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Paintings by Chet Reneson

# Blacktooth

*In the realm of the spirit world, every trout reaches the size of a king salmon, rises to the fly and fights hard enough to shatter your rod.*

Blacktooth, British Columbia squatted at the base of the Gwaxall Range, the last stop on Highway 99 before the road ended and the massive rock walls of the mountains began.

Will Jones sat in the town's lone bar and nursed a cold Kokanee while he considered how he was going to make it over the Gwaxalls and into the upper Blacktooth drainage. The copter he wanted to hire was down for repairs and he knew he'd have to be part mountain goat and part grizzly bear to navigate the canyon on foot. Even jet boats couldn't run that sheer-sided maelstrom, and there wasn't a road or a trail into the interior for a thousand miles. Which left him between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

Then the old man walked in.

He was an Indian, Will thought to himself when he first saw the old-timer, or a Native American, or whatever the heck they called the indigenous people up here in the mountains at the top of the world. Jones wasn't much for political correctness. It seemed a waste of time to call a spade anything other than a spade, and he sure wasn't one to waste time.

It turned out that the old man wasn't much for it either.

"You the Hookeyah looking to get over Earth-Mother's breasts and into the upper Blacktooth?"



“Who the heck are you?” Will asked him. “And what’s a Hookeyah?”

“My name is Lluueghit, which translates into Otter Brother in your language. And you, my friend, are a Hookeyah. A dumb-ass.”

The old man smiled when he finished, as if even a dumb-ass should be smart enough to understand that he was a dumb-ass.

Will didn’t know quite how to react – not many people were crazy enough to insult him to his face – but after a moment or two his indecision faded away. He pulled out his wallet and counted out a grand in Canadian. Then he laid the cash on the bar and asked, “Can you get a Hookeyah onto the upper Blacktooth from here?”

“Can a fat man eat berries right from the bush?”

“I suppose he could,” said Will, “if he was so inclined.”

“Let’s see those berries,” said Otter Brother, holding out his hand.

**W**ill woke up under a Spruce tree. Where he was or how he’d gotten there, he had no clue. His memory, ordinarily so clear, stopped at the exact point at which he’d handed a \$200 deposit to Otter Brother. He knew the other \$800 was due when he stepped foot onto the upper Blacktooth, but . . .

“You owe me \$800, Hookeyah.” said a voice from behind him.

He sat up and there was Otter Brother, just grinning up a storm.

“What the . . .”

“We had a deal, white man. You pay me a grand, I get you onto the upper Blacktooth. That . . .” he said, pointing at the river that stretched out in

front of them, “is the upper Blacktooth. So, Mr. Jerry Maguire, show me the money.”

“What?”

“The *kwan*, man, show me the *kwan*.”

“How in the hell . . .”

“How do you think, Hookeyah. On the satellite TV back at my cabin.”

“No, I’m not talking about Jerry Maguire. How did we get here? And how is it possible that this is the upper Blacktooth?”

“Well, my friend, do you want the long answer or the short answer?”

Will didn’t hesitate. “Why don’t you give me the long answer. And take your time. Don’t leave out anything.”

“Sure,” said Otter Brother, taking a deep breath, then letting it out in a sigh. “We traveled here in Spirit.”

“In Spirit?”

“No, in my ‘67 Ford pickup. Of course we traveled here

in Spirit. How else did you think I was going to get you here? You probably didn’t know this, but whatever we do in the spiritual realm manifests itself here in the physical world – provided, of course, that we add the right type of energy. So I slipped into spirit, brought you along, traveled to the upper Blacktooth, and then stepped back into physical reality. And here we are.”

Will looked around. For a moment, he didn’t know what to say.

Otter Brother giggled, and then said, “Beam me up, Scotty.”

Will kept an eye out for the guys with the white coats and the butterfly nets. They had to be around there someplace.

