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Summer 2014
Complimentary



Where Black Finn Meets Hunter S. Thompson



By Molly Murfee

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I won't claim that any resemblance to real people, places or events is coincidental. It's not. Stories are made from life. However, this tale is tempered with exaggeration, mismatched stories and plain ole made up stuff – let's say. As one of the valley's great storytellers says, "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story." Of course, in some cases, the truth is better than fiction. Let's just call this... an altered fish tale.



Illustrations by Carol Connor



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“In the days of the Utes, it was all about size,” winds up the Anonymous Official Judge. “Ute women chose their men in the Days of the Budding Aspen based on their [he gives a small cough] size. In a town like Paradise, size matters.”

The Anonymous Official Judge perches ceremoniously on a lifeguard-esque stand, cobbled together from scraps, that wobbles precariously in the mud at the lake’s edge. Beneath his tan suede sport coat, he brandishes a stained and loosely knotted necktie and a black t-shirt lettered with “Occupy This” atop a lewdly gesturing hand with a conspicuous middle finger. The ensemble is topped with a rumpled bucket hat speared by a neon yellow fishing lure. His cheeks (the ones on his face) are not baby-bottom smooth; in a mountain town, too much shaving arouses suspicion. In his pocket are a bag of fungi, a strip of little paper squares, a fistful of cocoa leaves and some certifiably legal Rocky Mountain grown marijuana fresh out of his closet at 12,000 feet. Around his neck swings a pair of dime-store binoculars, which he rarely uses, unable to decide which eye to squint – or not. At a certain point the focus bar ceases to work. Whether that point is mechanical or mental is up for debate.

The Anonymous Official Judge continues, his voice gathering steam like a sluggish locomotive. “In the mining days, it was all about size – the size of the ore, the size of the mine, and the women still chose their men on the basis of size.”

Before the Anonymous Official Judge, a crew of Fisher People lean, sit and loiter around the Official Flatbed (littered with wood chips, a horribly odoriferous dog bed, a chainsaw and a six pack’s worth of crushed aluminum beer cans) attached to a beat-up old Ford. Many of the loiterers also sport bucket hats, bedecked with fishing lures and flies bobbing off the brims like the swinging pompoms on the dashboard of a Tijuana-bound bus. They pass a joint, chuckling at the Anonymous Official Judge and listening with mock-sincere silence. They are bare-chested and bare-footed. It’s a lusty event, flaunting a rare opportunity to expose so much skin. Boobs push against bikini tops. Men’s short bands swing low, two hairs shy of full exposure. These Fishers are ripped and pierced, buffed from the lifestyle of romping in the dark forests and alpine meadows of the southern Rocky Mountains on all manner of toys. Toys with wheels. Toys attached to ropes. Floating toys. Toys



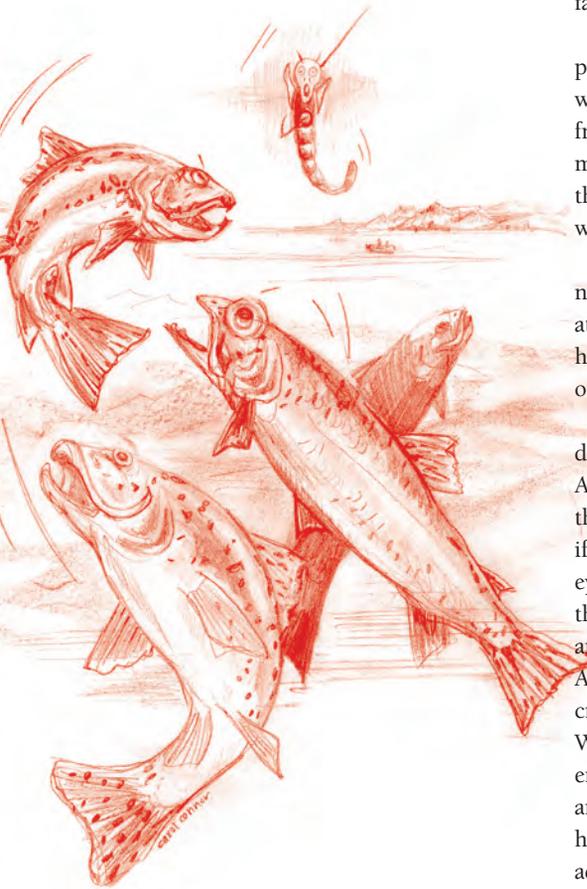
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fashioned out of spare snowmobile parts.

