



2021 Third Place

# MOUNTAIN TROUT

*Heather Ormsby*

I stepped onto the front deck of the cabin, coffee thermos in hand. My uncle's truck was already loaded with fishing gear and tackle box, plus a folding chair and a sandwich and water for later, if I hadn't caught my limit by midday.

It was already after 7:00 in the morning, but the sun was just coming up past the Mosquito range to warm the June day. Birdsong had been playing for a few hours already. I could see the lake down the hill from here, mist rising off the water in white ribbons. The blue sky above was clear of clouds, and there was only a light breeze to blow the grasses and the blooming purple mountain iris around in a small dance.

I took the truck out onto the rutted dirt road and headed down to the lake. It was close enough to walk, but I didn't want to have to carry fish back uphill along with my gear—assuming I was successful.

I had on my oldest jeans and tennis shoes in case I had to get dirty or step into the lake water after an errant pole or fish stringer. The day was starting out nice, but it was still cool in the mountains, even in June, so I wore a fleece jacket over my t-shirt and sports bra. I had a rain poncho as well because one never knew what was going to blow over the mountains.

With sunglasses hanging around my neck, a wide-brimmed fishing hat on my head, and sunscreen already applied to my face and arms, I was ready for the high-altitude sun and glare off the lake water.

When I turned onto the road that circled the lake, I could see I was the first person there. I still drove around to the far end, to claim as much privacy as possible if others should arrive to try their hand at the rainbow trout that had been stocked here. There were always some brook trout, as well, that swam their way down from the upper reservoir of the Empire Valley through the rivulets and streams and around beaver ponds.

There was evidence of beaver at the edge of the lake where a small stand of aspen had a few of the smaller trees gnawed down. I looked out over the water. The small ducks that stayed here in the summers were chattering away at each other with the news of the day.

I reached into the back of the truck and took out the folding chair and set it by the water's edge. There were a few boulders scattered around that would suffice for a seat, but my experience had been that hard rock was not very comfortable after an hour or so.

Next, I got out my fishing pole and tackle box and set them next to the chair. The pole was already strung; the hook ready for bait. The tackle box was large and old. It was metal, painted green, but most of the green had been eaten away by rust. It had been my Uncle Jim's and his father's before him.

When I opened it, a top tray rose up with the lid, exposing two levels to hold lures, hooks, leaders, and bait. There were

scissors and pliers as well in case I needed to cut the line or pull out a hook swallowed by a fish.

In the bottom of the box was a jar of putty-like bait. Just a small scoop of the stuff to mold around the hook was needed, and the line was ready to cast. I wiped my



fingers on the rag in the box to remove some of the stinky residue of the bait. This was one of the reasons I kept my nails short. My mother had always bemoaned the state of my hands.

"It's just not ladylike," she said.

But everything I enjoyed doing—fishing, hiking, bouldering, digging in the garden—required me to use my hands. Besides, our people were never the 'gentlemen and ladies' sort.

I checked behind me to be sure I was clear before casting out over the water. The weight tied onto the line above the leader pulled the fishing line out over the water before plonking down into its depths a good way out from where I stood.

There is nothing more satisfying than a good cast. I thought back to when my uncle was teaching me, and I had got the line tangled up in a tree that stood behind us. Jim had to stand on a tree stump to reach up and get the line down. After lots of cursing, he finally just cut the line with his pocketknife, and we started again with a new weight and leader and hook.

The fishing he taught me wasn't the rhythmic poetry of fly-fishing with handmade flies, or boat fishing for bass from noisy boats with shiny lures. He taught me the joys of sitting quietly by the side of a lake, waiting for the pull on the line and the silver flash of trout leaping up from the water.

It wasn't sport. We always ate what we caught, unless it was too small and needed to be put back into the water to grow for another season. "We're hook 'em and cook 'em folks," he always used to say.

And if we didn't catch anything? It wasn't time wasted. It had been a day of quiet contemplation and study of the lapping water, the whispering trees, the gossip of animals, and the race of wind, clouds, and sun across the sky.

My Aunt Sally would sometimes accompany us on our trips. She would have a pole, and Jim would bait and cast it for her. She would sit and read a book that she had brought, and often she wouldn't even check her line to see if her bait had been stolen by a stealthy fish. At the end of the day, we would reel in our lines and her hook would be empty of bait or tangled in lake-bottom weeds.

