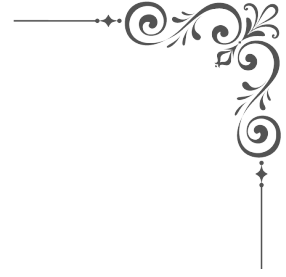


# The Fly Box



B. O'ree Williams





## **Author's note:**

*DEAR READER:*

*Thank you for picking up a copy of my story *The Fly Box*. This is a fictitious retelling of a collection of fishing stories I have gathered during my lifetime. Some are mine, others have been passed to me by friends and colleagues with their gracious blessings to write them down. I have changed the names to protect the innocent, and have purposely left out the exact location of the fishing holes to protect myself lest I incur the wrath of my fellow anglers. I realize some of my audience will most likely not be familiar with some of the jargon I use liberally, particularly when it comes to terminology specific to fishing. Therefore, to better aid you in understanding, please refer to the end of the story where I have listed several terms, so you have some semblance of just what the heck I'm talking about.*



*ENJOY*

*- O'ree*



**AN·GLING** /'aNGg(ə)liNG/ noun BRITISH noun: angling

1. The sport or pastime of fishing with a rod and line.



THIS IS THE CLASSICAL definition of what modern-day folks refer to as fishin'. It's a relatively bland definition of an activity, which on the surface appears to be simple and straightforward. But if you peek behind the curtain, you will see that angling is anything but simple.

As the definition states, angling is a sport, which implies the involvement of some kind of contest. However, this contest rivals any number of sports where speed, agility, and stamina are required. It also takes something few other sports, save golf, can boast; patience. If an angler doesn't possess the patience necessary to outfox their foe, then they might as well go home.

Enter the adversary of this hallowed sport, the fish. It is this creature who has been the bane of many a valiant angler since the dawn of time. Their elusive nature, combined with survival instincts honed over millennia, have made these dreaded creatures one of humankind's most formidable foes. They are ruthless, cold, and calculating, and have the uncanny ability to make even the most seasoned angler look like a fumbling infant. The skills and prowess it takes to successfully join battle with these remarkable creatures is nothing short of awe-inspiring.

In spite of this, however, humankind has pitted themselves time and again against these fearsome creatures and lived to tell the tale. And tell a tale they do. For you see, no story come even close to those told by a fisherman.

I am a fisherman, and this is my tale.

Reed Wilson

IT WAS 4:30 AM, and I was humming along softly with the radio, as the words to Simon and Garfunkel's song *The Boxer* resonated in my mind. We were somewhere on Highway 18, though exactly where I couldn't say. I gazed out on the long black ribbon dotted with yellow lines, trying to pierce the veil of darkness just beyond my headlights. But there was no movement save for the swaying of the trees lining the highway, so I let my thoughts drift back to the song and the faded memories it invoked.

Of course, my moment of nostalgia was shattered by a loud voice shouting, "JESUS H. CHRIST, what the hell are ya trying to do, practice your British driving skills? Don't know if you knew or not, but we drive on the right-hand side of the road over here old boy," said my buddy, Chuck Benton from the passenger's seat, now fully awake.

"Huh, oh, sorry 'bout that Chuck... guess I got lost in that song a little," I said.

He shot me a withering glance. "Well, that's all fine and dandy, Reed. I like it too, but what I don't like is the possibility of playing chicken with a Mac truck on account of my dear friend deciding to get all nostalgic 'bout God knows what," said Chuck, still panting from the shock of his rude awakening.

I rolled my eyes, knowing his diatribe was just getting started.

"Christ man, I can just see it now, the headlines that read "MAJOR ACCIDENT TAKES THE LIVES OF TWO LOCAL ANGLERS... ALL THAT IS FOUND OF THEM IS THEIR WADERS!" Knowing full well if I didn't put a stop to his rambling, I'd be listening to him drone on all the way to the river, I said, "All right, all right enough already! Let's stop up here and get some java, if for nothing else then to shut your yammering pie hole up."

That's Chuck for you. The man tries to make a point, only to get lost amidst senseless rambling about God knows what, and then to stop in the midst of it all to ask, "Now wait, what in the hell was I talking about?"



WE PULLED INTO THE only café in town. Then again, the majority of the coastal towns in Oregon aren't precisely towns in the traditional sense of the word per se, so much as a few scattered buildings along the highway, where one of which doubles as a gas station/grocery store. Other than that, there is a small hardware store, and a small quasi-hippy co-op opened by naturalists escaping 'the man' and a café. Luckily, this café has one of the best cups of coffee within

a one-hundred-mile radius along with fresh pie made daily by the hospitable owner, Shirley Van Dyke.

I pushed through the door, tipping my hat to Shirley as Chuck and I made our way to our usual table.

“Be right with you boys,” said Shirley disappearing into the kitchen.

“Take your time, Shirley,” I said, “We’re not in any hurry.”

Chuck shot me a sidelong glance which I ignored but remained silent as we took our seats.

A moment later, Shirley appeared with a couple of cups and a pot of coffee in hand. “Seein’ as you boys go through at least a pot of this stuff, I figured I’d just leave it here,” she said, setting the cups and pot down on the table. She reached behind her ear, producing a snub-nosed pencil which had been all but worn down to a nub. Looking over her glasses, she asked, “Try the pie this morning?”

Before I could answer, Chuck blurted out, “What’s the flavor of the day?”

I rolled my eyes in annoyance. “Are you kidding me?” I scoffed. “The specialty of the day is always advertised in big black letters on the sign out front which you always make a point to stop and read out loud as we pull up.”

Chuck shrugged and gave me a lopsided grin. “Well, she might not have changed it yet,” he protested.

Sensing I was about to lash out with a witty rejoinder, Shirley said, “Peach, hot and fresh from the oven, hon,” as she reached over to fill our cups.

