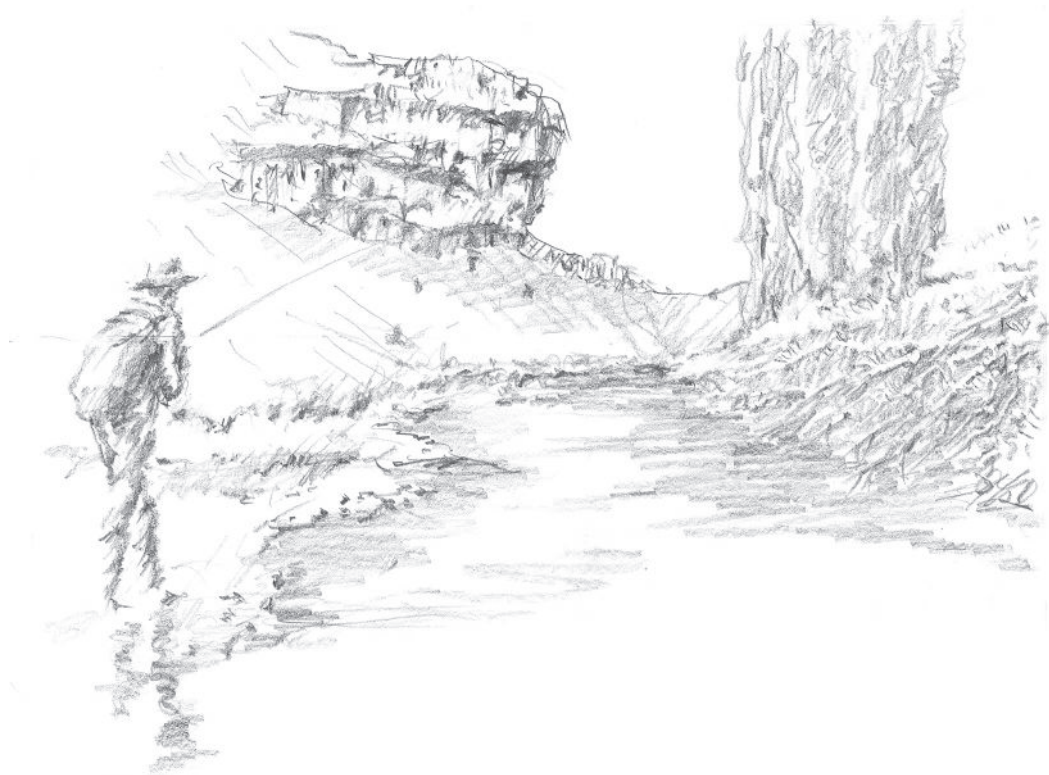




The Bokspruit River

CHAPTER 3

BARKLY EAST, MAY 2011, AND BRIEF FLIRTATIONS WITH TENKARA

It has often been remarked by trout fishermen that when they are about the affairs of stream and rod, the events of yesterday and the necessities of tomorrow are singularly dwarfed in importance.

BEN LAMPMAN, *A LEAF FROM FRENCH EDDY*



I was about two hours into the trip and deep into the heart of the Karoo, the back of my truck loaded to the gunnels with fishing gear, boxes of booze, a float tube with accessories, assorted cooking paraphernalia, including two enamel kettles with matching mugs, and a gas stove for brewing coffee and heating soup or beans when, for some unknown reason, I got this sudden heart-chilling thought that I'd left my orange-coloured Orvis rod caddy propped up against my study wall back home. Why our minds suddenly slip

off along anxiety-provoking tangents like this I don't know, but it happens. In fact, the more tortuous the notion, the more your mind seems to select it. In keeping with this distressing syndrome, the more I thought about it, the more I became convinced I wasn't wrong. Before long I just knew I had left all my fly rods at home, which is an end-stage symptom of this condition.

Naturally, my first impulse was to stand on the brakes, pull over and check through the back of the truck, but I was sandwiched between two eighteen-wheelers and there was no way I could stop right then. I sat for ages behind the leading truck, locked in worry, my doubts feeding on themselves and growing all the while. At times I was almost able to pass the truck, but not without taking a risk. When you're on the N1, deep into a road trip and worrying that you've forgotten your fly rods, you're not in the right frame of mind to take high-speed risks.

The rig ahead of me had a red canvas tarpaulin covering an obviously empty trailer, and on the downhill runs, when the driver was nudging 120km/h, the tarpaulin flapped like a giant flag in a storm. Also, he was not one of those polite guys who pulls over onto the shoulder to let you through. When I did eventually overtake him, ten long minutes later, it was on a long, dead-straight section of a steep hill when he'd slowed to a walking pace. I could see clear tar for miles ahead and floored the pedal. As he came into my rear-view mirror I felt ready to pull this imaginary lever on my dashboard that would release a pile of razor-sharp builder's nails onto the road, puncturing both his front tyres. It's a sort of James Bond-type fantasy I use to help relieve attacks of road rage.

Look, I have arrived on a river before, desperately keen and ready to fish, only to find I'd left my rod behind. Or my reels. In fact, most of us have done it more than once. On one occasion I was with Ed Herbst. I purposely hadn't taken a rod because I wanted a few really good close-up photographs of fins and skins, so I'd

loaded a camera and wading gear and nothing else. Ed hauled out the single rod tube he'd brought, unscrewed the cap, shook it, stuck two fingers deep into its throat, got a really worried look on his face, then upended the tube and shook it. An empty, emerald-green Sage rod bag fell limply to the ground. That's when he remembered he'd put the rod out to dry the night before. We got over it, climbed out of our gear and headed to the nearest café for a coffee.

But to leave *all* your rods behind on a two-week-long fishing trip is, as they say, a horse of an entirely different colour. In fact, it's not compatible with an extended fishing trip, full stop, unless wherever you are going has a conveniently useful reserve of fly rods – and some do, like the better fishing lodges, but most places I stay don't. In fact, at best, I'd be fishing a few ancient two- to four-weights of varying pedigree and condition. Certainly no bamboo.

After I'd put plenty of distance between myself and the flapping red tarpaulin, I pulled over at an abandoned railway siding called Konstabel, a siding that had obviously been important enough in the heyday of rail traffic to cause trains to stop here. Now the small cluster of railway houses was sad and dilapidated, but at least I was well off the highway and in a pool of shade under peppercorn trees.

I stepped out. It was strangely cool; I felt road-stiff and not sure I even wanted to open the canopy door. Countless chirping sparrows were noisily going about life in the trees. I reminded myself to crush a few biscuits for them before I left.

