

## THE SECRET PLACE

By Andrew Ing

It was already raining when the boy left the house but he had decided to go fishing before the rain came so it was just an inconvenience. He kept his head down and slogged along the rutted track to the dam at the edge of the plantation. He held the trout rod by the cork butt with the tip pointing back because his head was down to keep the rain off his face. Even the foresters were coming in early and they slowed down for the puddles and passed him in their muddied white trucks with the labourers crouched in the back up against the cab with their yellow oilskins shining wetly in the rain. They cupped a cigarette and passed it among themselves and watched the hunched figure in the slick green raincoat splashing away from them up the road. Some of them shook their heads, then one man said something and the others laughed and soon the figure was just a dim shape through the blinding sheets of water. The trucks had their headlamps on and the boy looked up at the mountains around him but the mist and the slanting rain swirled even around its lower reaches and the pines and the mountains were lost in that drifting whiteness.

When he reached the dam his jeans were wet through in front but still dry at the back and he supposed it could have been worse. His face was wet and he was cold right through, wet cold, but he tried to forget about it and walked along the dam wall where he stood and looked out

over the water. The water was grey and puckered as each drop of rain hit the surface, bubbled and sent up its own little spout. The wind gusted from the north, carrying blankets of mist which swept over him and into the trees. Both the upper reaches of the dam near the feeder stream, and the eastern bank, were practically unfishable because the pines came right down the hillock in neat rows to the water's edge; but in that wind it was also impossible to cast off the wall or from the western bank. He stood there awhile and then continued along the wall and walked into the forest, taking the game path that wound between the trees on the eastern edge of the dam.

It was quieter and sheltered in the pines and, though the rain still dripped through, it was not nearly as bad as on the wall. The brown pine needles were soft and wet underfoot and he had to duck under low branches as he followed the path for a few hundred yards through the trees. It was just a game path so it was narrow in places and mostly it burrowed under the low-lying tangle of branches which were sometimes impenetrable as the pruning was only planned for the following season. Every so often the line would snag on a branch as he bent under them and he would have to stop, untangle it, reel in the slack and then go on. At one point the track disappeared into a bramble thicket so he worked his way up the slippery slope to skirt it and then came down again, sliding and tripping over dead branches. Heavy drops of rain dripped from the trees above and down the back of his neck. He started to swear a bit then, not much, but with great conviction.

Half an hour later he reached the shallows where he found a dry patch in the lee of a tall pine. He sat down with his back against the tree and unshouldered the wet canvas fishing bag. He unbuckled the leather straps, reached inside and took out the thermos flask of coffee; it was old and weathered with a pattern of red and green tartan. He pulled the plastic mug off the top, unscrewed the lid and poured the coffee into the mug, holding it cupped in both hands and blowing the steam away, sipping slowly as he looked down through the trees.

The wind had dropped and, although it was still raining, it was a soft, gentle rain that pattered on to the flat water that was visible between the tree trunks. It was marshy at the water's edge, with bramble thickets stretching around to the mouth of the feeder stream to his right. He drank another mug of coffee and then took his gear and made his way down to the water. There was an uprooted pine tree that had fallen into the dam and it had blackened over time, with the bark and some of the branches having long since rotted away. In the middle the trunk was submerged for a metre or two but it emerged again and tapered off towards the end. It was about 20m long, and he saw that, if he could get out past the submerged section, there were still a few branches beyond that to hold on to. There he would be away from the trees with a clear back cast, either up towards the feeder stream in the shallows, or out into deeper water.

He had left his landing net at home but felt that if he could negotiate the slippery tree, make a cast and maybe hook a fish, then he would have got more than he bargained for. He would solve the landing problem when it arose. He was using a floating line so he chose a well-weighted black woolly worm on a long-shank hook which he tied to the leader and then tugged firmly to test the knot. It was a very good fly, he thought, with a dubbed body of ragged black seals fur and a sparsely wound black cock hackle to resemble the legs of an insect. He slipped the fly box into his shirt pocket, buttoned the flap, and then put a spool of four pound leader material into the pocket of his jeans. He dipped his boots in the dam to clean the mud from them and then walked slowly out on to the fallen tree as the rain came down once again in slanting sheets. He balanced by extending his right arm with the rod away from his body, and with his left hand held on to the protruding branches within reach. There was no bark to provide grip for his boots and the tree was slick from the rain and the damp fungus growing there. He reached the submerged section and shuffled slowly through the water which came to just below the collar of his boots, then he was through. Near the end of the tree he tugged at a branch which broke with a soggy crack and he secured a boot on the jagged knot, leaning his thigh carefully against a thicker branch on his left.