Today, however, on one of those preciously few summer days when all the world's glory seems to spill languorously from the golden beads of sunshine, this motley crew is gathered to fish – in some of the toughest alpine waters reported by man, woman or beast.

These fish are wary and wily. They have not survived nine months in a frozen lake at treeline to be caught by some drunken hooligan in a make-shift watercraft – boobs or no boobs.

The legality of the event could be up for discussion, although later at a local bar the Anonymous Official Organizer claims loudly, through a breath of bourbon and beer, that if any Forest Service representative raised an eyebrow to the event, he would enrapture the gent with a filibuster about the rules and regulations concerning a friendly wager. A filibuster elongated enough to put our crooked Congress to shame. "A. Friendly. Wager." He pounds his fist on the bar for emphasis. "Hell, I'll even sell him a pole and loan him my lawn chair." He gives me a high-five, offers to buy me a drink and takes advantage of my boyfriend's absence to touch me on my bare, sun-dressed back.

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The annual Lake Barnard Fishing Derby: If Huck Finn had grown up, if Hunter S. Thompson hadn't had his ashes shot out of a cannon, and if their two worlds had collided across time barriers, it might have been here. There is no annoying marketing campaign for this event. No posters, no radio announcement, no PR person waxing on about how "quirky and funky" it all is. No sponsor list, no sponsored athletes, no goodie bag full of crap from China. News of the event is spread solely by word of mouth, and by one crude Buddha with a teeny-weeny willy tattooed on the men's bathroom wall in the aforementioned barroom with a date and the caption, "Size matters."

The rules are simple and, as the story plays out, somewhat malleable. Ten dollars a pole. Five-hour time limit. Fisher Person who catches the biggest fish, measured Officially from nose to tail, wins the pot. It all begins at high noon. All Fisher People must heed any Official Warning Bells, such as bullhorns, fireworks or blasts from homemade black powder bombs. This year, the pot, meticulously tallied on the back of a worn manila envelope as each participant hands over his/her hard-earned ten bucks, is \$300.

"It's still about size," bellows the Anonymous Official Judge, then, slowly forgetting his point and meandering into a daydream involving loose mermaids, he wraps up his inaugural speech rather abruptly. "So do your recreational early, and may the best pole win."

The Anonymous Official Organizer trumpets a wrangly couple of notes from a brass instrument that looks like it lost a fight with a tuba, orders the Anonymous Official Judge from his perch, pitches the lifeguard stand into a canoe without a plug, and paddles vigorously to the Official Judging Area a quarter turn around the lake. The Anonymous Official Judge pauses a moment before digging in his laden pockets for his treats, doling out a few choice items to a few choice observers who seem to be glued strangely to his side. The competition now officially begun, the Lake Barnard Fishing Derby athletes saunter to their crafts like a battalion of slugs, while the recipients of the party favors wash the foul-tasting fungus remnants from between their teeth.

The Fishers launch in oar boats and canoes. Paddle boards furnished with coolers and umbrellas, fishing line lolling

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in their slow wake. A rubber river raft. There are no lifejackets worn to help brave the 33° water. Warmth comes in the joyful oblivion of a polished-off 30-pack of PBRs. It is an all-day event, after all. Tippieness from both craft and captain are expected.

From the observer's shore, all seems peaceful. Garnet and St. George Peaks loom in glory over the lake. Waterfalls pregnant with the bounty of winter pour from snowfield to snowfield. The lake sparkles with diamond-tipped waves, reflecting all the green and blue water can muster. Sprinkled across the surface are the Fisher People, arching long fly casts seductively over the water in curves that put Marilyn Monroe to shame. There is little sound. Wind in the trees. The flutter of a fly's wings. The sun shining so brightly it seems to hum with vibration.