It's been said that Murphy's Law applies to most things in life, and that one of its tenets is that if something can go wrong it will always be the worst thing. But my more sage friends tell me that the real world is governed by O'Reilly's Law, which simply says Murphy was an optimist. So you will believe me when I tell you it took me a full heart-thumping minute of shifting boxes and assorted gear before I spotted a corner of the orange canvas of the rod bag. It was lying in the last place left to look. I heaved a long sigh of

relief, punched a fist in the air, poured a mug of coffee, crushed a generous portion of biscuits for the sparrows, stuck my mug in the cup holder on the dashboard, and was just pulling off when the red tarpaulin roared by. I cursed him out loud and lifted a finger. In my rear-view mirror I saw the sparrows swooping from the tree to the crumbs on the ground, and that at least pleased me.

*

It wasn't the best way to start a two-week, 1,100-kilometre fly-fishing trip to the Eastern Cape, but there was some solace in knowing it could have been worse. Also, in an obscure, roundabout way, this sort of thing is strangely pleasant – after a shock like this, the sweeping sense of relief you get is satisfying. I slipped a disc into the CD player – Herbert von Karajan conducting Beethoven's *Symphony No. 4*, a gift from my musician friend Dulcie Kirby – and within ten kilometres I had chilled enough to enjoy Karoo landscapes sliding slowly by, trying from time to time to guess how far it was to the top of the next hill on ruler-straight pieces of highway. In the Karoo it usually works out at anything from ten to fifteen kilometres, but you can be wrong when there's a midday heat haze, and find it's more like twenty.

*

I'd left Cape Town pretty much on schedule, which was late in the day for a long drive like this, but then I'd had plenty of loose ends to tie up. So I booked a room at a B&B in Graaff-Reinet instead of pushing on another 150 kilometres to Mike and Candy Ferrar's farm on the far side of Middelburg.

I took a brief stroll around Graaff-Reinet, noticing that this attractive town was showing a few signs of becoming a tourist

trap, then sat down to dinner on a pleasantly cool outside veranda adjacent to a small swimming pool in a lovely garden. They served leek and potato soup, followed by a leg of lamb cooked as I think lamb should be (meaning not underdone and bleeding, but well-roasted). The gravy had a hint of rosemary in it, and I added a generous spoonful of tart-flavoured mint jelly to my plate. My only companions were a couple of French tourists who were locked in deep conversation, other than when they complained to the young waitress that the wine they'd ordered should have been uncorked in front of them, not brought to the table ready to pour. They had a point, I know, but I was glad they hadn't started this conversation with me. I was tired, with a hovering dose of road rage, and I just might have reminded them they were eating in a charming, unpretentious little restaurant in a tiny Karoo town, not at Les Jardins de L'Espadon in the Ritz Hotel on the Place Vendôme in Paris, to where, I would have added, they should hastily return.

The waitress brought another bottle to their table, and opened it with exaggerated twists of the corkscrew and a flamboyant yank of the cork that made a more than the usual muted 'plop' as it left the bottle. She got her point across, no doubt, but I also guessed her tip disappeared right then like a spooked trout in a glassy stream.

Instead of waiting for dessert and coffee, I decided to head to bed early. I did sit awhile in the courtyard outside my room with a mug of coffee, and was reflecting on the beautifully starlit night sky when the French couple strolled past. They didn't look up at the sky, and I wasn't about to point it out to them. Blind as bats, I thought ungraciously. My road rage was apparently still hovering.

But I was back on the road early the next morning as the first rays of sunlight lit the sleepy town. There were clouds around, and they slowly built into banks as the kilometres clicked by. When I drove through Burgersdorp two hours later, a few drops of rain hit the windscreen, but that was the last of it, and the clouds melted away.

*

From the bridge over the Kraai River at Moshesh's Ford, roughly forty kilometres from Barkly East, I looked down onto a river running high but clear – clear enough to make out the stones in the riverbed. In time I saw a trout in a pebbled depression near the far bank. It held a still station, moving only with the slowly lifting and settling thrusts of the current.

Judging from the puddles along the road there had been a good fall of rain. I'd driven through the odd slippery patch where, for reasons I don't fully understand, the harder shale surface suddenly gives way to short stretches that are more a soft clay than gravel, and where you can find the back end of your truck starting to waltz if you come in too quick or aren't that careful. The weeping willows on the banks of the Kraai were turning gold, but the poplars were already leafless and starkly bare. The air was icy on my face, and I saw no bugs hatching. I thought the river was certainly fishable; moments later, the trout I'd spotted rose confidently. It drifted in a lazy arc at least a metre downstream in a swinging rise, suggesting that whatever it had come up for was worth the effort.

*

At *Birkhall*, Basie and Carien had kept lunch for me, and within an hour I felt at home, almost as if I had never been away. Packed on my bed in a neat pile were the clothes I'd left from my last visit, plus a couple of items of fly tackle, including a pretty Hardy Marquis reel I'd somehow never really missed or, in truth, never knew I owned. Basie convinced me it was mine. It passed through my mind that when you own too much tackle you get a sort of collective fly-gear amnesia that includes everything except the fly rods. When you forget those, it's time to see someone professionally.

The wind had died and the late afternoon was mild. I took a drive to the Lindisfarne Bridge. In the deep pool below the bridge, trout were gently touching the surface. So I set up a rod, tied on a CDC midge pattern, skirted the tail of the pool and then moved up on it quietly. Whatever was hatching was small – I guessed a mayfly or maybe a midge – but from twenty paces in fading light you can't be sure, other than that any small grey insects coming off an evening stream are mostly either *Baetis* mayflies or midges. I have run into late hatches of tiny flying ants, and micro-caddis hatches aren't uncommon up here either, but they're more likely to hatch in warmer, sunlit day. Not that it matters much what you think is actually hatching, because you can always rely on the trout to tell you if you've got your fly selection right – or horribly wrong.

