

From ***The Lakes at Inhluzane***

Part of Chapter 4, ***Hunting Trout*** by Tom Sutcliffe

Included in ***The Best Fishing Stories Ever Told*** – Nick Lyons -

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In 2010 Nick Lyons published a compendium of angling tales which included among its authors Rudyard Kipling, Guy de Maupassant, Lord Byron, Lefty Kreh, Norman Maclean – and this excerpt from a chapter of Tom Sutcliffe's much-loved classic, *Hunting Trout*:

The truck freewheeled slowly downhill to the Old Dam, through bales of hay scattered in the veld like rolled-up mats. The wipers scuffed raindrops off the windscreen with rough sweeps. Not enough rain to really warrant wipers, but enough to be annoying when we switched them off. The heater blew hot air into the truck. It was turned up full, and we clasped white-knuckled hands to the vents to warm our fingers. The air coming into the truck smelled oily, as if it had been piped straight from the middle of the gearbox. Grey clouds pressed down on the row of pines leading to the boathouse, and we could tell the wind was strong by the way the pines were bucking. As we neared the dam our eyes were fixed on the water. The water was silver and rough, and there was no sign of fish. We could see the lake, but in the low cloud nothing beyond it. We parked the truck against the trees, a few yards short of the boathouse. The bare walls of the boathouse stood knee-deep in the water. The roof had long since blown away in a storm and when they lifted the wall of the Old Dam, water flooded back and rose permanently up the bare walls. So no one used the boathouse, other than as a landmark to fish near, because you often found heavy fish hanging around the boathouse. We thought that might be because the catches were mostly gutted here and that brings in crabs. Outside the air was bitterly cold, but the wind was coming from the west, and that was a good sign for the fishing. We poured coffee from a Thermos, mugs steaming in the cold air. Later we would spike the coffee, but never before fishing, which is maybe just as well, or at least properly cautious if you're in a floattube. You want your wits about you on a rough lake in a tube. We hunched into thick jerseys and heavy jackets, pulled woollen caps over our heads and put our hands into gloves. Our noses ran wet and turned red, our eyes watered with the cold. As the cold bit in, it got more difficult to assemble the gear. When it's this cold something happens to your fingers, maybe also to your brain. Your fingers get clumsy, seem not to connect with your brain, and I think the brain slows

down as well. Threading guides and tying knots took time. The neoprene waders were like ice around my legs. Overnight they'd got stiff and solid and were difficult to pull up over all the clothes. The waders had sprung a leak the day before and a patch of damp pressed wet as ice against my thigh. When I was done, I felt stiff and clumsy, like a strung-up Christmas turkey. But on the water the tubes were yielding and comfortable and we paddled out across the lake with the wind on our backs. The tubes left flat, silver paths as we paddled. We rocked silently from side to side as each leg lifted smoothly-green, upswelling bulges of water. Ducks were leaving the reedbeds one by one, like black-feathered arrows fired into the grey sky, but the coot and dabchick weren't about. Maybe the weather was too uncertain for them, or too cold, or the water too rough.

In ten minutes we were alongside the Shale Heap, another landmark on the far side of the north bank. We headed into the narrow bay beyond it. The tubes started trailing long strands of weed and the bigger weed beds slowed us down. The holes in them showed grey and smooth on the surface. I chose a good-looking hole, lifted the fly off the rod and dropped a cast into the edge of the opening, letting the line run with the wind. The line lay stiff and slightly coiled on the water. I lifted and cast again, reaching further across the hole. The leader winked on the surface then sank slowly under the weight of the nymph, the coils moving like a snake down a hole. My fly was an olive Hare's Ear, lightly weighted. There was no indicator on the leader. Suddenly the leader moved to the side, unnaturally, and I felt the pull of a fish. The line sprung straight and held tight from the bending rod. I could feel the fish diving and running hard, but a loop of line was trapped around my index finger. I tried desperately to free it, but it was too tight. The loop burned into my finger. For a brief moment the fish held and buckled the rod, nearly pulling the tip under water before the nylon gave. The rod sprang back, suddenly lifeless. It was a relief to free my finger. I hooked a second fish, a deep, pink-sided rainbow around four pounds. The fish was strong and when it hung on the line alongside the tube it regurgitated a cloud of pale-green damsel nymphs. They wriggled into the weeds. I reached down and twitched the barb free, not bothering with the net. The water felt warm, but my arm was wet to the elbow. I had been stupid not to use my net.

I opened my fly box, picked a slender, green damsel nymph with a soft marabou tail and seated the knot carefully with slow fingers. I cast again into the same hole. By now the line had lost its curl. It lay straight, rocking gently on

the belly of the silver water. I watched the leader and when it sank unnaturally fast I lifted the rod. I hooked plenty of good fish this way, but it was difficult to keep them out of the weed beds. Mostly the fish tore into a wall of weed and got off within seconds, but I landed a few small ones and released them. Then a heavy trout took the fly, a rainbow around seven pounds. It took close to the tube, less than a short cast away, and jumped. When the fish was at the apex of its curving leap it was coming straight for the tube, and for an instant we were staring at each other. I remember wondering if we would collide. The fish seemed wide-eyed and angry, and when it hit the surface it left a tall fountain of water and made straight for weeds. I heard the line hiss and saw a sheet of spray following it, but that fish wasn't on for much longer than it would take you to breathe in and out.

Then rain came in strongly, driven on high winds, the drops stinging my face and hands. But the fish were still obliging so we stuck with them, taking enough between us to lose track. I got them on damsel imitations until they ran out. Then I went back to the olive Hare's Ear. The fish were a little slower on the Hare's Ear, but they took it all the same. My gloves were soaked and I cursed myself for not bringing the paraffin hand-warmer. My fingers shook and felt numb, and tying a new fly to the leader took long, painful minutes. I decided to catch just one more fish and to do it with my back to the rain. It was a good fish and it made straight for the deep water so that when I came to lead it back through the weed beds it was all but played out. I lifted the fish in the sagging net and put it on the wet apron of the tube. It was a short, silvery fish around four pounds with occasional dark spots and pink flanks. I decided I would have the fish smoked when I got back to town. I paddled past the Shale Heap and then headed across the deep water. The deep water looked inky in the half-light. I paddled more strenuously than was needed, just to build up body heat. The fish felt heavy on the apron, the net and the fish sliding around uncomfortably as I paddled. When the effort had warmed me enough, I fished lazy casts into the deep water, but saw no more trout. It needed weeds to produce fish on the day. I beached and climbed the bank, awkwardly stiff-legged. I turned the tube on its side and laid it against the truck out of the wind and peeled off my wet gloves. I took the fish to the edge of the water and gutted it. The flesh was pink and firm. I wrapped it in wet newspaper and opened the Thermos and poured hot coffee. The brew looked dark and left clouds of steam. The others came in one by one. We started the engine and left it running with the heater full-on to warm the cab. We huddled in the lee of the

truck under the pines, drinking coffee. We worked out we'd been on the water for three hours and had taken a few good fish, but beyond that we didn't say much. When the wind gusted, showers of water dropped on us from the wet branches. It was bleak. Someone found a green bottle that still had four fingers of whisky in it and we laced the last of the coffee. I peeled off my waders, stripped off my jacket and suddenly felt strangely loose-limbed, almost naked. We piled into the cab and bounced back up the track huddled together like wet fowls, and the last of the coffee burned hot in my chest. We couldn't help thinking we'd won something of a victory.