“Sounds great, I’ll take one now, and two for the road.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to buy the whole thing?” I asked.

“Well, you know how I get the munchies when we’re on the river,” said Chuck with an imploring look.

“You sure it’s the river that gives you the munchies?” I asked wryly.

“Oh ha ha ha, yeah, maybe it’s from all that weed I carry in my truck.”

I took up my mug and muttered into it, “Humph, thought I smelled something funny in there or was that your waders?”

“MY waders don’t smell!” Chuck shot back.

“Right, then maybe it’s your feet or that dead trout I left under your seat a couple of weeks back,” I said, sniggering.

“WHAT!?! Are you kidding me, did you put a trout under my seat?”

Ignoring Chuck’s outburst, I turned to Shirley and said, “Coffee’s as fantastic as ever, Shirley.”

By this time, Shirley could barely keep the coffee pot steady as she was trying to keep from laughing out loud from my onslaught of witty comments.

Incensed, Chuck shot to his feet, forcefully shoving his chair out of the way. "I'm gonna go wash my hands... jackass!" he said as he turned to head to the washroom.

"Jeez, he's pretty easy to rile up ain't he?" asked Shirley, still trying to contain her mirth.

"You have no idea," I said. "Chuck's always been like that. I think it dates back to his childhood when his older brother and sister would pick on him endlessly," I said shaking my head. "Most of the time he's pretty good about letting it roll off his back, but when you corner him like that, he reverts to the defensive little kid."

Shirley laughed. "HA! And with friends like you, who needs enemas right?" At this, we both burst into laughter.

"Well, if he and I weren't fishing buddies, I think he'd probably be one of those high strung sons-a-bitches who drives a minivan and spend their weekends doin' honey-do's and playing bridge with the neighbors."

"He's married, right?" asked Shirley.

"Yeah, fourtee... no, fifteen years next month."

"You oughta know how long it's been." Chuck broke in, walking back to the table. "You were the dirty rotten bastard who got me so drunk the night before at my bachelor party," he said falling into his chair with an audible thump! "And as I recall, you were the jackass who passed around those damned polaroid photos of me, wearing a bow tie and a big diaper riding on the back of a donkey."

"Heh, heh, heh, yeah, that was pretty funny wasn't it," I replied gingerly wiping a tear from the corner of my eye.

Chuck raised an eyebrow at me, clearly not amused by the trip down memory lane. "C'mon," said Chuck, "The fish ain't gonna catch themselves."

I stood and stretched. "Right," I said through a yawn. "Plus I'm sure Shirley's got real customers to attend to."

Shirley looked at us over the top of her glasses, casually looked around the café, and then returned her glance to us and smiled, "You bet, they're just crawlin' over each other to get in here."

"Well, it is only 5:30 am." I said, "and besides, shouldn't the ranchers be coming soon?"



“Yeah, I expect they will... That’ll be \$6.50 for the pie, hon.” She said to Chuck as she held out her hand.

“Oh... right. Say, uh, bud, can you spot me?”

“Humph... typical.” I said as I reached in my pocket to get my wallet out.

“Well, I figure you owe me that for puttin’ the trout under my seat.”

“Man what a gullible dumb-ass you are,” I said pushing through the door. From behind us, I heard Shirley say, “C’mon back soon boys.”

We waved, got in the truck and took off for the river. Chuck decided that he’d had enough of my nostalgic episodes, and hopped in the driver’s seat. “I think I better drive, you’re either too sleepy to drive, or you’re too busy thinking about the river. Either way, I’ll get us there faster.”

“Why’s that?” I asked

“Because! I want to fish.”

I smiled and tipped my hat over my eyes. Chuck started the engine then flicked on the radio, and as I drifted into unconsciousness, I heard the words to Cinderella by FireFall whisper into my ears.



I WOKE TO THE SLAMMING of the door, and Chuck saying, “Rise and shine jackass, there are steelies aplenty, and you’re gonna miss ‘em.” I tipped my hat up and looked around, curious to see which spot he decided to bring us to.

Before I could respond, he said, “I also scouted out the spot upriver I was telling you about.” At my curious look, he rolled his eyes and said, “You know, where the cuts are hanging out. It looks like they’re hitting number eighteen PMD’s.”

“Sounds great,” I yawned as I slid out of the truck. Funny thing about Shirley’s pie, it always makes me sleepy. Either that or maybe it’s Chuck’s constant rambling that lulls me to sleep on jaunts like these.

“Eh, Reed, check this out.” Chuck was leaning over a large boulder pointing down a relatively calm pool at the bottom of the embankment. “Steelies are down there I just know it,” he said with a grin. “I think this is the place that I hooked into that steelhead a few weeks ago, although I was busy playin’ the fish and can’t be for certain.”

“Guess there’s only one way to find out,” I said. There had to be some decent fish down there. I knew this because Chuck has this annoying habit of chewing on his cheek when he senses an ideal spot to fish. It’s something he’s done since he was a kid. It makes him look like a goldfish, but I’ve learned to

look at it as his way of getting into the fishes head, instead of sounding like a moron.

I got my gear out and set up my Spey rod for hitting the steelhead, and then rigged up my five-weight for the cutthroats upriver. For his part, Chuck wasted no time in rigging up his ten weight for fishing the pool right in front of us and didn't even bother to set up his trout rod.

"You not going to rig up for the cuts?" I asked though I could see he could have cared less at the moment. He was on a mission and damned determined to get the steelhead that he lost a few weeks back.

From over his shoulder, I heard him say, "Later! This is too important to bother thinking about those rinky-dink cuts now, man."

I raised an eyebrow, shaking my head as I watched him go. "Just like the postal service," I muttered, "Nor rain, nor sleet, nor Sea-Run cutthroat trout will stop him from that steely."



