls in the coffee bar.

We did not return to the rattlesnake pool the next summer. I was not smart enough to be afraid, but catching trout was more fun than catching grasshoppers and I had acquired confidence in dry flies, which were so efficient that I could get back and showered and over to the coffee bar with Bill before it closed. His mother hoped to fatten him up by giving him a quarter every day for a milk shake. This struck me as amazing grace, but I did not personally imbibe -- just occupied a stool and told snake stories, which made Eve so jumpy that she had to be walked home.

July 1969

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