But they weren’t. And he was, at least as best as he could tell, actually on the upper Blacktooth. For there were

rainbows as long as his leg rising in front of him.

“Son of a gun,” he said, for perhaps the tenth time.

“You’re overly fond of that expression, Hookeyah. You might want to come up with something a little more imaginative.”

“Sorry.”

“No problem.”

“But son of a gun, they’re eating mayflies!”

“I know,” said Otter Brother. “I call them tuekkessan.”

“Tuekkessan? What does that mean in English?”

“Green Drakes.”

“Son of a gun!”

Otter Brother just sighed and walked away.

**I**t didn’t take Will long to understand the crux of the problem. He’d journeyed some 2800 miles by air, car and, umm, Spirit, but being a neophyte traveler in the more ethereal dimensions, he’d neglected to pack his rod, reel and flies. Which left the trout of the upper Blacktooth sadly out of reach, and his dreams forever unrealized.

After a moment or two of deep thought, he walked over to where Otter Brother was sitting against a tree and asked, “You wouldn’t happen to have a fly rod stashed around here, would you?”

Otter Brother thought about the question for a few

Will literally ran for the far side of the phone booth-sized boulder while Otter Brother looked up to the Creator and asked, “Great Spirit, how could you let them conquer the entire continent when they’re afraid of stepping in the river and getting wet?”

**A** few minutes later, Will had his waders on, his rod strung, and he was tying on a perfect size 10 green drake when Otter Brother walked over and held up his fore finger.

Will looked up to the sky and asked, “Rain?”



*On the trout’s first run, Will’s reel started to smoke. On its second, his rod snapped. On its third, the 3x tippet parted with a sound like a pistol shot. The whole tenuous affair had lasted maybe a minute or two . . .*

moments and then said, “Just my Winston 5-weight.”

Will’s face lit up like the newly risen sun.

“You’ve got a Winston 5-weight?”

“Nah, Hookeyah, I’m just yanking your chain. What would I be doing with a fly rod? I’m an Indian. You ever see an Indian with a fly rod?”

Will had to admit that he hadn’t.

“So lay off the dumb questions. But your stuff is all over behind that big boulder.”

“My fishing gear?” Will asked.

“Yep. I even brought your sissy-boy waterproof pants.”

“No, not rain.” He waved his finger in the air for emphasis.

“One.”

“One?”

“That’s right, one. You get to hook one fish, then we head back.”

“Hold on there, Chief. Why just one.”

Otter Brother sighed – he’d been doing a lot of that since he met the Hookeyah – and then adopted the same benign tone he might have used when explaining something complex to a dog.

“Because one is the first number, as well as the most sacred. You are blessed with one heart, one mind and one spirit. You have only

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one life to live in the physical world. There exists but one earth, one sky and one sun. And, in all the realms of creation, there is only one upper Blacktooth. So you get one fish.”

“But . . .”

“No buts. One fish, and then we go.”

The problem with catching just one trout, as Will soon learned, was that he couldn't make up his mind which one to cast to. It was easy enough to tell a little fish from a big fish back in the States, but there didn't seem to be anything resembling a little fish here on the upper Blacktooth. Consequently, Will was left to decide which of the enormous rainbows he was going to tempt to the surface.

After a half-hour's deliberation yielded little in the way of clarity, Will settled on a big, hook-jawed male that was rising like clockwork out in front of a good sized boulder. He waded out into the water, checked his knots and had just made his first false cast when Otter Brother yelled out a question from the bank.

“Hey, Hookeyah, are you sure that's the trout you want to catch?”

Will stopped casting.

“I think so. Why do you ask?”

“Well, he seems sort of . . . small.

Don't you think?”

Will looked at the rainbow, which he would have guessed at somewhere in the twelve-pound range, and said, “Small?”

“Well, just a little.”

“Do you think there are bigger ones around?”

“It's the upper Blacktooth, isn't it?”

“Yes, it is,” said Will, and he reeled in and waded back to the bank.