Jim insisted I follow his example. Fishing needed concentration. It was a meditation, but not in a way that led to dreaming or a stupor. I needed to pay attention to every tug and sway of the wind on the water, to the fish jumping all around our lines, catching flies, mosquitos, and dragonflies.

This morning, after I cast my line, I carefully sat on my chair and settled the pole in my lap. My left hand held the pole firmly, but not too tight. The fingers of my right hand rested lightly on the handle of the reel, ready to turn and bring in the line if a fish got hooked.

Once in a while, the breeze would pull my line out with the movement of the water, and I would turn the reel just enough to keep the line taut. The slightest quiver could mean something was nibbling the bait, and I would need to flick my pole to try and hook the fish.

After a while, the breeze quieted, and the water became still. Silver flashes of fish jumped out around the lake, sending ripples in ever widening circles. I reached down and pulled up my coffee thermos that I had set next to the chair. I poured some of the coffee into the cup that was its cover, and I took a sip of the still hot, bitter, black coffee.

Usually, I drank my coffee with cream, but today I wanted to remember Jim, and he always drank his coffee black.

When I finished with the coffee, I reeled in my hook and saw that the bait was still there. I re-cast my line out onto the water.

When my father died, I was just five years old. My Uncle Jim and Aunt Sally would take me on weekends so that my mom could do her weekend bartender gig and catch up on sleep during the day. During the winters, we would snowshoe through the parks or visit the Denver-area museums or go to the library. I would sleep over, and Aunt Sally would overcook wonderful stews and casseroles. When they took me back to my mom's there would be plenty of leftovers for dinners later in the week.

When the Spring came and the mudseason was finished in the mountains, we would drive up on the weekend to Jim's family cabin here by the lake. While here, we would hike and fish and go farther out on camping expeditions or take the kayak out onto Twin Lakes farther down the highway from his cabin.

Jim and Sally didn't have any children of their own, so I guess they enjoyed having a child to spend some time with and to help my mother, of course. I was relieved to get away from the sorrow that hung heavy in our home. She never really got over his death, and when I went away to college, she succumbed to cancer. I thought it was sadness that killed her. She didn't really fight to stay alive and refused chemotherapy.

Jim and Sally were there, of course, to help me with handling her estate, such as it was, and taking care of the funeral and burial. I sold the house, and from then on, I would return to Jim and Sally's home for holidays.

There was very little wind, but the water lapped a bit at the shore of the lake. Dragonflies flitted around the short grasses there, hunting for mosquitoes and other bugs. The sun was dazzling off the water, and I put my sunglasses on.

Biting black flies began to bother my ankles and the back of my neck. They were a nuisance, but their presence usually meant the fish would get more and more active. I looked out over the water, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw a silver flash and heard a small splash as a fish jumped out for a fly snack.

I felt a slight tug on my line. My left hand flicked my pole up quickly and then I waited motionless for another tug or pull. There.

My right hand started to turn the handle on the reel to bring in the line. The rod bowed from the pull of the fish on the hook. As the line shortened and the fish was closer to shore, it began to flop and jump in the water, struggling to get off the hook.

I stood, and when the fish came close, I flipped the rod up to land the fish on the grass of the bank. It flopped a couple of times, then lay there, its gills gasping to breathe out of the water. I grabbed the pliers from the tackle box and knelt by the fish.

It was about a foot long. A beautiful rainbow trout, the pink and green colors of its scales iridescent along its fat sides, the inside of its gills bright red. Luckily, the hook had caught the lip, and I was able to unhook it without too much trauma.

I picked up the metal fish stringer from the tackle box and ran one clip end through the fish's mouth and out through the gill. I clipped it shut, then picked up the stringer and laid it in the water to keep the fish cool, placing a rock on the shore end to anchor it and keep the fish from pulling free.

I rubbed my hands in the water to clean off fish slime and dried my hands on my jeans. I picked up my fishing rod and gently reeled in the line until the hook dangled from the end of the pole.

I rebaited the hook, stood and cast back out over the water. The weight plonked into the water.