THAT STEELY HAD BEEN the elusive one that got away. Chuck and Jeff McClintock, another childhood buddy of ours were up here a few weeks ago fishing the area, and Chuck lit into a very nice steelhead that played him for about thirty minutes. I know it was a nice fish because Jeff doesn't lie. He's the only fisherman that I've ever known not to embellish the size of a fish. The rest of us generally adhere to the rule of three or multiples of three. For example, if you catch a ten-inch rainbow, it is an unspoken rule that when you tell your counterparts about the fish, you add at least three inches. It also depends on the type of fish that you are applying the rule to. In other words, if you catch a steelhead, then the rule of three means pounds. So, a nine-pound steelhead ends up being a twelve-pound fish when the information gets back to the council at the fly shop. If you start bringing exact mathematics into the equation, then it gets all shot to hell, and the validity of the story is no longer credible.

When Chuck and Jeff were fishing here a few weeks ago, it was Chuck who lit into the fish, while Jeff took all the mental notes necessary as he always does to be able to reproduce results later at the drop of a hat. Chuck caught the beast on a bright orange #2 Popsicle. He was using a fifteen-pound leader, tied piecemeal by Ted using a tapered design ranging from thirty-pound test at the butt down to fifteen-pound test at the tippet. He set the hook after fishing the down and swing method on his downriver side.



That's just the way Jeff's head works. It's like a log book, constantly cataloging things like conditions; river flow; water temperature; patterns used; where a bird takes a shit; and how to tell the difference between summer and winter steelhead smolt. However, you can only take so much of this before your head begins to hurt, and you find yourself unconsciously changing the subject over something a little more mundane such as politics.



REFERRING BACK TO JEFF'S mental notes, I tied on a #2 bright orange Popsicle and cast for the far wall. Chuck took up his position a couple of hundred yards upriver from me at the head of the pool, and within minutes, I heard a whoop and a holler from Chuck's direction. I didn't bother reeling up as I knew this would go on for a few minutes while he was setting the hook, and then would calm down as he began to play the fish. Only if he came down my way and asked for help, would I reel up and inspect. Otherwise, if I bit and went to investigate, I would be riddled with an onslaught of comments like, "What, you haven't gotten anything yet?" or, *The Box* strikes again."

Even though Chuck is thirty-seven, he reminds me a lot of Walter Matthau's character in *Grumpy Old Men*. Remember? He was the one who was always bragging and carrying on about how many fish he caught etc. Well, Chuck is almost the same way when it comes to fishing. I guess in the end; it's ok that he brags about his fishing skills. I'll grant him that... if nothing else, he's a hell of a fisherman.

While I was busy thinking about all the ridiculous comments that Chuck would be barraging me with, I almost didn't notice the sudden tug of my line. Luckily, I have been fishing long enough to recognize the telltale strike of a steelhead. I set the hook and began my battle.

It was a glorious display put on by my quarry as he first ran like hell to the other end of the pool, which was about a hundred yards away. He then treated me to a series of spectacular leaps. I really couldn't get a gauge on the size at the moment as he was on the other side of the pool. However, I knew he was very sizable by the force he was exerting on the other end.

Sensing he was approaching the end of the pool and limits of his tether, the fish then moved back towards me and then upriver. Again, he jumped and tugged with all his might and tried every trick in the book to spit the hook. I held tight by keeping the tip up and constant pressure on the line.

I was glad to be fishing with my Spey as it allows for two-handed fishing which curbs fatigue. A wily steelhead can wear you out almost as quickly as you wear them out. In fact, I am convinced steelhead fishing is not your conventional battle of technique and skill, so much as a battle of strength and stamina.

In the end, the battle concludes in one of three ways. The first is that you, the angler emerges victorious with the beautiful opponent lying at your feet gleaming in the sun. The second way is the fish makes one last good push for the deep or far side and snaps the line. This outcome usually ends in frustration and exhaustion as the fish has overpowered you whereby proving that your manhood is lacking. The third way ends with the fish making one last good leap. While in the air, he shakes his head and then with one good breath spits the hook out with a proverbial “*Up yours fly slinger!!!*” and swims off in victory.

This last way is probably the most painful way to end the battle with a steelhead. If for nothing else; it is a reminder that you were outsmarted by a creature whose brain is one-tenth the size of yours.

This battle was going to end in my favor I could tell. I was doing everything by the numbers and was feeling good about my technique. The fish jumped a couple more times and then dove to the deep part of the pool. I gave a good tug to bring him back up to the surface, as I didn’t want to lose him in the rocks or under the snagging log in the middle of the pool. I was careful not to horse him but kept constant pressure on him to coax him back up.

By this time, Chuck had landed and released his fish. The only reason that I knew this was that he shouted loud enough to be heard in the next county that the bastard was defeated.

I was too busy with my fish to acknowledge his catch. All I could muster was, “Nice catch... now don’t bug me I’m busy.” I probably shouldn’t have said this knowing Chuck would take it as an invitation to come over and give coaching tips.

“Be right there buddy,” yelled Chuck, knowing that I had a fish on.

“No, it’s not necessary, I’m tryin’ to keep him from the far side. Just take care of your fish,” I huffed.

“Already let him go,” he yelled as he was making his way over the rocks.

“No, really, it’s cool, I don’t need any help. I’m cool!”

“Maybe so, I just want to see you land that hog.”

“Fine. Just stay back a bit.”

“Hey, no problem. Just don’t lose him.”

When he finally got down to where I was making my final stand, he was out of breath from clambering up the rocks and then down the path to get to where I was. I had to admit; it was a pretty funny sight to look up and see that hefty bastard running in his waders. It was fortunate that I had something to distract me. Otherwise, I would have started laughing uncontrollably at the site of a two fifty pound plus chunky guy wearing a floppy fishing hat turned up and running in a pair of neoprene waders, looking a little like a floundering green walrus.