Will and Otter Brother spent the next two hours searching the river, scanning every pool and eddy, every riffle and run, but each time Will convinced himself that he'd found the trout of his dreams, the trout of a lifetime, Otter Brother asked if he was sure. And Will, as much as he wanted to

say yes, had to admit that he wasn't.

It was getting late when they walked around a bend in the river and saw another half-dozen monster trout rising for Otter Brother's “tuekkessan.” Then it hit Will like a ton of bricks.

He looked the old man straight in the eye and said, “I'm dead, right?”

Otter Brother simply raised an eyebrow, so Will kept on.

“I mean, this has got to be heaven. How else can you explain all these huge fish, and the incredible beauty that's all around me, and the fact that . . .”

“Hookeyah,” Otter Brother interrupted, “there's only one way to find out. In the realms of the spirit world, everything tastes wonderful. Hell, moose crap tastes like really good dark chocolate with just a hint of huckleberry.”

The old man looked down at the ground, then took a few steps and picked up a lone, dried-out moose turd. To Will's inexperienced eyes, it looked like a rabbit pellet, but it was fifty times larger than your typical bunny scat.

Otter Brother lowered his voice to the point that he could barely be heard. “All the great truths of the universe are contained in this sacred vessel, Will Jones. Will you remove the blinders from your eyes and sup from the table of the Elder Gods, or will you continue to walk a path of darkness and ignorance? The choice is yours.”

Will looked at Otter Brother standing there with the desiccated moose crap held lightly in his gnarled old hand, and said, “I'm not really dead, am I?”

“No.” The old man chuckled. “But you might have died if you'd tried to swallow this dried-out moose pellet. Let's go find your fish.”

A few minutes later they found Will's trout; a rainbow so big that it couldn't possibly sustain itself on insects, even insects as large as Green Drakes. Yet it was eating Otter Brother's “tuekkessan” like they were candy.

It took Will a couple dozen casts – his hands were shaking and his stomach felt like he'd gone ahead and scarfed down the moose pellet – but the fish finally rose to his fly. When it did, he set the hook and

almost involuntarily said, “Holy . . .”

On its first run, Will's reel started to smoke. On its second, his rod snapped. On its third, as Otter Brother offered sage advice on how to hand-line a trout the size of a king salmon, the 3x tippet parted with a sound like a pistol shot. The whole tenuous connection had lasted maybe a minute or two, and Will, who fancied himself a pretty fair angler, was left with the distinctively unpleasant feeling that the mother of all rainbows had been toying with him. It didn't exactly help matters when Otter Brother asked him if he'd ever fly fished before.

Later that same night, Will found himself back in Blacktooth's lone bar, watching Otter Brother walk out the door, not to mention out of his life. The old Indian's final words still echoed in his ears.

“Hookeyah, you're all right – at least for a white man. But you really do need to work on your fishing skills. Maybe if you didn't wear those sissy-boy waterproof pants, the Great Spirit would smile down on you and let you land a good fish every now and then.” He chuckled to himself, and then continued. “Or maybe not. You can never tell with the Great Spirit. He has quite a sense of humor.” Then he walked away, leaving Will to contemplate the eternal mysteries of human existence.

It was only a few minutes later – Will was still nursing his first cold Kokanee – when an elderly native woman stepped into the bar room. She was plump and brown and wrinkled like an ancient walnut shell, and although her younger days were clearly behind her, she moved with a certain amount of grace, as if she'd been a dancer in her youth. In retrospect, Will decided that he really shouldn't have been surprised when she walked right up to him and asked him a question he'd heard once before.

“Grandson, are you the Hookeyah looking to get over Earth-Mother's breasts and into the upper Blacktooth?”

Will took just a moment to look into her eyes, which held a mischievous twinkle, and then he reached into his pocket for his wallet.

“Yes, grandmother,” he answered. “That would be me.” 