I sat down and looked at my fish. It would be just right for supper tonight. If I caught another, I would put it in the freezer and take it to Denver in the cooler Monday morning.

Uncle Jim was never a big talker. Aunt Sally would always want to know how school was going, who my friends were, what boys I liked. I always preferred it when Jim and I were fishing alone.

He would offer instruction on the fishing, point out things that he thought I would find interesting. But mostly, we just sat quietly together on the shore.

**The top of the world, he always called it. I was so relieved. I didn't want to part with coming here.**

His silent presence was comforting. And his consistent presence let me know I could rely on him. He was my backbone in a world that would toss me around like the foxtail grasses blowing in the wind.

One of the biggest lessons of fishing with Uncle Jim was how to be patient. As a kid, I would squirm and fidget, or zone out completely lost in a daydream. Jim would always bring me quietly back by pointing out a weasel swimming close to shore, or the shape of a cloud, or the wild strawberries flowering near the water.

I learned to watch and look and listen. To pay attention. Which is why I know I would have seen how sick he was becoming if I had been in town the past year. Maybe I could have talked him into seeing a doctor sooner. To beat this cancer with radiation and surgery.

But I had moved away to Kansas City for work after Aunt Sally died. I talked to Jim every week, and I knew he sounded down. I had seen grief before in my mother, and Jim never sounded like he was giving up. Just sad.

It was his neighbor, Alicia, who finally called me to let me know how sick Jim was. When I flew in to visit, I was shocked by how much weight he had lost. At how pale his skin was and the yellow of his eyes.

"I didn't want to bother you," he said. "You've got your life just starting."

He was the last living family I had. I wasn't going to let him die alone. So, I quit my job and moved back to Denver into his

house to take care of him. At first, I was hopeful that there could be treatment to help him, but the cancer had metastasized and was spreading throughout his body.

Within a month, he was gone.

My vision blurred and I blinked away the tears that had formed. I ate my sandwich and finished the coffee while listening to the water lap and the breeze blow through the quaking aspen trees.

My favorite fishing season was September. The weather usually settled by then, and there wouldn't be any afternoon storms to chase us away. The air would be so still that the lake became glass, and the yellow gold of the autumn aspen would reflect in the water and the whole world became golden.

It had been September the last time I went fishing with Jim. I had been getting ready to go to Kansas City and he wanted to spend one last weekend here before I got caught up in my new job.

"Don't worry about fitting in with everyone there in KC," he said. "You're not like the mountain trout."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The fish up here, they need the cold water. You won't find trout down on the flats. Down there it's all bass, and carp, and catfish. Or those bony sunfish."

"Trout's the best though," I said.

"I do like trout, but you're not a fish. You can thrive wherever you land. Just put your mind to it."

I had said I would. But the truth was that I had missed Colorado terribly. I missed having the mountains as my compass. I missed knowing that Jim was nearby. I missed the clear blue skies and abundant sunny days.

Just before Jim died, he told me that he was looking forward to seeing Sally again, but he was sorry he couldn't be here for me.

I kissed him on the cheek and told him that he could watch over me. He smiled and went back to sleep. He never opened his eyes again.

Afterward, I found that he had left everything to me, including his house in Denver and this cabin here at the Arkansas River headwaters. The top of the world, he always called it. I was so relieved. I didn't want to part with coming here. Because the truth was, I was happiest here. There was plenty of work I could find in Denver. I might even decide to winterize the cabin and live here year round. For a while.

The sun was beginning to set behind Mt. Elbert on the Sawatch side, so I reeled in my line and put everything away into

the tackle box and back in the truck. I took the stringer with the fish and wrapped it in plastic before setting it in the truck bed as well.

When I got into the truck and turned her back onto the road, the sky was bright pink and orange with a fiery sunset. I rolled down my window and looked out at the Mountain Bluebirds flitting around their nests on the fence line poles along the road. I turned on my headlights to look out for deer on the way, then I headed for home.



Heather Ormsby lives in Denver and is a fourth generation Coloradoan. She studied Journalism at Creighton University but has mostly worked in customer service for a library in Boulder and now at the Denver Art Museum. She spends most of her free time as a writer, photographer, artist, traveler, and gardener. She primarily writes mysteries and short fiction.