When he got to where I was, he was panting, and immediately started in with the instructions. “Keep the tip up! Don’t horse him! Loosen the drag! Jesus, you’re gonna lose him! Want me to land him for ya?”

Annoyed, I finally turned slightly and snapped, “SHUT...THE...HELL...UP...WILL...YOU? I’m TRYING to catch a fish here!”

“Oh, sorry... no problem...don't...”

“DAMMIT CHUCK, SHUT UP!”

“Right.”

After about twenty-five minutes, I started to bring him closer to the surface. When he finally got a few feet from me, he made his one last jump.

“He’s gonna spit it.” Chuck started to yell.

“Not if I can help it,” I replied.

He made the jump, and I kept the rod tip up and poured on the pressure. When he jumped, I looked, and then had to do a double take as I thought I saw something else in his mouth. “Did you see that?” I asked.

“See what?”

“I thought I saw something else in his mouth.”

“Naw, probably just your fly,” said Chuck. “Guess we’ll find out in a couple of minutes.”

The fish made one last attempt at a run, but was apparently out of energy, as I reeled him in. Even to the last, he made half-hearted attempts to escape, but it was clear that he was becoming disoriented and lethargic because of the build-up of nitrogen in his blood.

When he finally surrendered, and let me reel him, he came almost willingly, as though he knew his salvation at this point could only be found in capitulation. I waded out to a more manageable depth of water to land him. I bent down to grab his tail to remove the hook.

At first glance, he looked to be a little longer than my arm from nose to the tip of his tail, but it was hard to tell as the sun had gone behind some clouds,

which obscured my view of the fish. But it was there in the dark green water where my suspicions had been confirmed. I pulled him closer and rolled him over to get a better look at where I hooked him.

I laughed out loud and said, “HA, you’re never gonna believe this Chuck.”

“What, what is it?”

“Which fly did you say you were using a couple of weeks back when you lit into that steely?” I asked over my shoulder.

“Orange Popsicle #2. Why?”

“What did it look like?”

“Well, you know what a Popsicle looks like Reed. Mine was kinda faded.” I pulled it from *The Box*. Why, what is it?”

“Did it look like this?” I asked as I held up what I thought I was looking at when the fish jumped. In my hand was the exact same fly Chuck described. And as if by some odd chance, as soon as I held the fly up, the sun came out and shined. The hook glistened in the sun.

Chuck went all white and looked like a zombie. “It’s a sign.” He said in a far off voice. “Sign of what?”

“That *The Box* is a gift from beyond.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” I scoffed.

“The fly you’re holding in your hand came from *The Box*. It’s gotta be a sign.”

“This is unbelievable,” I said, rolling my eyes, “The only sign I see is that you’re an idiot, and can’t land a fish to save your ass.”

“No... Don’t you see? You caught the same fish as I did, and the same fly that I used is still with him... and now it has come back to me.”

“Man, I think Shirley's pie is getting to you. That or that dead trout in under the seat in your truck is getting to you.”

“No... it’s *The Box*, that fly is from *The Box*,” he said, pointing a shaky finger. “And the fish that took it is a steelhead... It’s... it’s that same steelhead that the old man on the river caught.”



*THE BOX* as Chuck refers to it isn’t anything special. It’s just one of those old aluminum fly boxes that you get from the Cabela's catalog or the local sporting goods store, nothing too impressive. However, you can’t convince Chuck of that, since he found it one day when he and his Dad and brothers were fishing over on one of the coastal rivers. His older brother told him that it was a cursed

box, and said that no good would come of him possessing *The Box* in that he would never catch a fish as long as it was with him. He then went on to explain that the cursed box came from the old man on the river.

As Chuck tells it, apparently there was an old man who was fishing on that same river years before who lit into a steelhead of biblical proportions. It is said the old man battled the fish for a day and when he finally reeled the fish in close enough to land him, the steelhead swam at him, leaped into the air and took the old man down to the depths with him never to return.

Of course, this like most other fish tales is total bullshit. Oh, there was an old man of the river, but some biblically proportioned steelhead didn't swallow him. Nope, turns out that the old man was a drunk, who would venture to the river to escape the constant henpecking of his wife. I imagine he took one drink too many, slipped on a rock and slid into the waiting arms of his fluid mistress, never to be released from her icy embrace.

For the longest time, Chuck heeded his brother's warning and never even touched *The Box*. However, one time when Chuck and I were heading over to the Kilches to fish, he grabbed *The Box* by mistake. You should have seen the look on his face when he realized he'd grabbed the accursed item. It was something akin to the look of horror one gets when they realize they've made a fatal mistake. But what was he going to do? He had to use something. Well, that something turned out to be his good-luck talisman, because since then, he's rarely had a day on the river where he didn't limit out.



I LISTENED AS HE DRONED on, shaking my head all the while. But I'd had just about enough of Chuck's nonsense, so I walked over to him and for him to turn away from me. I reached down and cupped my hands together to get a handful of icy cold water. When Chuck turned around, I let fly, dowsing him with a face full of the Trask. It hit him with a huge splash, causing him to falter in his step and fall ass first into the river. The commotion was big enough to scare any fish in the vicinity for the rest of the morning.

He came up with a gasp and screamed, "WHAT IN THE HELL DID YOU DO THAT FOR?"

"Man, I think Shirley's pie's getting' to ya. You're talking crazy."

He started towards me, and I could see that he aimed to get me back for that little stunt. "You jackass, I'm gonna dunk your skinny butt for that one."

“Now take it easy Chuck, I was just tryin’ to snap your ass out of that catatonic diatribe that you were going on about my fish being some mystical sign.”