In the slanting sunlight the 7X tippet glowed on the surface and, within seconds, a small trout took the fly and leapt like a salmon when I hooked it. The trout came in quivering, but then lay still in my hand with a look of deep resignation on its face as I freed the hook. I caught a few more until they stopped rising; that happened, as it does so often, when a cold wind arrived, lifting leaves from the riverbank, scattering them like confetti, the gusts flattening sweeps of veld. You might ask why rises stop so abruptly when a cold wind gets up. Perhaps the bugs stop hatching because the wind ripples the surface, but I doubt it. Delicate midges and most species of mayflies hatch in rippled water precisely because in rippled water the meniscus is easier for them to break through. Or is it that the emerging insects somehow sense the dangers of hatching in cold, windy weather where, if they break the surface and hatch, they will get swept away on the wind before they get a chance to get out of their shucks? Or is something else at play here? Like, does a sudden drop in air temperature threaten the survival of newly hatched adult bugs? Or perhaps the bugs actually *don't* stop hatching in the wind at all; they just get harder for trout to grab because they're blown

away as soon as they hatch. I guess the answer, to try to be helpful, is *all of the above*, qualified by the word ‘depending’ – the panacea term for the many events we can only guess at in fly fishing.

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That night Basie said it was too cold to snow and I offered to light the fire in the lounge. He quickly said, ‘Don’t worry, leave it to me.’ I suspected this was a deep survival response that got embedded in his mind when I lit the fire in his lounge one particularly cold evening on a previous trip. The wood then was slightly damp, and the flames just wouldn’t take hold. Basie suggested I add a little ‘starter’, a turquoise-coloured, high-octane inflammable gel. I poured a little gel onto blackened embers that I could have sworn were nowhere near still smouldering. Bad call. The bottle burst into flame in my hand, and I reflexively tossed it straight into the fireplace. There was a massive whooshing sound, and the entire chimney lit up in a blinding sheet of orange flame. For a few long moments it looked like the Taliban had scored a direct hit on Basie’s lounge with a petrol bomb. No serious damage was done, but Basie needed a stiff drink before the colour came back into his face and he could speak.

*

Tony Kietzman drove across from Rhodes the next day on the back of my reports that the Sterkspruit looked good – high, but dropping. He knew that if there’s ever a great time to fish it’s when a river or stream is falling and clearing. We went into what we loosely call the gorge, a section on the farm *Branksome* a few kilometres upstream of *Birkhall*. It was a day that looked good for the moment; meaning the weather could switch either way in minutes. At least wind wasn’t a problem, and we thought if it rained lightly the fish might come on.

We parked in a paddock alongside the river, slipped over the fence and crossed the river. The flow here is normally wide and shallow enough for an easy crossing, but this day the river was running higher than I'd expected and the weight of the current dragged heavily on my legs. The water was clear and flowed brightly over pebbles in the shallows. In the riffles it tumbled, leaving lattices of white waves and bubbles. The deeper reaches were opalescent-green. Everything about it looked perfect – perfect in ways you will find few people can actually put into words, but which is something anglers recognise instinctively if they've been programmed on rivers for long enough.

We walked downstream on the far bank through *ouhout* bushes where the tangled debris of dead branches cracked under our boots and raised a fine dust that smelled strangely of honey. The veld swept up the hillsides in rust-coloured waves, in some places reaching to craggy ridges. Although the valley is generally narrow in the kilometre or two of this section, it's not really a true gorge; nothing like those on other streams hereabouts, like the Swith or the Joggemspruit, and certainly not like some Western Cape streams, such as the Witels or the Jan du Toit's, where in places the rock faces on both banks reach upwards like the spires of a cathedral.

Further downstream we crossed the river again at a place where it is wider and shallower, but its pull was still strong. You cross a river like this with care because it drags at your legs and the rocks are smooth, round and slippery. And that's not only because you'd rather not end up soaked to the skin, but also because any river crossing takes on a special meaning when you have enough unprotected camera gear in your backpack to make a down payment on a small apartment. So you wade carefully, never moving a leg forward until the other foot is secure. It's one of the secrets of safe wading.

We walked down the south bank until we had a comfortable morning's fishing back to the truck, then we slid quietly into the

ankle-deep water at the tail-out of a run, where the breeze was gently upstream. Tony is a dry fly man when conditions allow for it, or when there's even a hint that a dry fly will work. He had on a RAB and I used a bushy CDC dry fly that I fished on my corn-yellow Dugmore bamboo rod. In this first run we got a fish apiece, both sturdy trout in good condition.

We were in no rush. Tony lit his pipe, filling it from the crumpled Ziploc plastic bag that (for as long as I've known him) doubles as his tobacco pouch; not quite in the Dunhill league, but then we weren't on the Houghton Club water of the River Test either. With his pipe in his mouth, he dropped a dry fly near the head of the run and hooked a third fish that zigzagged around between us till he reached for his net, rod high, and landed it. I got lovely photographs of him landing that fish, the angler backlit with the water sparkling like diamonds. I took a fourth trout from the same run and we realised the fish were really on. They were all around fourteen inches.

The fishing was constant after that, meaning if any presentation in good holding water was right, most often a trout would lift to our dry flies. Sometime during the morning we noticed mayflies hatching, but not in profusion. They were dull-coloured insects and tiny and didn't bring on much by way of rising fish, at least not that we could see. But later I noticed a good head come up in the tail of the run we'd waded through when we crossed the river on our way downstream not an hour before. This trout rose in a narrow, deep slot near the bank. It took my dry fly and raced downstream. I finally checked the fish and played it into the net. It was all of sixteen inches. Tony was about to press the shutter on his camera while I was posing with the fish when it bucked in my hand and was gone. It's not the first time I've dropped a fish at that critical moment, and it won't be the last. I think the secret is to lift the fish cradled in your hand and not held tight. That is if you are going to lift it out of the water and, more and more, I am of the view that

because it's risky for fish to be exposed to air, we shouldn't be doing it for more than a second or two, if at all.

As happens some days on rivers after a busy start, the fishing just went lame for an hour or two, only the occasional fish coming from the best-looking places in the best-looking runs that we knew held a heap more fish than we actually got from them. And we only got those on deep-fished nymphs. They weren't interested in the dry fly any longer. Well, not for the moment at least.

Midway along this lovely section of the Sterkspruit there is a wall of sheer rock that drops steeply into the water for about a hundred metres. It's on your right as you're going upstream. The rock is dark-grey, almost black, but it's patterned with bright patches of red and orange lichen, like God's graffiti. The water running along the wall is deep and inviting, and suddenly we were catching fish again with ease. In fact, they were taking so confidently we switched back to dry flies and trout rose to them all the way along the rock face and even up in the bubbling whitewater at the inlet.

Upstream we came on a place where the river widens on a corner and then braids into a series of shallow, quick-flowing runs. It was not far from where we'd parked the truck, and suddenly we were hooking small fish at will, the biggest maybe ten inches.