**THE CROWD CHEERS,
KNOWING THE
\$300 PRIZE WILL
BECOME "SHOTS FOR
EVERYONE!" WHEN
THEY MAKE IT BACK
TO TOWN.**

Competitors cluster around an inlet pouring into the lake from the ridge above, reputed to have a lingering of nippy fish. Nothing. For two hours. Nothing. Poles and their operators grow antsy. The Anonymous Official Co-Judge flips his measuring tape in and out of its metal slot with a resounding "swish" and "click." His napping Rottweiler rolls over to expose her near furless belly to the sun.

Suddenly, the paddle boarder sitting on top of his cooler tips into the drink, despite the protective nature of his bright yellow, rubber raincoat. A couple of Fisher People lay down their poles to pirate the floating bounty of PBR cans. At last...hot sports action. An Official Spectator pops his lake booty of stolen PBR from the sunk slicker-wearer, sits back in his lawn chair, and yawns a deep, satisfied yawn.

Finally, "Fish on!" someone yells, and the Anonymous Official Co-Judge rushes in, tape in hand. Eleven-inch rainbow. A veteran derbyer scoffs. He's only baited for



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the native brown trout and begins to spew about the over-fishing of the native fish, and the demand for foreign species, something about the 1800s and the disgusting nature of fish farms. A purist he is, he claims, through the namesake gap between his teeth, and he mutters something about the rules needing to be changed. But then he smiles, cracks a beer, and silently snips the line of a competitor paying more attention to packing his bowl than watching his indicator.

Another hour passes. Someone from shore trumpets the beaten trumpet just for fun and discovers a gasket missing. The Anonymous Official Judge yells through his bullhorn, "One hour before the one-hour cut-off!" and giggles at his own voice resounding over the water.

Another competitor decides it's more interesting to try and fish the cap off of his neighbor in the oar boat.

Thirty-packs wane. Tippy boats grow tippier. A firework blasts over the gaggle of boats; announcing the final hour.

"Fish on!" someone finally yells. A 13-incher. Game on. Now there's some real competition. Another 13-incher gets pulled in. Then another. The final firework blasts over the water. An unsuspecting tourist floating by comments to his little girl that these people must not know about the fire ban. The Official Shoreline Spectators guffaw in delight – at the thought that someone among this crew would obey the law if they knew it.

Slowly, weaving, the Fisher People return, in a slightly more advanced state than when they left, broad smiles lazing on their faces as if swinging from facial hammocks.

"It's a three-way tie," pronounces the Anonymous Official Organizer from the Official Judging Perch.

Forgoing the tug-of-war on paddle boards (the tie-breaker of the year before) or the hatchet toss (from the year before that), the Anonymous Official Organizer, Judge and Co-Judge decide in a surprisingly civilized fashion that the three finalists will be sent back to the icy waters. First fish caught wins. The crowd goes wild, sidling up to tree stumps, boulders and grassy spots to watch.

Within ten minutes, a voice echoes across the lake: "Fish on!" Roaring furiously to shore, the potential champ brandishes his fish. The Anonymous Official Judge nods, turns and yells with an open-armed flourish as if declaring the Kingdom of Heaven: "We have a winner!"



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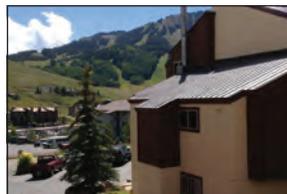
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Everyone whoops and hollers and makes obligatory merriment to cheer the success of their Friend, knowing they'll reap the benefits of the \$300 that will become "Shots for everyone!" when they eventually, finally, make it back to town, at some point.

The last of the beer and bourbon is scavenged, and the crew settles into the end of the day. The sun splashes the peaks with shocking grenadine, bruising to sexy purple, blushing around the edges in pale rose like a day well had. No one speaks, and the silence is as comfortable as any can be among friends who have spent the day fishing together.

One breathes deeply and smiles mischievously. "You know, we do have the most fun."

"Ye-up," replies Another, tugging his hat over his eyes at the final glint of sun, which sucks the last of the day's color, sip by sip, into the night.

"Damn him, though; he always wins," the First complains amiably.