He regarded me with a look of mixed hatred and resentment. “Well, it was...”

“Now don’t start that crap again. It was a total coincidence that I caught the same fish that you did. Think about it. You caught that fish in the same pool a few weeks back, right? Plus, we’re pretty far up, so it’s most likely that he wasn’t going to go up any further.”

“I suppose,” said Chuck, scratching his chin, “But tell me this. How is it possible that the same fish is going to be caught by the same person on the same fly,” he protested.

“Well, first of all, idiot, it was caught by me, not you. Second, I used that fly because Jeff said that’s what they were hitting.”

“Maybe, but I was with you when you caught it.”

“Oh shut up, and go dry off. There is still plenty of catching to be done today, provided that you didn’t scare them back to Tillamook Bay.”

In all the turmoil, I forgot that I was still holding the steelhead. Only when he wiggled a little, did it dawn on me that I still had him by the tail. “Now, see what you made me do you dumbass? Now I’m gonna have to keep him, and you know how I feel about that.”

“I’ll take him... I’ll get him stuffed, and put him and *The Box* on my mantle.”

“The Hell you will. I said I don’t like to keep them, but I didn’t say that I won’t keep them. This son-of-a-bitch is going on the grill tonight. Jaz loves fresh steelhead.”

“Fine! but I still say it’s a sign.”

“Oh shut up and go dry off...there’s fish to catch.”

I hate keeping fish unless they are a steelhead like the one I caught, or a nice fat Springer or Fally. I will keep one, and only one of those when I get them, which is just as well as the limit is one per day of each species. That is to say that you can keep one steelhead, and one Chinook, etc. Trout are a different story altogether. I would never admit it out loud to Chuck, but I consider it bad karma to keep trout. But, as I said, I would never tell Chuck as he would start that whole stupid superstitious bullshit up again, and I don’t have time for that.

“There’s no way I’m going to be able to revive him after this long,” I complained, looking down at the poor creature. It was evident that I was going

to have to keep this one, which wasn't that big of a deal. Nevertheless, I was annoyed at having to keep this one on account of being distracted by Chuck's moment of insanity. It was such a good fight that I wanted to return him to finish his spawning. But the more I thought about it, the more, I reasoned he would end up seagull food or worse yet, rot somewhere on the shore. It's a sign... Jesus, what a gullible dumb ass.



CHUCK FLICKED STARTED on his way back up to the truck. "I'm gonna go for the cuts upriver, jerk," he said, pausing long enough to flick water in my face.

"Good," I said with a wince, feeling the trickle of icy water running down my neck. "I'm gonna head down river and check out a pool I noticed earlier." I followed Chuck back and dropped my prize in the cooler.

"You got that scale handy?" I asked.

"Sure, it's in behind the seat. One sec."

"Watch out for the dead trout."

"Haha, very funny." A couple of minutes later, he handed me the scale.

"There you go. So, how much is it?"

"Says here he's coming in at a healthy nineteen pounds, 8 ounces."

"Did you apply the rule of three?"

"Won't have to. Thanks to you, he's goin' home with me. And since I left my truck at Cane's, everybody will get a good look at him."

"Sure you don't want to fish the cuts, I saw a monster hatch beginning, and I would like to see what else *The Box* will produce."

"Well be sure to watch for more signs...Nostradamus," I said as he began to walk away. Over his shoulder, I heard him reply, "Up yours schmuck." I laughed as I grabbed my Spey, and made my way down to the next pool.

Twenty-five hard-fought minutes later, I released my second steelhead of the day. It wasn't the hog I'd caught earlier, but she was a beautiful and bright fish, with plenty of life in her. I thanked my partner for the dance and gave a brief wave and a smile as she slipped back into the inky darkness of the deep pool.

"And that's how you do it," I said to no one in particular, but then thought to myself, Thank GOD Chuck wasn't around to distract me with his nonsensical ramblings. It definitely made releasing the fish easier. But before I let him go, I remembered that I had brought my digital camera. I took a picture of the fish, the spot where I caught the fish, and the fly used. Jeff would be asking for the



information for his catalog, plus it would be something to rub Chuck's nose in because it was solid proof; something he never seems to have unless someone else is fishing with him.

I held the fish for a couple of minutes slowly reviving her until he finally snapped out of her funk, and darted off. I was happy to see her go, as I dreaded having to kill another fish. I don't know if it's the purist in me or merely the idea of having to clean the damn thing. I have never liked cleaning fish. Not that I have an aversion to blood and guts mind you, but I think it's that nasty slime that gets on everything especially in places that you can't immediately see. And of course, once it dries, it gives off that foul dead fish smell which tends to linger for years.



IT WAS GETTING PRETTY close to noon when I got back to the truck. I grabbed my lunch bag from my backpack in the cab and a beer from the cooler. I pulled the tailgate down and sat to enjoy a bit of peace and quiet before I joined Chuck upriver to tackle the cuts. It turned out to be a spectacular fall day once the fog burned off. The breeze coming in off the Pacific had that wonderful sea smell lingering in it. It is something I never get tired of because it is a constant reminder that I live in the majestic Northwest. The scent is found nowhere else in the world, a perfect marriage of sea air and evergreen trees, which evokes thoughts of long drives down the coast on highway 101 with my wife or eating fresh seafood. It can lull you to sleep most peacefully, and wake you up feeling refreshed. -SIGH!-... Ahhhh! Heaven.

“WOO HOO!” came Chuck's irritating voice, shattering my moment of silence. He appeared from behind the trees a moment later with a creel full of cutthroat trout. And even though I generally hate keeping trout, I had to admit; they'd go pretty well on the barbecue later tonight. I was just glad I wouldn't be the one cleaning them.

“Ni-ice haul Chuck,” I said as he opened up his creel to display his prize.