It was after 3pm when I dropped the tailgate on the truck and lit the gas burner under a kettle of river water. I added a few spoons of coffee grounds and left the kettle until the lid boiled off. The coffee tasted good, even in the absence of milk and sugar – and despite my chipped enamel mugs. Or perhaps it was good for all these reasons. Tony, anyway, takes his coffee black, and always seems to enjoy my sub-standard brews despite only drinking the proper filter stuff back at his home.

We were drinking the coffee sitting on the tailgate of a truck parked alongside a trout stream with birdsong drifting in on the breeze, in the same paddock where years ago my friend Mario

Cesare and I stopped for a late lunch after fishing this beat. I remember him asking me how long I'd fished my Orvis 4-weight Western Series graphite rod (it turned out to be ten years from the date on the butt cap). I also remember that I'd climbed over that barbed wire fence a lot easier back then. But I'm not concerned about taking a few extra minutes crossing barbed wire fences – especially not in a high-priced pair of Simms chest waders. And, as if in a replay of what transpired all those years back, Tony reached over, picked up my Dugmore bamboo rod and flexing it said, 'Nice stick. Feels like a 4-weight.' I said it was, and I could have added that in many ways its action reminded me of my old Orvis 4-weight Western Series, just that the Dugmore is a little smoother on long casts, and a little more forgiving on bad ones.

We left the paddock and headed upstream to the bridge that roughly divides the farm above, *Broadford*, from *Branksome*. This is pretty water; the river is wider and shallower but full of structure, including a bridge and a weir. The fishing can be interesting in that the trout are, if a little smaller on average, quite discerning at times. In the hour we had to fish we proved neither of these points. Not a single fish rose and we couldn't get a take from even the tiniest of trout until, in the run below the weir immediately above the bridge, we did hook a few finger-long rainbows on a dry fly. By then the weather was closing in and the temperature was down. But if we hadn't at least tried this lovely piece we would have died wondering that night.

It was dark when we got back to *Birkhall*. We had dinner with Basie and Carien and I easily persuaded Tony to take one of the spare beds for the night. I told him we'd fish the lake in the morning. Around midnight I awoke to the sound of thunder. Through the lace curtains of my bedroom window lightning lit up the night sky, each of the flashes followed by a deep rumble of thunder. With the window open I could hear and smell the rain, and I took a torch

and padded through the sleeping house to the porch. Rain was falling in slanting sheets that bounced high off the stone wall that skirted the veranda. The storm's omens might not be good for the fishing, but this was pure oxygen for the rivers.

*

Next morning we sat around the table in the kitchen eating bacon and eggs and toast thickly coated in marmalade, and kissed the prospect of fishing goodbye. I was comfortable with that, but only because I had a heap of flies to tie. Tony left to check on his indigenous nursery project in Rhodes, and we loosely agreed to fish the Bokspuit as soon as the weather cleared. It was May, and we argued that it couldn't rain that long up here in May. But since when can you second-guess the weather? As it happened it rained for two days, with the sun coming out in patches that suddenly changed the vistas off the veranda from scenes of impending storms into pretty pictures of sun-soaked pastoral peace. But they never lasted long.

*

I met Agostino Roncallo on the Internet. He ties flies in Genoa, Italy, and he's a magician with CDC. He'd sent me a box of his patterns, about three of each, and I sorted through them on *Birkhall* during a truce in the weather, choosing his Mirage dry fly to copy. After a few attempts I got one to look roughly the same as his, if a little clumsier, but good enough to try on the local trout. The note he'd sent with his gift of flies asked a particular question. Roncallo wanted to know if his patterns would catch trout in Africa. I ended up tying half a dozen size 14s and 16s on grub hooks, using grey 8/0 UNI-Thread and dun-coloured CDC feathers. I was as keen as he was to find out if they worked, but I kind of knew they would.

*

The weather cleared a day later, turning to blue skies attractively laced with wispy clouds. The clouds were splashed across the sky in beautiful patterns, making for as lovely a day as I've ever seen up here. But it felt fragile; as if the weather was hiding behind a thin veil; as if the last two days of bruised skies and lightning were not quite gone; as if more bad weather was waiting just around the corner, ready to pounce.

*

I love the upper Bokspruit where the river is swift, stony and quickly forgiving of storms. Tony and I decided to fish the *Birnham* beat, upstream of some other well-known beats you may recognise, like *Hillbury*, *Welgemoed* and *Knockwarren*, but downstream of possibly the best of the upper Bokspruit, *Gateshead*.

I met Tony along the road. He parked his truck in a lay-by, then moved his fly gear across into mine. There wasn't much to move because we hadn't unpacked my truck that well after our trip into the gorge and there was plenty of his stuff still in the back. You may have noticed that it's not unusual for fly fishers to leave gear lying around. In fact, on a fly-fishing trip if you don't end up with bits of gear spread around the place you probably aren't fishing hard enough. Tony is pretty good at spreading gear, and so am I.

The other thing I noticed is that Tony and I share a love of bridges. Not just as in slowing down and having a look at the water from a dawdling truck, but stopping, getting out and having a long inspection – both sides. The first bridge on the road up the Bokspruit is on *Welgemoed*, where Gavin Schneider has his house. The water looked pretty here, tinted a pale-green, clear and flowing briskly. A bunch of branches and logs had washed up against the

mouth of the bridge. I made a mental note to tell Gavin about them before the water broached the bridge after another storm.

There were fish about at the bridge, dancing nervously in and out of structure: small, delicately-coloured trout that were almost transparent they were so close in colour to the riverbed itself – slippers of glass I call them. And there were plenty, at least twenty trout each side of the bridge.

*

The road up the Bokspruit Valley is lonely, all the way to *Gateshead* where the road ends. The traffic is light, only the occasional tractor, now and again a farmer checking on something on a farm he owns but doesn't actually live on. I don't think a farm up this valley is actually occupied. It can be quite eerie. Some years back I locked the keys in my truck up here after we'd fished the *Knockwarren* beat, and in the two hours we waited in the dark hoping for some passing traffic, not a single car went by. It's a long story, but we eventually got a message through to Basie, and his manager drove across. He arrived with a long face and my spare key. I guess he wasn't expecting to leave his warm bed to come to the aid of a bunch of idiots stranded in the dark on a remote country road.

The absence of traffic up the Bokspruit Valley is nothing we complain about. I sometimes wish all the world's roads were as quiet as this one, but it's probably enough just knowing there *are* still a few places like it, and that you can escape to them when you want a little solitude and to shake off as many reminders of the real world as you can, like the constant heave of heavy traffic and the persistent packs of pressured people. Come to think of it, the search for solitude is a big part of why many people go fishing in the first place. This may sound a little like some homespun philosophy, but in today's world, solitude has become a priceless commodity.