The rain still came in from the north. He lifted the hood of his raincoat to warm his neck and, with his back to the feeder stream, looked out into the deeper water where the steep bank angled down sharply to a natural ledge under the trees. His heart caught in his throat as he saw the fin of a large fish breaking the surface of the water near the bank as it fed on insects struggling in the surface film. It was under the pine branches in a patch of still water sheltered from the spattering rain. Watching the fish all the time he quickly stripped some line from the reel

with his left hand, the smooth clicking of the ratchet and pawl sounding clear and natural out there on the water. When he had enough line he lifted the rod and flicked it smoothly back and then forward, the slack wet line slipping easily through his left hand. With two false casts he had all the line in the air and he hadn't spooked the fish, so he stilled the rod on the next forward motion and the line settled gently on the water with the fly cartwheeling and plopping down softly a few metres from the cruising fish.

There was a swirl and a flash of silver then the rod bent and the line was tight and alive, angling down swiftly beneath the surface and cutting through the water. He knew the fish was well hooked. He fought the fish as it zigzagged haphazardly out into the open, wrestling this way and that, trying to loosen the steel embedded in its jaw. He kept the rod tip up and the line taut and he allowed the fish to strip line from the reel which whined and screeched with each frenzied rush. The boy fought for balance out there on the fallen tree and it bobbed to his motion, sending ripples over the water; but he held on and then the trout jumped in a final burst of energy. It flapped and twisted in the air in a flurry of water, silver and pink, and the boy was proud of the fish for fighting like it did. Then it fell back into the water – but its fight was gone and he reeled it in close to the tree. He edged his way back along the slippery perch, delicately leading the fish around and away from the branches that angled down into the water below him. A small turtle came up from the depths, stuck its neck out and nudged against the exhausted fish as it moved slowly in the water, and then, just as mysteriously as it had come, it was gone, sinking away into the cold greenness.

The boy reached the roots of the tree and jumped on to the bank. The mud sucked at his boots and he leaned forward to slide the trout gently from the water, hooking his fingers into the gills as it lay there firm and cold and slippery on the reeds. He broke off a stout branch and clubbed the fish quickly on the back of the head. It quivered and was still. He loosened the fly and washed away the mud. The fish looked to be at least four pounds and it was a cock rainbow in beautiful condition with a proud hook on the lower jaw, giving it a permanent scowl. The boy was very pleased with his catch and he felt sure that nobody had ever tried the same thing out on that precarious tree. He left the fish on the wet pine needles under the bag and then washed his hands and re-tied the fly on to the leader above the point where the trout's teeth had frayed it.

The rain had let up now so, once again, he shuffled along the fallen tree and, when he reached his former perch, he saw three or four large trout feeding again in deeper water away from the trees. The water bulged and swelled around the fish as they circled randomly so he stripped out some line and cast in a slow rhythm, dropping the fly right where he thought their dining room table should be. As it sank below the surface it was taken with a vicious swipe. The fish came straight for the tree and the boy was too slow in retrieving the slack. It was a swift dark shadow beneath him and he looked back as it leapt clear of the water near the stream behind him and then darted straight back under the tree, snapping the line on a branch and jumping three times again out in the open. It hadn't taken five seconds and the boy stood, slowly coiling the limp line with a feeling of emptiness after the wild breathless excitement of the take. He estimated the fish weighed at least six pounds.

In the early evening the wind died completely and the last of the sun slanted down the hillock through a gap in the clouds, bringing on a hatch of caddis. The boy fished on alone into the twilight, a solitary figure seemingly suspended on the water out there with just the silent swish of the line in the air above him. He landed two more rainbow hens and lost three big fish in the reeds at the mouth of the stream in the shallows.

It was suddenly cold as the sun dipped away and he made his way back to the shore and sat there under the quiet pines in the chill of evening, sipping the last of the coffee. He thought back to the driving rain in the early afternoon, of the men in the truck laughing, then he looked down and admired the beautiful trout where they lay clean and moist at his feet. He separated the rod pieces and packed away his gear. He wanted to get home to watch his father's face when he held up the fish for him to see. The coffee had done nothing for his shivering so he threaded some reeds through the gill slits and hooked the loop in his hand before starting back along the dim path in the gathering darkness.

*«Trout are not be caught with dry breeches.»*

*Spanish proverb*