“Thanks,” he said with a look of pride. The look turned sour when he regarded me with a raised eyebrow. “Now don't go and get any funny ideas, Reed. I haven't cleaned them yet, and I don't want any damned guts in or around my truck!”

I raised my hand in mock defense. “Hey, no problem. I figured you've already had your daily dose of grief from me today. And I'll have you know, by

the way, it was Jeff who spelled out 'FISH MURDERER' in trout guts on your truck last time, not me."

He eyed me skeptically. "See, I'm just not buying it, Reed. Jeff may have been the one to do the deed, but the idea smacks of something you'd conceive," he said, wagging a finger at me.

"Be that as it may, none of the others are here to witness the genius of my shenanigans. When it's just you and I, my pranks are just not as funny," I said patting him on the shoulder. "I think you need a crowd to make your tantrums amusing."

He chuckled, unable to deny the humor of it all. "Well, I'm glad to know I bring you idiots a good laugh. Nice to know where I stand with you jerks," he said shaking his head. "You guys are just as bad as my older brother."

"Now, now Chuck, I think that's a little uncalled for. After all, none of us ever put ladyfinger firecrackers between your toes while you slept."

He winced. "Yeah, I almost forgot about that one," he said with a chuckle. I was happy to see he could now laugh about it.

I started to disassemble my Spey rod, then looked at him with a smile. "Hey, I said I wasn't gonna do anything, and I meant it. Are you done for the day?" I asked.

"Naw, just for right now. All this success has got me tuckered. Besides, I figured it was a good time to take a lunch break."

"Sounds like a good idea. What did Am' fix for you today?"

"Oh, you know, the usual, sandwiches chips, beer... nothing fancy."

"Well, don't forget, you have that pie from this morning."

His eyes lit up. "Hey, that's right, one piece now, and one for the road home," he said with a gleam in his eye.

I smiled at him sheepishly. "Uhh, well, not exactly... see, I figured since I bought them, I was entitled to one of those two pieces."

His look of elation evaporated like a fart in the wind. "WHAT? You jackass! I was gonna eat one on the way home!"

I shrugged. "Well, as I said, I paid for them, and since I was hungry, I went ahead and helped myself. Besides, if you really want a piece of pie for the road, we can stop by Shirley's and get another one."

"Well, I guess so," said Chuck. I could swear he stuck out his bottom lip as he said this.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh stop whining and let's get back to the fish before it gets too late."

We finished lunch and headed back upriver to the spot where Chuck had been earlier. Just as he said, there was a pretty prolific hatch going on when we got there. Chuck had pretty much forgotten about the loss of his second piece of pie pretty quickly because as soon as we got to the spot, he started up with his cheek chewing again.

I decided to wait and watch for a little while before wetting the line; mostly because I wanted to find the sweet spot, but partly because I do enjoy watching Chuck cast. He may be quirky, but he is one hell of a fly-fisherman.

His casts are the kind that you see all the professional's use, all perfect with tight little loops on the forward and backward casts. I once got a great photograph of him casting in a pool up in Washington where the light hit just right. He had back-casted a couple of times and was on his final forward cast. I caught it right at the perfect moment when the line had almost unfurled. The spray coming off the line glittered in the sunlight, creating a vivid rainbow. It indeed was a thing of beauty; one of those moments usually caught by a professional photographer. But the scene paled in comparison to the look of contentment on Chuck's face. I've seen him smile when fishing before, but I can honestly say I've only seen an expression that serene on his face a couple of times in his life. If there is such a thing as poetry in motion, it's watching this guy cast a fly. Plus, it helps to remind me that Chuck is not as much of a dork as he comes off as.

Unfortunately, Chuck's poetic casting was not meant to be today. Whatever serenity had been present was soon replaced by his loud whooping and hollering, signifying he had a fish on.

I guess I hadn't been paying close attention to what he was casting because the fish that he had on looked like a very sizable steelhead. "Weren't you throwing dries?" I asked. Keeping his focus on the fish, he ignored me, so I repeated my question. Again, he said nothing, which was not like him at all. I ambled over to where he was and watched the fight of the day unfold. "Hey, Chuck..." I asked again but thought better of it when I saw the look of concentration on his face.

A moment later, he finally gasped, "Yeah, heard you the first time. Gimme a sec."

"No problem, I'll get out of your way." I climbed up onto a big boulder that jutted out into the pool above where Chuck was in the thick of it. From that vantage, I could see quite well, the silhouette of the huge fish at the end of Chuck's line. "HOLY COW what a monster you got!" I yelled.

“Feels like a damn truck!” he said, trying to get purchase on the slick rocks of the pool to make his stand.

Moments passed while we watched the line meander back and forth. From the way it refused to come up, it seemed as though the fish was ignoring Chuck's attempts to coax it up from the depths.

"Is she stuck? Hey! Reed!" asked Chuck with annoyance.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, I can see it, and no, she ain't stuck. She just doesn't want to come up. I think she's ignoring you," I said, keeping my eyes trained on the behemoth in the murky depths.

After what seemed like an hour, the fish finally broke the surface with his first jump of the fight. The sight was like something out of some cheesy sci-fi flick. This was no ordinary fish; it was...the mutant steelhead from hell with colors that looked like something out of a painting. The deep forest green running along the fish's back gradually faded into a bright silvery viridescence. Punctuating the resplendence of this beautiful creature, was a brilliant blood-red band down the side. This fish was an old native, as was evident by its perfectly hooked kype jaw and scarred fins. When I made eye contact with the beast, and it felt as though it was staring into my very soul as if to say, "How DARE you desecrate my haven of peace, jerk!"

“JESUS FRIGGIN CHRIST!!!” I yelled in amazement. Chuck was still trying to get purchase as the monster continued to demonstrate who playing who. “Keep the pressure on him!”