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We crossed under a fence spanning a culvert and were on the Bokspruit in two minutes. The streambed on this beat is mixed: sheets of pale-green, sometimes apricot-coloured, sandstone alternating with stones, pebbles and fine grit that looks like the coarse volcanic silt you find in rivers in Iceland. But it's the colour of the sheets of sandstone bedrock on *Birnhem* that sets it apart from other beats: a light ice-green. There are stretches immediately above this beat where the bedrock changes colour, to anything from a pale yellow to a deep honey. You find sheets of tinted sandstone in many streams in this area, like the Bell on *Dunley* and the Karringmelkspruit, but on *Birnhem* the extent of the bedrock sheets and the relative intensity of their colour is extravagant.

We had two objectives this day, outside of just wanting to catch a heap of trout. The first was to take a few underwater photographs of fish sitting over the green sandstone and the other was to try out the Tenkara kit I had brought along.

Tenkara is the application of an ancient Japanese style of fly fishing, with the emphasis on simplicity and minimalism. In the modern Japanese idiom, Tenkara is more than that. It is the perpetuation and faithful rendition of a deeply traditional method of catching fish on a fly. Nowadays it's used not only as a smart method to fish, but I suspect also to revive or revere, or both, a branch of angling with deep roots. Without falling into the trap of overly sentimentalising the art, it's an attempt to arrive at a philosophical high point where supreme simplicity, effectiveness and even the poetry in fly fishing all converge – though I doubt this was necessarily the goal the Japanese forefathers had in mind when they developed and described the various techniques. To the ancients, I imagine Tenkara was just a clean, quick and easy way to harvest fish. We've maybe since added a little hype and bunkum.

Okay, so where are we in all this? Tenkara is ultra-minimalist, but its benefits derive more from its convergence with the poetic than with the practical. At least that's what I tell myself. It has serious limitations, but it also offers interesting new horizons. For example, there is no reel. You attach the twelve foot braided line to a permanent loop built into the tip of the fly rod. The rods are telescopic, collapsing down to something about as long as your forearm, but extending out to anything from ten to fourteen feet, depending on the model. They are mainly graphite and very light. I say mainly graphite, because I suspect that Tenkara glass rods, if they aren't already here, will soon show up – glass rods being a fraction more traditional than plastic rods.

You attach the leader to the end of the braided line as in regular fly fishing, add a tippet and a fly, and you're ready to go. Here's where the technique borrows a little from my understanding of dapping, and a little from what we call 'high-sticking'. The cast is an easy figure-of-eight sweep, like a roll cast at times, at others like a conventional cast, but always dead simple, and you can get amazingly accurate. Casting distance is limited so you have to fish close in whether you like it or not, something most experienced fly anglers have preached for the past forty years anyway.

The long rods offer amazing leverage, enough to 'walk' a fly through runs or to drift it close along those dark, cave-like recesses under banks, or to play the fly on its toes in the twisting twirls of current that hold around jutting boulders or at the foot of falls. The fly is carried only by the leader, and sometimes just by the tippet. At first it all feels a little strange, but later when you work it out, when you understand the dynamics of it, you can land a fly on a sixpence, hook trout under your nose, and it starts to make its own sort of perfect sense.

Just to add to the traditional way we were fishing, Steve Boshoff had made me a Tenkara net. It is beautifully crafted from cherry

wood, with a long, straight handle and a perfectly circular opening, and it looked just right in the underwater shots I took that day.

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So we began the day with nothing more vital to decide than what fly to add to the Tenkara outfit, settling on one of the Mirage CDC patterns I tied. It was enlightening. The flow on *Birnam* was perfect, and the first three casts produced solid rises that we missed because we struck too soon. When we measured the strike, we landed eight small trout from one run and missed two others, many fish taking the fly right under the tip of the rod not more than four feet from us.

And so it went all the way up to the stand of poplars near the top end of the beat. We'd fished less than a kilometre of water and had taken a heap of trout, I guess between forty and fifty – best not described in numbers but simply as non-stop action. Typically the trout took close in, and if you sat down to analyse what we were doing with the Tenkara rod that was different, it probably came down to fishing very close, almost totally drag-free and covering more water in every run and pocket than we would have with a conventional fly rod. And there's a general lesson in this. Most of us tend to rush up streams instead of slowly combing through every part of a run, probing every inch of water with the fastidious care of a forensic auditor.

At the poplars we would normally have carried on fishing upstream until the river meets the road, where we can climb out easily and walk back to the truck. This day, on a whim, we decided to fish back downstream over the water in which we had just hooked a heap of trout, and we took at least another half-dozen we'd somehow missed on the way up. Tony muttered something about starting a new article of faith that would go along the lines of, 'You don't just *walk* back, you *fish* back!'

We tried nymphs as well, but they somehow didn't add much to the catch rate or the poetry, and little to the fun of drifting a bobbing dry fly on a downstream current a few feet from you. It's as deadly a way to fish close in as any other, and I wondered why we didn't do more of it.

Where we had started that morning there was a deep, narrow run with a long undercut bank that had a decent sweep of current running alongside it. I set up the camera under a willow, and Tony crept to the tail end. We had run out of Mirages by then, but I had proved a point for Agostino Roncallo. His flies work in Africa. (I let him know once I returned to Cape Town.)

Tony ties a good, buggy-looking RAB. He fished the fly up the run until, near the neck, in the sweetest part by far, a really decent trout took hold of it. It was fifteen inches, a hen fish that showed all the signs of having spawned early; she was brightly coloured and there was no sign of eggs in her belly. And a little higher up, I caught one of the most colourful cock fish I have ever seen in a river. Its gill plates were a neon-lit tapestry of dazzling purples and pinks all laid out on a flame-orange background, with flanks as red as a late evening sunset. You can't easily take the beauty of any trout for granted, but some are so magnificently coloured they can get you wondering about the meaning of life. Mostly these are browns, but when a wild-river rainbow really gets dressed up, everything else can take a back seat.

*

Tony's early-spawning-trout theory is interesting. He believes that in the Rhodes district trout spawn when the conditions are right, not necessarily on or about the date they were spawned themselves, the latter being a generally accepted hypothesis for salmonids worldwide. And he may have a point, given that flows

and temperatures in this part of the world can be so different on any given date of each year.

