

C.F. Lindsey
If Trout Don't Jump

It's morning; the sun has not yet risen, but the sky produces a blue hue above the firs and pines that reach skyward at the base of the line of hills across the riverbank. There's a stillness that accustoms these hours just before dawn: the deer have yet to leave their bedding grounds, birds refuse song, even the river's rushing current seems to have calmed for the time of morning where silence reigns. A lone figure reclines at the water's edge, the steam of his steady breathing mixing with the thicker clouds of smoke from the cigarette dangling between his lips.

His dress is of one used to the chill of the autumn and the sport of fly-fishing. Neoprene waders cover his lower half to just below his chest with an unbuttoned, down jacket shielding his upper body from the wind's bite. A rod of bamboo rests across his knee as his fingers work at a knot that's bugged his tippet. The light is poor for the work at hand and sends him cursing before pulling a knife from his pocket and cutting the tangle.

He tosses the broken leader over his shoulder. The cigarette in his lips grows small. He flicks it towards the water and pulls another from the inside pocket of his jacket. The striking of a match illuminates his face: whiskered cheeks covering small pock-marks along his jaw, but still visible in the flickering light, dark eyes with more red than white around the irises, and black circles framing the eyes of red and the bearded cheeks. A quarter of the fag turns to ash with the first puff.

"Thought you'd know better," a voice from behind says. Another man plops down on a rock a few feet away. He wears long johns tucked into military hiking boots with a knit sweater for a top.

"What do you mean?"

"Casting before daylight. Really botches the visual; no artistry in casting in the dark." He pulls a smoke from behind his ear and lights up. "Something up, Will?"

"Couldn't sleep. Is something up with you, Clyde?"

Clyde smiles through the smoky haze around his head, scratching at his crotch. "Nope," he reclines further against the rock to rest his back. "Slept beautifully, even without a bed. They should do something about that."

Will chuckles. "You want turn-down service in the mountains?"

"Why the hell not? Make it a sight more inviting, that's for damn sure. Give those possum-cops something useful to do."

"I suppose." Will moves the rod off his knee and stares at the water. It is becoming clear; birds can be heard greeting the day.

Clyde rises from his seat, stamping out the glow of his cigarette on the damp stones. "Guess I'm going to get some bacon in the skillet. You hungry?"

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"No. Think I'm just going to get tied on and get the fly wet. Should be a nice hatch this morning. Saw some winter caddis yesterday evening."

"Little early."

"Yep. It's either late or early."

Clyde walks off towards the shelter of trees and the smoldering remains of a fire. Will continues smoking. He takes out a box from the bag sitting next to him that holds his caddis imitations. Hard to see the color in the early light breaking. Color isn't important. Caddis are the same. It's something that doesn't change. Bugs are bugs. Trout eat bugs. Why throw a cog in a perfectly oiled machine?

The knots are made quickly. His hand is deft. The shaking almost stops. When it's done he stands and walks to the water's edge, submerging the worn wading boots a few inches at a time. He's careful with his movements. He begins his cast: forward, back, one, two, ten o'clock, two o'clock. The line drapes down at the beginning of the drift and he sighs, letting the cigarette drop from his mouth and extinguish in the water pooling around his ankles.

The bite is hard to see this early. Will keeps a finger hooked over the line, separating taught line from slack, keeping tension for the set. Watching for the take is pointless; the sun's not fully risen, and with him facing east it will be some time before there is any successful sight fishing to be had. A heron calls from down the river a ways. It is distinct, unmistakable, like a baby's cry.

There's a popping noise, faint. Will glides the rod sideways in a quick, but smooth motion. The rod bends and the sound of fin fighting water can be heard in the small holler where the fishery rests. It doesn't take long to pull it in. Nothing large. A small rainbow around the ten-inch range. Will bends down towards the struggling creature attached to his line, the rod held high above his head keeping pressure on the fish. He lifts it out of the water as he removes the fly, gazing at the small eyes rolling, the small jaws working the gills for lack of oxygen. He rubs a finger along the slimy surface of its skin before placing it back into the water, facing the middle of the channel, and letting it wriggle to freedom. He doesn't come up from his hunched position for some time. He stares at the water's surface as if he can see the fish rejoin its kind. He straightens and regains his standing position, hooking the line to an eyelid before sloshing out of the shallow water.