“What the hell do you think I’m trying to do? Get over here and give me a hand, will you? I keep slipping on these blasted rocks.”

“Be right there,” I yelled as I climbed down and made my way over to where Chuck was losing the battle by degrees.

The awkwardness of the terrain under the water combined with the size and strength of the fish was enough to throw Chuck off balance. He gritted his teeth, trying to dig in.

As if sensing Chuck's precarious position, the fish halted its forward momentum, turned tail and ran straight at him. Chuck wavered, flailing his arms to maintain his balance, but it was no use. Once the line went slack, the sudden absence of opposing force ended the struggle, and into the water, Chuck fell.

The battle didn't end there, however. Fortunately, Chuck is wired to lock his grip like a bear trap as soon as a fish tickles the line. So what was meant to be an assured victory for the steelhead, turned into a renewed battle for dominance.

I couldn't help but laugh when the only thing I saw sticking out of the water was Chuck's forearm gripping the rod. I ran over and took the rod from him, while he clawed his way to the shore. I reached down to help him just as the fish redoubled its struggle to get free. My bout of laughter died in my throat a moment later when the steelhead made a strong run for the far end of the pool, threatening to take my arm with it.

"What the hell is this thing, a shark?" I gasped, struggling to keep my shoulder from popping out of its socket.

"Not so funny now, is it, Reed?" spluttered Chuck.

I backed out of the water holding the rod high to keep the pressure on the fish while reached down and grabbed Chuck by the waders and dragged him to the shoreline.

Right about the third time the fish jumped, Chuck was back on his feet and ready to take over his fight. I was going to let him have his just reward, but not before I played him out just a little more.

"Ok Reed, I'm all right, let me have my rod back," said Chuck, reaching out for the rod.

"Hang on a sec Chuck; I got her in a groove."

"Well, that's all fine and dandy, Reed, but it's my damned rod, and it's my damned fish, now gimme my rod back."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, one sec," I said, sparing him a glance. I cocked an eyebrow at him, and scoffed, "You can barely stand up yet. Why not rest for another moment."

"To hell with that pal, I'm fine," replied Chuck. "C'mon, gimme me my rod!"

I chuckled, suddenly reminded of my six-year-old who whines the exact same way when my three-year-old grabs her toys, complete with a foot stomp to emphasize the point. "All right, all right keep your shirt on chuckles, here's your damned rod," I said, passing the rod. I could have been a real jerk and tossed it at him, but you just don't do that to a man; particularly when there's a behemoth on the other end of the line. It won't make any difference anyway; you're just gonna lose it, heh heh heh."

Chuck snatched the rod. "Gimme that you moron. I am gonna get that fish, you'll see." I always love to do that Chuck. Getting him riled up in those situations is the easiest thing to do. He gets so bottled up tight in those moments that he could pop. The funny thing is, that when he gets riled like that, he

actually fishes better. I think it has something to do with his manhood being tested; I don't know.

I handed the possessed rod back over to its owner and stood back to watch the rest of the spectacle unfold. The fish jumped again and fixed us with another damning stare. However, instead of flinching, Chuck stared right back into its soul, delivering his own message of defiance. The fish ran to the far side of the pool to the boulder where I stood when Chuck first lit into the fish. Remembering my digital camera, I started snapping shots. If nothing else, I was at least going to get the fight documented for posterity. Plus, I guess a part of me wanted to help Chuck reinstate his credibility with the fly tying round table back at Cane's fly shop.

Soon, the fish began to show the signs of fatigue. Its jumps came less and less frequently, while the violent undulations of the rod slowed to a dull tug. Feeling more confident, Chuck waded back out into the pool to embrace his mighty foe. He raised the rod high one final time to keep the pressure on. One way or another, this epic battle was coming to an end.

"Gimme a hand here Reed; he's too big for me to take alone," said Chuck, backing slowly out of the pool.

"Be right there," I said snapping one final shot.

Chuck began to turn around to hand the rod to me when he stepped down and plunged into the river for the third time that day.

"GODDAMMIT!" he yelled when he came back to the surface. It was a wonder how he was able to keep his waders on with all the water he'd taken on.

Reaching down again, I pulled my friend out of the drink, hopefully for the last time. Both angler and fish were beyond exhausted. But whereas the fish lay motionless, resigned to its fate, Chuck came out of the water cussing up a blue streak. I guess falling in three times into the drink would be enough to pull the short curlies of just about anybody. However, Chuck's three-peat mishap would not go without reward.

He stepped up to me and stared down at the fish, water dripping from his nose and beard. He shook his head and chuckled. "It has been an honor, sir," he said to the fish, as he raised his hand in a salute.

The fish moved its jaw slowly, as if to say, "Well played, old boy. I concede defeat." It struggled once in a half-hearted attempt to reassert its defiance but thought better of it let its tail drop.

Chuck's anger evaporated when he gazed his prize. "How much do you think?" he asked me with a sidelong glance.

"Hard to say. I don't have my scale handy. If I apply the rule of three, then I'd say he's gotta be somewhere around twenty-eight," I said, scratching my chin.

Chuck shook his head. "No need to apply the rule of three on this one. You got pictures, right?"

I nodded. "You realize, you're going to have to keep that fish if you plan on getting your credibility restored," I said.

"Yeah, well, I suppose. I'd rather just have you snap a shot or two. This guy deserves to back to his sanctuary."

I turned to him, then froze as I stared down at the wide-open pocket where *The Box* usually rested. "Umm?" I said.

He gave me a strange look, then followed my gaze down to the now empty pocket. "AW NO!

SON OF A BITCH!!!" Chuck exclaimed.