On this point, it's a fact that brown trout spawn earlier in our rivers than rainbows, sometime in May for browns and more like mid-June for rainbows. And since rainbows spawn after browns they obviously mess up the brown trout redds, which could partly explain why the two species rarely coexist in the same stream.

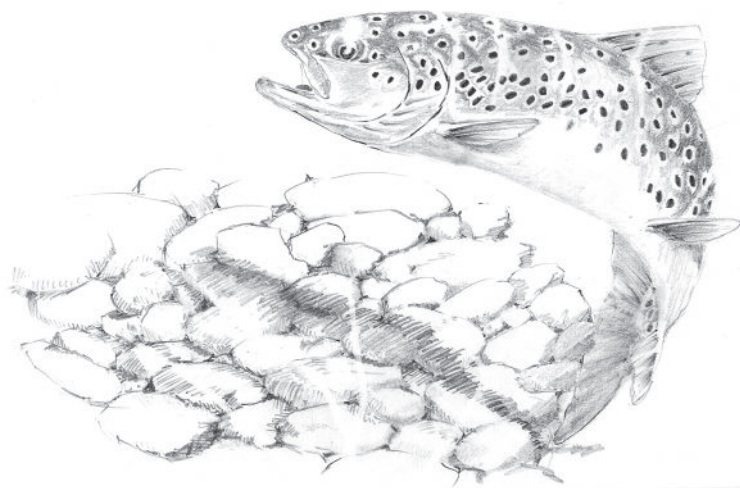
*

It was around mid-afternoon when we left the river under a bruised sky heavy with cloud. We needed coffee and a bite to eat before heading up to the higher reaches, so we drove up to the now-vacant old *Birnham* farmhouse and parked under a canopy of trees that had layered the yard with a carpet of yellow leaves so evenly spread it was clear there hadn't been a vehicle up this way in days. I boiled coffee on the tailgate and Tony produced a range of cheeses that we spread on dry crackers. We each ate a tomato like an apple, sprinkling it with salt. There's no better way to eat a tomato.

We had planned to move on upstream to fish the *Brucedell* beat and were just about to pack up when a few drops of rain fell. By the time we got into the truck it was raining hard. We took a drive upstream in case the rain stopped, and got out of the truck where the river flows shallow and wide over honey-coloured sandstone. The wind was strong and the raindrops hit us like bullets. I said to Tony that when we were a lot younger we probably would have pushed on and fished this stretch. He nodded, blowing a plume of blue pipe smoke into the air and said, 'For sure. In shorts and a T-shirt, with a fly box in one pocket and a spool of nylon in the other.'

'That's about it,' I said, 'except for the sandwich in the back pocket that we'd have already sat on a few times.'

He knocked out his pipe and we headed back.



*

Another day of rain. More fly tying. I was starting to get a mild dose of farmhouse fever when Tony called to say the weather was due to clear the next day and asked about going to *Brucedell* to fish the steeper-gradient water from the causeway up. 'I've got about enough flies now,' I told him, 'so let's do it.'

At the *Welgemoed* bridge the water was fishable, but there was rain about and the wind was cold. I looked at the clouds and they told a story. It was likely to rain again sometime in the day. I might not be a meteorologist and I can't second-guess the weather, but sometimes you just get a feeling about things. We slid back into the truck and headed for the causeway that crosses the river at the start of the water on *Brucedell* a few kilometres upstream.

Brucedell is divided into two beats separated by a tall waterfall. The best water is the mile or two *below* the falls, where the top half is the best of all, simply because the river develops more structure

and runs have more substance the higher you go. But the mile or two of river *above* the falls is also attractive. There are plenty of places to park to fish the piece above the falls, and then it's best to first hike downstream to the bottom end of the beat where the falls are, and where you get to a point where you start believing the earth must be flat after all, because you're watching a wide river falling right off the edge of the earth apparently into nothing. I never get too close to the edge because water mesmerises me and I don't do heights when there's no firm railing around the dangerous parts. If there's one secret to fishing this upper stretch, the piece above the falls, it's that the tiniest pockets can hold big rainbows.

The fishing was slow, even the pretty runs producing only the occasional fish. Nothing of size hooked, though plenty of small trout flashed at the fly and missed it. We were using the Tenkara rod again, sharing the runs. Midway up this section you come to a few long, aquamarine-tinted pools that are deep and glass-clear. At the first big pool I drifted a size 12 Yellow DDD near the inlet, letting the current carry the bobbing fly downstream. As it hovered near the end of its drift, a big rainbow casually rose up to it. We followed the fish all the way from the riverbed to the fly, which seemed to take an age. I let it turn on the fly, then struck. It felt solidly hooked and it felt strong, a deep-sided rainbow of around twenty inches that briefly flashed silver under the surface then fought deep with plenty of head-shaking. The fish wasn't easy to handle without a reel. Eventually it broke free as Tony was trying to slip a net under it with the leader in his hand. He stood silently for a long moment, the empty net dangling at his side. He had that thousand-yard stare in his eyes, as if hoping for some redeeming intervention from on high.

A lovely thing about Tony is that he takes his fishing, and yours, as seriously as a surgeon operating on someone's head.

I said, 'Don't worry. We'll catch another one.' It was a reckless invocation to the gods, and we paid the price for it.

The storm moved right in, and the fishing went right off.

Further down the valley the scene was surreal. One half of the landscape was under a clear blue sky, the other half was under slate-grey clouds dropping sheets of rain that fell in scintillating silver pillars side-lit by sunshine. We fished back to the truck in light rain, taking two small trout from shallow runs, and none from the deeper places we knew must hold plenty. The frustrating part about this sort of situation is that you know the trout will come on again, just that you don't know quite when: in the next few minutes maybe, or the next hour... or not for a week. These are wild, freestone trout, well beyond a century from their ancestral gene pool in some American hatchery, and there's no way of being too sure how they'll behave. They are perfect that way though, if you agree that 'perfect' includes little by way of predictability.

On the trip out, the weather lifted and we were under blue skies again. We drove up the Riflespruit Valley out of idle interest and found the river looking good. The Riflespruit is much like the Bokspruit in ways that count in the river's favour – clarity, lovely stream textures (meaning a variety of features), and an abundance of insect life and trout. We marked a few places we needed to come back to fish. The top reaches of the Riflespruit are really good, but there's not much wrong with the lower and middle stretches either.