"Bastard," agrees Another.

They know; none of it was really about the money anyway. Or even the fish. Maybe the bragging rights, but only for a day. It was really about. This. **cb**

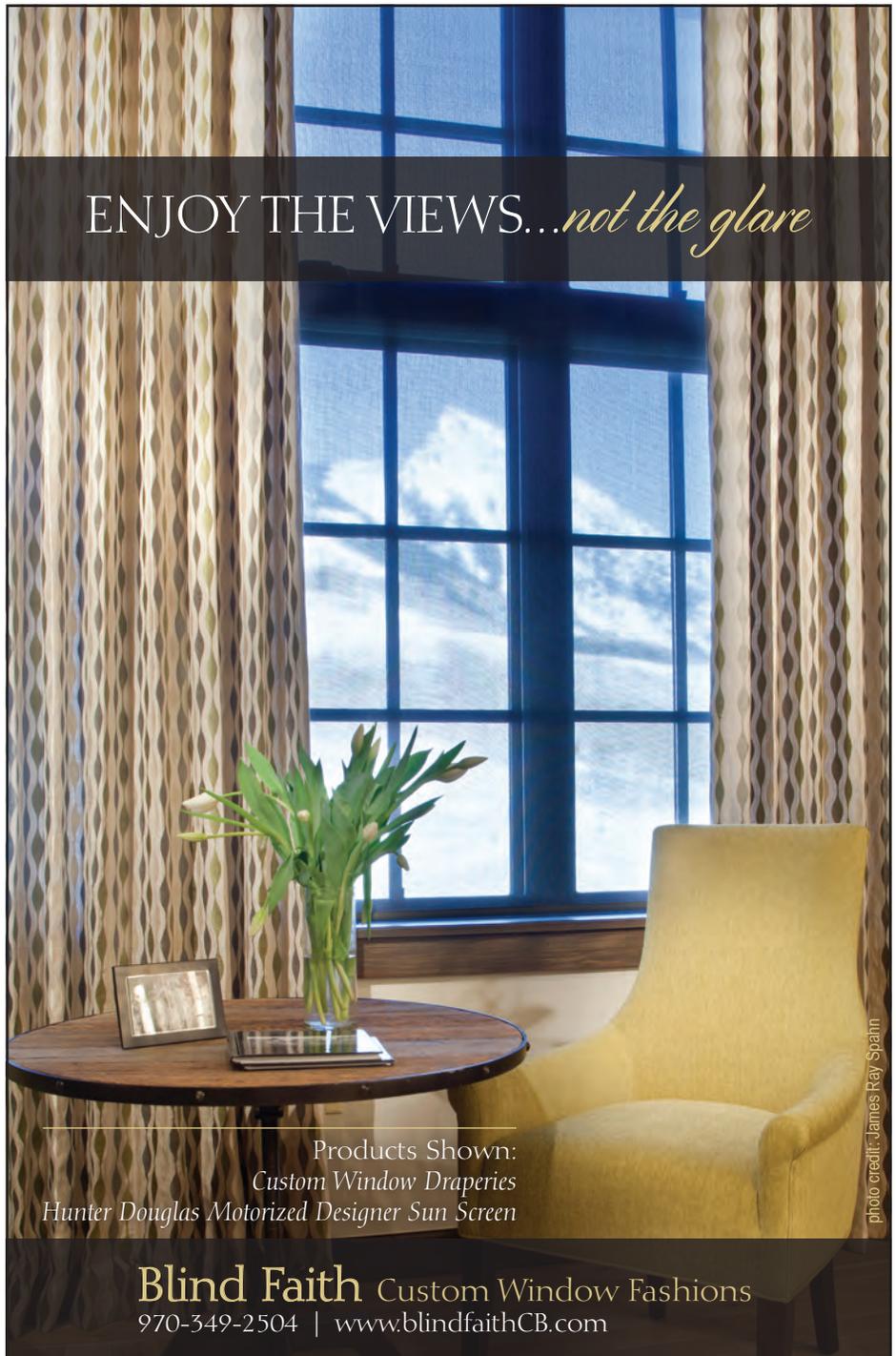


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