In any other circumstances, I would have been laughing my ass off, but this was one of those situations, somewhat akin to losing your best friend. I couldn't meet his gaze,

"No, no, NO!!! You gotta be frigging kidding me!" He shouted, flying into a paroxysm of rage

"Aw man, I'm so sorry," I said quietly. I patted him on the shoulder. "It must have slipped your vest when you went under that last time."

Unwilling to accept defeat, Chuck shouted, "QUICK Reed, look for it!"

"I'm sorry bud, it's been several minutes and the current's too strong here. I'm sorry."

"NO, that was my lucky BOX!" said Chuck, stomping his foot.

I rolled my eyes. "Alright, FINE!" I said, wanting to head off any further temper tantrums on his part. "Stick around for a moment; I'll go take a look." But it had been too long, and the rapids at the end of the pool were too rough. As I looked, I could swear that I could see the glint of the sun off the old aluminum box as it fell over the last boulder before it disappeared into oblivion. I felt a lump in my throat and was almost compelled to take off my cap as if to pay my final respects to *The Box*. In secret though, I think the lump was more my attempt to choke back the urge to laugh uncontrollably. It soon passed, and I returned to where Chuck was kneeling exhausted over his prize.

Without looking at me, he asked, "Well, any luck?"

"Unfortunately, no, I didn't see it bud. I'm truly sorry." I was still trying to choke back the urge to bust out but regained control when the attention turned back to the fish. "Man what a monster!"



“Yeah, big fish,” said Chuck, though I could tell he was still sulking. “almost biblical in proportion... you don’t think...”

“Think what?” I said with rising skepticism in my voice. I knew where he was going.

“That this is the fish that took out the old man all those years ago...”

I wasn’t going start that crap again, so I played it cool and then nipped in the bud. “Well, if it is... not that I believe any of that nonsense, then it would explain why *The Box* left you. I mean, if you think about it, it makes sense. You catch the fish that took out the old man, and now the curse is lifted.”

As if filled with a sense of closure, Chuck said, “Yeah, wow. Wouldn't that be something?” he said almost reverently. Fortunately, he didn’t catch me rolling my eyes.

We turned our attention back to the beautiful old fish and watched in silence, as it began stirring with renewed signs of life. Chuck held for brief second, then opened his hands and watched her disappear back into the depths. He wiped his hands a couple of times indicating the end to his valiant effort, then turned and looked me with a wry grin playing at the corners of his mouth. We stared at each other for the span of a heartbeat before we broke out in laughter.

When our laughter died to a chuckle, Chuck said, “You're probably right, Reed. All that curse crap is pretty ridiculous eh?”

I snorted derisively and shook my head, but bit down on any further witty comments.

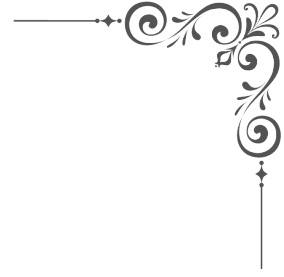
We started back towards the truck trekking back up the narrow trail that we came in on. All the while, I saw Chuck looking longingly at the rapids as if clinging to the ever-diminishing hope that *The Box* would rise from the depths to be returned to him. Unfortunately, none such was the case. *The Box* was returned to its rightful owner somewhere deep in the Trask or one of the countless other coastal rivers. I suppose there was some kind of mysticism to *The Box* and the history surrounding it, how it came into Chuck’s life as quietly and enigmatically as it left his life. I also pondered the idea that each and every fisherman has their totem, good luck charm, or habits that promote success in the art of angling, whereby allowing them to catch that ‘steelhead of biblical proportions’.

I reached into my vest and pulled out a similar aluminum box and handed it to Chuck. “Here, man. I know it's not *The Box*, but who's to say you can't think of this one the same way.”

Chuck smiled as he took the proffered gift, and said, “You know, Reed, despite being a royal pain in my ass most of the time, there's no one else I'd rather go fishing with.”



Fin



## FISHING TERMINOLOGY

**# 18.** - This is a unit of measurement for hook size which works inversely. That is to say, the higher the number, the smaller the hook. In fly fishing, the hooks generally tend to be small (depending on where you fish), in order to mimic the local aquatic insect life. In this case, a # 18 would be about the length of about half of a millimeter from bend to the eye.



**PMD.** - An abbreviation for Pale Morning Dunn. This is a fly pattern used to mimic small light-colored mayflies generally found near any creek, river, or lake.



**POPSICLE.** - A large orange fly pattern made from feathers, often accompanied by darker feathers in the front. The hook size of this fly varies from #0 - #6 (large flies). Used primarily for fishing sea-run Steelhead Trout in the Pacific Northwest.



**STEELY.** - Abbreviated term for Steelhead trout.



**CUTS.** - Abbreviated term for Cutthroat trout.



**# WT.** - Designation for a fly fishing rod to use a five-weight fly line. Fly lines are classified by a

"weight" system based upon how much the first 30 feet of the "working portion" of the line weighs in "grains". For example, a 5 wt.



**15 LB.** - Used in this context, it refers to the tensile strength of the fishing line. For example, 15 lb test leader means that the fishing line can withstand 15 lbs

(6.8kg) of pressure before it breaks.



**LEADER.** - A short length of tapered fishing line which comprises anywhere between 6 (1.8m) and 12 feet (3.6m) attached to the end of the fly line.



**TIPPET.** - A concise length about 1.5 feet (45.72 cm) of fishing line that attaches to the end of the leader. The strength of this section is usually between 2 and 5 lbs (.9 - 2.26 kg) depending on what kind of fish one is fishing for.



**SPEY ROD.** - A two-handed fly rod used for more massive quarry such as salmon or steelhead.

The length can vary from 11 to 13 feet (3.35 - 3.96 m). The added length of the rod allows for greater distance when casting.



**HATCH.** - A term used to refer to multitudes of emerging aquatic insects.



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