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Next day the weather looked fine and I tried to get to what Ed and I used to call Tank Pool on *Birkhall*, but the road was a lottery after the rain. I was alone, hoping to catch the river for an hour or two while it was still in good shape. I closed the farm gate leading to a track that goes down into the valley, and for the next few hundred metres it felt like the steering assembly on my truck had come loose. The vehicle just slid wherever the deep ruts and the

mud led it. I got out and checked the tyres. I could see no tread at all, just a thick layer of caked mud on each tyre. I guessed I could probably slither down the steep hill into the valley, but getting out, never! So I turned back. The approach to the solid wooden pillars supporting the gate was on a slight downhill, and the truck began to slide. I stood on the brakes. Nothing. The truck just kept sliding towards the gateposts as if all four wheels were on roller skates. I braced for the crunch. The truck finally stopped inches from a post. I stepped out to open the gate and saw just how close I'd come to a deep bumper dent. You couldn't have squeezed a size 22 ant pattern between the front fender and the gatepost. Okay, make that a size 12.

Later that morning Carien and her mother waltzed off the road coming back from Barkly East. They put their truck through a fence, followed by a full 360-degree spin, fortunately with little by way of damage other than losing some rubber trimmings and scratching the paintwork. They managed to drive back onto the road through the hole they'd left in the fence and in less than a minute they were on their way home again.

The day stayed bright, and I grabbed my pocket-sized Zeiss binoculars to do some bird watching. I got what I thought was a first sighting, a tiny, bright-blue kingfisher with a rust-coloured chest that was hovering nervously around the reservoir next to Basie's house. I thought it was an African Pygmy Kingfisher, and was as excited as a twitcher until I got back to consult the bird books. They suggested I was wrong, and that if it was an African Pygmy Kingfisher it was on the very limit of its range, meaning I was either lucky to see it, or else long on imagination and in need of field practice. It turned out to be a Malachite Kingfisher. (The only reason I name-dropped my fancy field glasses, by the way, is that they were given to me by Mario Cesare fifteen years ago, and they were pretty special in ways that go well beyond the fact that

they were made by Zeiss. I eventually destroyed them in bizarre circumstances, but that's something I'll tell you about later.)

The reservoir in the *Birkhall* garden has a steady stream of water feeding it, and Basie has used it at times to grow out trout. In fact, I hooked a monster on a dry fly in it one day that I never landed. But the presence of fish and frogs and tadpoles means that kingfishers aren't uncommon visitors.

*

I left *Birkhall* and drove to Rhodes to fish the Bell with Tony and to spend the night at Walkerbouts, where I had some business to discuss with Dave Walker. At the Lindisfarne Bridge the Sterkspruit was running high and discoloured, and in the next valley, so too was the Bokspruit. But the Bell at Rhodes was pure glass, so we tried it with dry flies and caught small trout. They were rising to a hatch of tiny *Baetis* mayflies, and they took a size 18 RAB, but inconsistently. We had added a longer leader to the Tenkara line and were getting more distance with the rig, landing the fly pretty accurately, yet in their own purposeful way these fish were either strangely fussy or unquestioningly gullible, depending what fish you were casting at. In some cases a rising fish would take the fly immediately, but another fish rising a rod-length away would ignore it. We ordinary fly fishers would say, 'That's fishing,' but the technocrats might say something like, 'In some drifts you probably missed the micro-drag,' or 'If you'd been observant you'd have seen some fish were taking emergers, not adults.' I think the first assumption – micro-drag – was probably the cause for the refusals, but it was puzzling as any micro-drag was seemingly undetectable.

Then a cold front came through, and if we hadn't been out fishing we'd have been glad of the rain. We enjoyed watching its sudden arrival. The clouds formed a deep-purple bank about ten kilometres

to the south, suggesting serious celestial forces were at work up there. As fronts go it was spectacular, but it ended our fishing. We left before the rain, in a landscape way beyond spectacular, with purple skies and patches of barley-coloured sunlight flooding the autumn veld where the sun's rays sneaked through gaps in the clouds like the spokes of giant golden wagon wheels.

In the tiny, cluttered lounge at Tony's cottage in Rhodes, we cleared his table of reels, rods, landing nets and a pair of waders, set up a laptop and started going through the underwater pictures we'd taken that day. As always there were plenty of shots of trout with their heads or tails out of the frame, and in the poor light of the frontal weather, most of the better photographs were sombre. We ate rusks and drank a pot of coffee, then drove to Walkerbouts.

That night I recounted the story of the two trout I had drawn with a black permanent marker on a wall of the Walkerbouts pub in 1996. I know the year exactly because I dated the sketch – okay, graffiti. Dave had since done alterations to the bar area, taking down a few walls to add space, but he framed the sketches in a wooden mount under glass and left that wall intact. Back before 1996, the walls in the pub were covered with the impressions left by various guests, male and female, who had daubed their bums and other body parts in paint then pressed them against a wall, often at amazing heights. One evening, Ed Herbst and I suggested to Dave that we could maybe lift the tone of the place by adding a few sketches of trout to counterbalance the assorted anatomical imprints. He was in the kitchen at the time and hadn't heard more than that I needed a Koki pen, which he arranged, and then carried on cooking. I was just finishing the date on the sketches, when he came out of the kitchen, looked mildly surprised, scratched his beard and said, 'Okay, I'll learn to live with that.'

But our discussion in the pub this last visit added some interesting dimensions to my graffiti. Say I went into the bar in a really upmarket

place – like the Mount Nelson or the Cellars-Hohenhort, two of the most prestigious hotels in Cape Town – asked for a Koki pen, then scribbled trout sketches on a vacant wall. The difference came down to a beard-scratching observation from the owner of Walkerbouts that he'd learn to live with it, to immediate arrest and a jail term, suspended at best, if it had been at the Mount Nelson or the Cellars-Hohenhort, depending on whether counsel for the accused could argue mitigation on the grounds of a severe dose of fish fever.

It rained heavily that night.

*

I had a note from a young man called Byron Grant a week or two before I left on this visit who said he was planning a trip to Rhodes in May and wanted some advice on a 'must do' bucket list of sorts. I did my best to tell him where I thought he might enjoy himself, and to sensitise him to the fact that there had been plenty of rain and that more could be on the way. He wrote back to say he'd made up his mind to go, and hoped he'd bump into me on a river somewhere.

