

Catch and Release

Shannon tottered naked through the doorway of the primitive cabin onto the weathered plank porch and leaned against one of the cedar posts holding up the rusty tin awning. She watched him watching her.

“Please, Wallace, don’t let it end this way.”

She was not crying yet, but that would come next. He didn’t want to see it, hear her manipulative whine. He turned away, and with resolute strides, walked across the clearing in front of the cabin into the woods.

“Don’t hate me, Wallace.”

In the morning half-light, he followed a vague path of kicked-aside leaf clutter through a tunnel of thick undergrowth, unaware of anything but the blare of competing voices in his head—*go back—end it now—don’t be mean—the only way.*

A pair of doves flushed from their roost startled him back to the present. Ahead, a gap in the tree canopy and the murmur of fast water indicated where the Enid would be. Pushing through a canebrake, he stumbled into an ankle-deep rapid tumbling down into a tennis court size pool. On the far side of the pool, the stream narrowed again and sluiced between two lichen-splotched boulders before continuing its cascade to the Hiawassee a mile farther down the gorge.

He sloshed to a dry sandstone slab in the midst of the gurgling water and sat to assemble the two halves of his bamboo fly rod. As he played out the line, the current took it into the pool. He studied the water, planning his first cast. The still surface mirrored the yellow-green willows at the shoreline and the blue-green spruce on the slope behind. Circles radiated on the water like

pings of raindrops. Feeding trout—why he had come. No need to rush, he cautioned himself, and sucked in a deep breath to clear his head, still woozy from the night before.

He and Shannon had been at that tipping point—just before drunk, when everything is funny. As they reminisced about their high school days, the reflection of the candle flame danced in her eyes. He added ice from the cooler, a little Crown Royal, and a lot of Coke to their glasses, wanting to nurse their high until that perfect moment when she would lead him to bed.

“I didn’t know what you were doing,” she said between snickers. “I thought you were killing me.”

“Me too. You growled like a wolf. Scared the crap out of me, but I couldn’t make myself stop.” They leaned across the dinette table grinning, reliving ecstasy in each other’s face.

She threw her head back, “gra-a-ah,” and then cackled open-mouthed. “I thought you were magic; only you could cast that spell.” She took a sip and swirled the ice in her glass, her face turning thoughtful. “You know, you ruined me—I mean for other men. The flame never burns white-hot like with us.”

“I spoiled you.”

“Bighead,” she scoffed. “You were the first. And it felt innocent and natural. For some women, their first experience is like rape and they hate sex after that. I’m the opposite. I’m ruined because I want every time to be like that first time.”

He offered up his glass for a toast. “To killing you.”

She clicked his glass. “To my assassin.”

She got up, walked behind his chair and draped her arms over his chest. When she nibbled his ear, he swayed to retain balance. He pinched the candle flame.

Willow tendrils rained down from an outcrop overhanging the left bank of the pool. The big one would be in that shade waiting for breakfast to float by. Wallace lifted the rod to ten o'clock and the green fly line lifted off the water in a curl. When a slight bump of the rod indicated the line had straightened behind him, he smoothly brought the rod forward to three o'clock, the tip pointed ten yards upstream of the overhang. The line rolled out quietly on the water, the fly at the end of the tippet landing like a down feather. A perfect cast. He had waited months to make that cast, driven a hundred miles, bushwhacked through wilderness.

She slept in the crook of his arm, cheek snuggled against his chest, bonded to him with swelter. When he tried to roll away, she grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

“It’s too hot.”

“Hold me,” she implored. “The after is important. Not for you, I know, but for me. I want this time to be perfect.”

The line slouched back to the rod in S-curves as it drifted downstream. He pulled in just enough slack so the line would go taut when he lifted the rod to two o'clock. His wet fly would be two feet deep when it reached the rock shelf and drift under the willow tips. He felt giddy and tried to calm himself with a deep breath. If he jerked when the strike occurred and the trout weighed more than a pound, the thin tippet would break. It had happened before.

Shannon had roused when he got up at dawn and watched from bed as he dressed and prepared his gear.

“Sleep in,” he told her. “I’ll bring back breakfast.”

“You’re a gentleman, Wallace. Anybody ever tell you?”

“Only you. My wife never mentions it.”

“We bring out the best in each other, don’t you think?”

He chuckled under his breath.

She smiled back. “Guess if we asked your wife and my husband, they wouldn’t think so.”

Wallace leaned against the bedpost as he struggled into his waders.

“Do you ever wonder if we would’ve made it? I mean, if we had gotten married, would we still be together?”

