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Erin Breska

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Catch and Release

BY ERIN BRESKA

"Loop the tail of the line one, two, three, four, five, six times around the leading strand and then back through the hole. Now, pull the tail snugly and you have your cinch knot, see?" my grandfather says, as he demonstrates a new knot to me. Eyes wide with excitement, I watch as he inverts his shoulders, keenly engrossed in clipping off the excess line from the feathery fly with unsteady hands. His jade green Cabela's fly fishing vest hugs his lean body and the soft tinkering sounds of the needle-nose pliers and tippet spools dangle against his shallow chest. He wears jeans with a sewn patch on the left knee, the non-matching thread woven into the denim depicting what looks like a poorly crafted spiderweb. His furrowed brow marks his concentration as he rubs an opaque floatant gel on the wings of the fly in a circular motion with his thumb and forefinger. Smearing the remains of the gel on his pants, he stands up, reels up the loose line, and motions for me to follow him.

We approach the sandy bank where the river licks at my feet. I hope that my small Velcro sneakers will protect my dry socks, and the thought of cold feet makes my toes curl. The frothing swells of the river dance and glide around the smooth rocks, like tiny ballerinas effortlessly twirling onstage. The river, a constant murmur, and the chirps of the early birds amiably greet us. I look around, quickly blinking at the sunless canyon we are standing in. Trees cover the mountainside like an emerald blanket and inhaling the crisp air tickles my nose. Earlier that morning, my mom bundled my stubborn self into two heavy jackets I am now grateful for. Pulling the outer zipper to the top of its track, I proceed to burrow my neck deeper into the flannel that smells of campfire. It seems as if we have been on the bank for hours and are finally greeted by the warm morning sun that peaks through the dense branches of the tall evergreen trees surrounding us.

The bamboo rod, now a golden yellow in the soft light, patiently waits to be used, to be whipped gracefully back and forth in the air like the unraveling of a cowboy's lariat. Its gleaming varnish reminds me of tree sap nearing the end of its gravitational journey down the trunk while still maintaining its shiny appearance, seconds away from crystallizing. I also am

waiting for my grandfather to cast his line, envying the simple flick of his wrist, the natural and beautiful movement of his body leaning in and out, shifting his weight to become synced with the cast. His hands grip the cork handle, manipulating the direction of the cast with the slightest movement of his protracted fingers. The whistling zip of the line getting tugged through the air makes me eager to hold the rod in my own hands, to practice both the power and finesse that my wrist can exhibit. SLISHHH. The line is stripped from the water's surface. SLISH. My grandfather extends his strong arm back, effortlessly keeping the line in a mid-air state of stillness. SLISH. The line catapults through the air again like a bungee cord sprung loose, depositing the delicate fly on top of the water. Before long, his crooked smile drifts momentarily across his still face; he is satisfied with his cast. Trailing the line on the surface of the water, my grandfather slowly wiggles the supple rod as the fly weightlessly swirls from one dark pool to the next, teasing its hungry suitors below.

A quick, silver flash cuts the surface of the water and my grandfather calmly lifts the rod and then hands it to me. "Hold the pole up high to prevent him from spitting the hook, hon," he says. Hon, his term of endearment for me, makes me feel safe on this cold morning. The rod sporadically tugs in my small hands. My breathing quickens. I yank the bamboo high above my head, unaware of my exaggerated action. To an observer, it must look like I am clumsily fencing against some unseen opponent. Chuckling, my grandfather envelopes my hands with his, and his leathery skin gently scratches mine. Together we fight the silver outline that appears and disappears amongst the round stones beneath the gin-like water. Letting the reel scream as the fish rapidly jets downstream, we quickly strip the line in as the fish reverses direction. It's a game of tug-of-war for me now, but to the fish, it is a struggle between life and death. A dorsal fin abruptly cuts the water and the thrashing of a speckled tail elicits a brief splash. Nearing defeat, another flash of silver now exposes its iridescent underside. The fish barrel rolls in an attempt to free itself. Finally, the yanking weakens and the swimming slows before we can slide the twenty-inch rainbow onto the shore. I look down at my hands, tightly grasping the reel; surface veins pulsate rhythmically.

The fish flails its body in its now waterless environment, struggling to breathe. Its round, black eyes unblinking; its jaws open and close, desperate-

ly seeking water. I cannot pull my eyes away from its now rigid form. I watch as the deep red gills lift up and down like small billows, trying to find oxygen. My grandfather crunches over the pebbly bank with his dusty work boots and bends down to free the fish. "Should we let it go?" he asks. I quickly nod in agreement. I become anxious. My eyes fixate on its gills lifting and collapsing, lifting and collapsing more slowly now. Unclamping the pliers from his vest, my grandfather swiftly detaches the tiny hook from the lip of the fish and tosses the fly near the pole that now lies gently against a clump of thick reeds.

Careful not to grip too tightly, my cold hands cradle the trout from below; the gills are still moving. Its strong body, encompassed by metallic scales, flashes like show lights. A viscous film that coats its skin gifts my hands with an unpleasant odor. My grandfather clasps his hands over mine again, and we stumble to the water's edge. My hands are interposed between the silky yet slimy body of the fish and my grandfather's overworked, dry hands; a perfect dichotomy. A worn, gold wedding band suspends loosely on his left finger. Some of his fingers have trapped blood under the nails, now dried and black from years of plumbing work, being a Navy sailor, and chopping firewood in his older age. Other fingernails have grown back oddly, resembling the marbled bark of a white oak tree. Yet these nails, exposed to years of work and toil, still manage to protect my grandfather's fingers from harm.

We take a few steps into the river and submerge our hands, allowing the cold water to rush between our fingers and rejuvenate the fish. My shoes, once warm, flood with water and cause me to gasp quietly. Bubbles surface, ridding any last bit of hope that my drowned socks will still be warm and dry. I focus my attention back on the trout as its gills brush against my skin, increasing now with speed. Its body anxiously slithers back and forth in the net-like confinement of our hands. We loosen our hold and it slips back into the shadowed depths of the river. I wipe my hands on my jeans, ridding them of the smell and remaining water droplets. Trying to process what just happened, I stand feebly on the bank, gazing in the direction that the fish swam, admiring its vivacity.

Stretching out my hands, I examine my own fingers: the slightly grooved wrinkles on each knuckle; a pencil-line scar on my left index finger

from my puppy's sharp teeth; the small, pale freckles stippling my skin; and the thin, perfect white crescent moons encasing the tips of my pink fingernails. The grooves on my fingers and hands, tiny canyons shaped by time and experiences, are what capture the delicate memories of my life. They are witnesses, holding the power to access the carefully stored recollections in my mind. My hands are bursting with silent stories, transcribing exactly what I am creating with my grandfather in this moment. I look up at my grandfather and grin. The sun, now emerging through the tops of the tree branches, casts dancing shadows on his warm face as he smiles back. I take off one of my jackets now, and he stumbles over a rock, retrieving the bamboo pole. We walk back to the car, hand-in-hand, discussing our luck at having landed such a big fish. "That sure was a good catch, hon," my grandfather says. Yes, I think it was a good catch indeed.