The day after I got back from my night in Rhodes, Byron called me. His fishing, like mine, had been dogged by rain, and looking out from the veranda on *Birkhall* I didn't have much good news for him. Skyscraper-tall clouds were already building up. But he and Tony drove across to *Birkhall* anyway and, with the rivers out, we tied a few flies. As for the chances to get in some fishing in the next few days, we were hanging on thin shreds of hope. The forecast was for solid rain, and I found myself with the dilemma of having to decide whether to make a break for home or just sit it out, hoping the forecasters were wrong. In the end I headed home. Tony and Byron reckoned they might try the top of the Bell on *Boarman's Chase* the day I left. I didn't make it. Byron cut his stay short and left for home a day or two after I did.

*

The trip back was uneventful, and I reached the Karoo National Park in Beaufort West in time to see a few red hartebeest cross in front of me in the last light of day. The best thing about stopping overnight at this place is that you are six kilometres off the N1, meaning you get away from all the road noise and diesel fumes from the serial rows of trucks.

Speaking of modern highways, I haven't mentioned the gradual proliferation of speed traps on the N1, set up in places you would least expect to find them and, I suspect, aimed more at bolstering the revenue of local municipalities of small towns than making our roads safer. On a deep country highway, when you spot more traffic police crouched behind artfully disguised cameras than Pale Chanting Goshawks, something is fishy.

That night I was able to phone my long-suffering wife and to learn, happily, that she hadn't left home or run off with a billionaire from Monaco.

Early the following morning I sat on the veranda of my rondavel with a cup of coffee and one of Carien's home-baked rusks, watching the birdlife and in no hurry to leave. A pair of Cape Robin-chats were doing their best to peck morsels of fat off the braai grid I'd used the previous evening, and sparrows chattered expectantly until I threw them some crumbs.

I decided to make the run back to Cape Town a slow one, and to stop for a quiet lunch at the Laird's Arms, a small pub in the Victorian village of Matjiesfontein. An hour out of Beaufort West I noticed an orange warning light on my dashboard. I pulled over and nervously paged through the owner's manual to find that it was a fuel filter warning light. It was a Sunday, and I had no idea whether the truck was safe to drive, or if there was a risk the engine would suddenly give up on me. I called Basie. No reply from *Birkhall*

or his cell. I got hold of Ed Herbst and asked him to Google it. Ed couldn't comment on what the cause or the prognosis was, so I called Basie again. This time I got him. He was more confident and said, 'Drive through to Cape Town. You should be okay. They can change it next week.' Which they did.

I enjoyed the snack at the Laird's Arms, and a short drive later I pulled into the shade of the same peppercorn trees I had parked under on the way up. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves. Scrub grasses, small bushes and succulents all growing on stony ground formed a seemingly endless expanse of flat grey flora that ended in a distant mountain range. Other than the passing cars and trucks, the place was silent. I poured a mug of coffee and pondered the coincidence of two nasty surprises on this trip. First, on the way up, the sudden fit of phobic panic that I'd left my orange-coloured Orvis rod bag at home, and now, on the way back, an orange warning light burning menacingly on my dashboard – both, by strange coincidence, events that had sprung on me at roughly the same place, in the heart of a remote corner of the Karoo. I swilled out the coffee and crushed the last of the biscuits to feed to the sparrows. Again they swooped to the ground. It felt good to feed them. No doubt a legion of well-meaning scientists out there will howl a disparaging chorus of criticism about how feeding wild sparrows threatens their existence in some convoluted way that, in the end, would likely be hard to argue against. Except to say that life on earth is ever-changing, ever-adapting, and that some of today's apparently rock-fast theories on conservation – and on medicine, for that matter – often become tomorrow's trash ready for instant recycling.

I binned the empty biscuit packet, slipped some music into the CD player and was home a few hours later. And I'll keep feeding those sparrows.

*

I should wrap up this chapter with a few more observations on Tenkara, as long as you understand I'm hardly an expert on the subject. And there aren't many of those, at least not in South Africa. Craig Thom, who owns a fly shop in Cape Town, is one, and Steve Boshoff, the bamboo rod maker, is another. Neil Rowe, whom I fished with briefly up at Highland Lodge some years ago, was apparently the first South African to get into Tenkara (and no doubt is still at it). Outside of them, to my knowledge, the sport has limited subscription, unless there's a heap of practising converts who've stayed under the radar.

The occasional flirtations with Tenkara that Tony and I enjoyed on this trip would hardly qualify us as more than mildly experienced, and certainly not true disciples; maybe enthusiastic dabblers is how you could best describe us. But we were both in agreement that Tenkara fly fishing, at least as we experienced it, is a lot more like ballet than conventional fly fishing – a hard point to get across that should become more obvious as we go on. And we were in agreement that it's fun and mighty effective, perhaps even an easy way to catch trout in small, fast-flowing streams, which, as it happens, is also where our brief experience with Tenkara began and ended at the time – that is, on small, fast-flowing mountain streams. Since then Tony has carried on with Tenkara, in a roundabout sort of way, and I've occasionally lapsed into using Tenkara on Western Cape streams, but without the regularity needed to pronounce on its virtues and limitations with any real authority. At best you could say I have tried my hand with Tenkara, rather than fished it seriously.

The question is, why not more dedication than that?

One of the likely reasons is that Tenkara fishing has limitations (I'll get to these later), and the other is that I enjoy casting fly lines on conventional fly rods. There's a challenge in it that, in a way, touches on one of the most pivotal aspects of the sport of fly fishing – casting a virtually weightless fly and fly line with enough

accuracy to qualify as a decent presentation. Tenkara does that to an extent, but differently. The casting stroke is limited, which means easier casting with less room for error. The rods are long, allowing you to *place* the fly as much as *cast* it. And while this is productive, and there's no doubt it is, the cast is infinitively less challenging.

Getting distance is sometimes a problem in that you are limited to the length of braided line, leader and tippet off the end of the rod. But if you want to cast long distances, you're missing the close-up and minimalist intention of Tenkara.

Finally, there is no reel. I don't need to tell you there will be times that you won't easily check a long run from a strong fish. Certainly you will not have a fish run into the backing, because there is none.

As far as the limitations of Tenkara go, I'm understandably at times staggered by the reports I read (or occasionally hear about) of large fish being taken on Tenkara rigs – not giant saltwater GTs and such, but certainly big trout and yellowfish.

I touched on the advantages of Tenkara at the beginning of this chapter: dainty drifts, less drag, less mending, easier casting and, above all, a certain poetry that you can only reliably describe once you've been behind a Tenkara fly rod, especially on a small, well-stocked, quick-flowing and averagely tricky trout stream. Some have said it's as exciting as your first date. That depends. My first date was a mess; nothing like my first Tenkara outing. But, look, if the simile strikes a chord with you, you'll have little difficulty understanding Tenkara.