It's afternoon; the sun is high in the sky, taking some of the morning chill from the air but still leaving enough for thicker clothing to be necessary for comfort next to the bank of the river. The two companions wade in the shallow water, casting towards the middle of the channel with enough room in between to give Clyde—standing upstream—a sizable drift before having to pick up his line from passing into Will's section. It's silent but for the noise of the water, the occasional splash of a fish on a line, and the scratch of a match on its boxes rough surface to light a smoke in-between casts.

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Will pulls a small flask from the front pocket of his waders, his rod tucked in the crook of his arm. He pulls and swallows and whistles towards Clyde holding out the flask in invitation.

"Drink?"

"Sure."

Will tosses the flask, screwed tight to protect from spillage. Clyde catches it without taking his eyes off the bobbing, orange indicator floating in front of him, unscrews the top, and takes a sizable pull, his Adam's Apple moves up and down with each gulp.

"Brandy? Blackberry, right."

"Hiram Walker."

"Pretty cheap stuff. Why not splurge on the expensive liquor for a change?" Clyde takes another pull from the small, silver flask before tossing it back in Will's direction.

Will holds up the flask in salute towards his friend. "How 'bout you stop complaining about free booze and catch a fish every now and then."

Clyde smiles. "It's not all about the catching. It's sport. You know, beauty, artistry, skill, all that bullshit."

Will drinks from the flask, losing the grin on his face. He tucks it back into the pocket of his waders and recasts into the flow. He stands in silence for a while: watch, watch, watch, roll cast upstream, watch, watch, watch.

"You read much?"

Clyde continues with his casting. There are ripples along the far bank that indicate a sizable trout cleaning the shoals to prepare for laying eggs. Brown trout males do that work. "Paper. Every morning, Democrat Gazette preferably. Try to not read too much big press stuff. All about the Liberal agenda and that mess. That's why I don't watch CNN. Read a few novels. Never been much for fiction, though."

"How 'bout old wives' tales? Fairy tales. You know, folk stuff?"

Clyde watched the indicator bob underwater near the head of the ripples. He swung his rod back, the line going tight before going slack again. "Shit, rolled it." He recasts up stream for another run. "Nope. Never paid much attention to all that mumbo-jumbo. No sense to it. You want to read something good? Read that Tolkien fellow. Damn creative."

Will takes another cigarette from his waders and lights it. He takes a few puffs before saying anything. "I read something once, maybe I heard it. Old folk tale about seeing fish jump in your dreams."

"Wish I could see some fish jumping right now."

"Said that it meant someone you know is pregnant. Someone close."

Clyde pulls back on the rod as he sees the indicator bob under near the same spot. The line goes taught; it stays that way. "God damned hung. Shit." He pulls. Nothing happens. He pulls some more, twisting the rod every which way. Nothing happens. The tension is still there. He grabs

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the line beyond the tip of his rod, now resting by his feet in the water, and yanks. The line snaps. "Two dollars. That's what I lose every time I break one of the damn sonsabitches off."

"You listening?"

Clyde rips out his fly box. "Since when did the cost of flies trump the cost of a beer at a bar? Ridiculous."

"Clyde?"

"Yeah. Pregnant fish jumping." He turns towards Will, frustration pulling his face into a scowl. "What does this have to do with anything?"

Will sighs. He pulls on the cigarette and blows out a slow stream from his nose. "Had a dream."

"About fish pregnancy?"

"Dreamed about trout jumping out of the water, it was a beautiful, arcing motion. Big fish, too. It was two. They came out of the water together, two beautiful fish. It was something to see." He put the cigarette back towards his lips. "I don't know. Sorry to bring it up. Just some superstition."