“Sure we would. If Carolyn hadn’t gotten pregnant—”

“Bet you’d be tired of me by now. Stepping out. Inviting some old flame to meet you on fishing trips. Might even be Carolyn.”

Wallace stopped lacing his boots and glanced at her. “What happened to me being a gentleman?”

“And I’d be just as bad. We just never grew up—like Peter Pan and Tinker Bell.”

“What are you getting at?”

She sat up smiling and patted the bed. “Sit a minute. I’ve got an announcement.” She grabbed his arm and pulled him down to face her, patting her mouth with her fingers trying not to giggle. “I’m pregnant.”

Wallace jumped to his feet and glared at her. “Not funny.”

“Not with you, silly. My husband. I never thought I would be. I’m ecstatic. Please be happy for me.”

“You should have told me before—”

“If I had, last night wouldn’t have happened.”

“Why did you even come?”

“I shouldn’t have, I know. I wanted us one more time, to be kids again before the rest of life happens.”

Wallace became the trout, a native brown, or a big rainbow that had escaped the gantlet of anglers at the accessible areas upstream. Old and savvy, he would have run the small trout out of his private abode. The fish would hover just off the bottom, facing upstream, waiting for the mosquito-like outline of a newly hatched midge against the surface glare. He wouldn’t doubt the bait, a perfect replica of a midge, and strike before it whisked by.

The floating line jerked. Wallace dismissed it as an extension of his fantasy, but then the end of the line slowly dipped underwater. He caught himself just before instinct snatched the rod tip up. Instead, he eased the rod back until he felt the weight and then flicked the rod to set the hook. It felt big.

The fish darted into the strong current at the center of the pool, swimming hard, directly away. The line played out against the drag as he waded to the bank to turn it. The reel quit clicking in front of the twin boulders at the end of the pool. From there he inched the fish back, gently lifting his rod and then reeling in line as he lowered it. Wallace and the trout became one, feeling each other’s struggle through the taut line. With each lift of the rod, the fish felt weaker.

He had walked to the window above the galvanized sink, pushed aside the curtain, and looked out at the clearing in front of the cabin. In first light, the morning haze swirled like smoke.

“Wallace, it’s time for us to grow up—move on,” she said. “We can’t sneak around like this forever.”

“So, this is the last time?”

When she didn’t answer, he turned and looked back into the shadowy room. He could barely make out her shape sitting on the bed, the light from the window glistening her wet eyes like tiny mirrors.

“If you ask me, you know I’ll come. Please don’t. And if I ask you, tell me no. Can you do that Wallace? I’m not as strong as you.”

His text messages would read: *I want to kill you*, and a date. Her reply was either the same date, or if she had a conflict, a different date. She had never refused him. Sometimes after months, he might receive a message from her: *I need to die*.

His excuse, a weekend fishing trip; hers, a sick aunt who lives off the grid in the mountains. That aunt had died years before and left Shannon the cabin.

Wallace held the rod above his head and the exhausted trout glided in on its side. He trailed the fish up the purling shallows to a foot-deep washout behind the flat rock where he had assembled the rod. Adrenaline subsided leaving him exhausted like the fish. He sat, rod in his lap, and lit a cigarette while watching the Rainbow glint iridescent crimson, blue, then green as it lapped around the sink. A hen, he could tell by her rounded nose, sixteen inches at least. If only Shannon could see her.

In years past, he would have brought his prize to the cabin and displayed it on the Formica table for her to admire. She would squeal delight, congratulating him with kisses. He

would build a fire in the pot-bellied stove. While she melted butter in a cast-iron skillet, he would cut two filets on a stump out back.

The hook was hung in the lip—no real damage. He took forceps from his vest pocket and held the trout against the pebble bottom while he worked the hook loose. Tiny tangerine eggs dribbled from her belly onto the gravel.

If Shannon started packing as soon as he left, she would be driving out now. Or would she stay to clean the cabin? He should run back. Hold her. Kiss her tears away. What would he say? They could remain friends. Just friends. What could he say that isn't a lie?

It was over. The thought hit him like a gut punch that caused a gasp.

Wallace cupped his hands under the fish and flicked it out of the sink. She hovered in an eddy getting her bearings, and then with a flip of the tail, slithered down through the rocks into the pool. A breeze roughed the surface into the sparkle of crushed ice.

He lay back on the flat rock, rod balanced across his chest. The sun, diffused by the morning mist, seemed close—a fuzzy dandelion pod that could be puffed away. He closed his eyes and surrendered to the melody of the burbling water as it danced ever onward.