Clyde continued looking towards his friend. He smoked, scratched his whiskered face, the whiskers were turning grey. He catches the golden shine from the ring on Will's left hand. His own hand is clear from such jewelry. There was nothing there, just hair and gnarled knuckles from too many run-ins at the bars in Little Rock. "You trying to tell me something, Will?"

"Just about a dream."

"Diane know?"

"No. Just had it the night before I called you. Wanted to hear your opinion on it."

"She pregnant?"

Will looks down stream. An eagle was flying overhead towards the nest that nestled in the trees there. The nest would be empty this time of year; babies would have already flown north with the father. It was the mother. She'd be alone for a while with an empty nest. He looks back towards Clyde. He's staring at him. His rod rests in the crook of his arm and the cigarette is smoking in his left hand near his face.

Will sighs. "Not that I know of."

"You fucking?"

"We're married."

Clyde laughs. "My questions stands. You guys still intimate?"

"Yeah."

"Wear a condom?"

"No."

"She on the pill?"

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"Think so."

"You've nothing to worry about then." Clyde laughs and reels his line in to where the leader is all that hangs from the tip of the rod. He clips the fly along the reel and sashes towards the bank. The sun is beginning to set behind them, its warm rays slowly diminishing for the chill to take control of the air. He turns back to Will as he makes it to the rocky shoreline. "You want kids?"

Will turns towards him. The sun plays with the deep lines under his eyes, "I don't know. Not really. Not right now."

Clyde nods his head. He turns around and walks a few paces, stops, turns back, and smiles. "Besides, you've nothing to worry about anyway. Fairy tales aren't real, and trout don't jump." He laughs as he walks back towards the camp in the woods where the bacon cooked and a fire used to be where coals now reside.

Will turns back towards the river. He slips the rod from under his arm and takes up casting again. It goes back and forth, back and forth, one-two, one-two, ten o'clock to one o'clock, ten o'clock to one o'clock. He lays it flat along the surface where the ripples had been previously. While there was a log that protruded from the bank on the other side, the ripples still indicated a fishes' presence. He let the drift go, watching the dry fly as it bobbed with the current. There was a pop; the fly disappeared. Will set the hook, the rod bending down towards the arm holding it steady and up right.

The fighting was longer this time. Will didn't pull it in as quickly as the first. It was a bigger fish. He let it take the slack from his fingers, the line that drooped from downward. He got it on the reel. It was safer that way. He let it play. It dances along the water's surface, its large dorsal fin breaking against the current, trying to run upstream. Will reels, slowly, ever so slowly. Reeling too fast would break the line. The fish jumps. It wriggles in mid-air. Grace. Perfection. Doubt.

The fight ends. Will pulls in the dead weight of the exhausted fish. It's a brown trout, probably around eighteen inches, a nice trophy to remember and release back into the stream. He lifts it from the water as he removes the fly. The jaw line of the fish indicates that it is male. It was cleaning the bed of the shoal for its mate to lay her eggs. She would turn around and eat them once they were laid if given the chance. It was the male's job to keep her away, fight her back and protect its young. The fish's eyes swiveled in fear as its jaws worked the gills from shock and the lack of oxygen. Will stares at it.

He puts the fish back in the water to let it regain itself, his grip still tight. Quickly, he lifts the fish from the water and brings its head down hard on a stone by his foot. It hangs limp. He shoves it into the front pocket of his waders as he reels up the slack line and snags the hook into place on the reel. His feet sash through the water towards the bank and crunch as he reaches gravel. Camp is insight. Clyde builds a fire to cook supper. The brown will taste good.



It is evening; the sun sinks below the tree line and casts a shadow on

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the river, the mountains. The fire in the middle of the camp glows with a brown trout in the skillet. There is oil in the pan and the sound of bubbling from frying. It smells of fine seasoning. Will and Clyde sit around the flames. They laugh, passing a bottle between each other. Their conversation is light. The air is cool. Sounds fade to the crackling of fire, the strumming of crickets, and the burbling of water nearby. A whippoorwill sings its song through the den of night, the men laugh as the liquor takes hold. No trout jump in the river near by.