# The Trout that Climbed a Tree

**Ken McLaughlin**

**There's this fellow I met on the Little Q. last fall--nobody we know. He's fishing his way through my favorite run, just above the Whiskey Creek Pool. Actually, I hear him before I see him. He's thrashing about in the water and hollering. I can hear him way up by the hatchery fence, though I can't quite make out what he is saying. It sounds like, "[Something or other]... to blazes! Into the trees *again*...." This was followed by whole lot more, mostly unintelligible, that I can't quote in present company, even if I do hear it clearly.**

**I walk down along the trail until I'm above him on the bank. He's standing at the top of the pool, tying on a new leader. I stand there and watch him for a few minutes. "Stirring anything up?" I ask him finally. He doesn't seem to hear me, so I raise my voice a little and ask again, "Move anything this morning?"**

**He gives a start and looks up at me. "Jeez!" he gasps. "I didn't realize you were there." His voice sounds a little odd, and for a moment I think he might be drunk, but then I notice he has the tip of his tongue caught in the blood knot. He gives a little tug, frees himself, spits a couple of times, then tightens his knot. "Been standing there long?" he asks.**

**"Just got here," I tell him. "Sounded like you were having a little trouble with the bushes on the far side."**

**"Salmonberries," he says and starts patting his pockets. "No, no. It's the goddamn trout. Every one I catch takes me into the trees." He pulls his clippers down on their little string and looks up at me again. "You got any Triple X on you? I'm running low on tippets."**

**"I never could get that business double and triple X stuff straight," I confess, "but I got everything from 20 pound test on down to 2. Will that do?"**

**"Give me some six pound test," he says. "That'll do just fine. I appreciate it." He wades ashore, and I hand the reel of mono. He clips himself a length from it.**

**I glance upstream. It's fall, but the water is still low. "Trout took you into the trees?" I say. "Whereabouts?"**

**"Dammit." he says. "Clipped the wrong one again." He lets the clippers go and starts his knot over again. "Along the bank," he says, glancing up from his knot. "Way the hell back into the trees. Pardon my French."**

**I must look a bit skeptical, because he stops twisting his leaders for a moment and looks me straight in the eye. "You're right," he says. "I wouldn't believe it myself, if I hadn't seen it. It's them tree climbin' trout. They are the toughest little sonsabitches to bring in. I've had three on today, and each one's the same thing. Bam! He hits the fly. You get time to say to yourself, 'Hmmm, nice fish!' Next thing you know, he's up the tree--you're wrapped around a twig, and pop! He's gone like weasels."**

**"Tree climbing trout? I never heard of such a thing," I tell him.**

**"Yep," he says, "Salmo arbutus, they call 'em. Means just what I said--tree climbin' trout. Pretty rare. Hell, the reg's don't even mention 'em. Most scientists don't believe in 'em. But they're real." He points down at his feet. "They're here. They *love* these small, bushy streams. I been fishin' 'em for years."**

**"Ever catch one?" I ask him.**

**"Caught 'em? Oh, yeah. Caught hundreds of 'em! But I never brought one in. Fight like hell! More fun than snaggin' a log, or draggin in one o' them great ballsa' moss off the bottom!"**

**"I'll bet they are," I nod.**

**He squints his eyes at me and cocks his head. "You don't believe me, do you?"**

**"Sure!" I say, "I believe you. I believe anything!"**

**"Look," he says, and he starts patting his pockets. "Like I told you, I been fishin' for 'em for years. I know what gets 'em." He jerks his thumb upstream. "I'm pretty well done here. Have a go yourself. Start at the top of the run and work your way down." He finally locates a battered old green metal fly box, pops the lid open and hands me a fly. "Try this--my own design. Fish 'er deep, right under the bushes. Drag 'er crosswise across the flow. I call 'er the moss-backed muddler."**

**I thank him and say I'll try it. Then I go back up the trail.**

**It's a pretty fly, I'll give him that much. So I tie it on and toss it out. One, two, three casts, each one a little farther, until I am reaching across the stream. I start to work my way down.**

**About 50 or 60 feet below me, a cutthroat breaks the surface. I think, "I'll try for him when I get down that far."**

**I gather my line and flip it out. I watch as it snakes across the stream, right into a dark green slot that ran under some overhanging cedar branches. I toss a loop or two to sink the fly, then let the river catch the line and turn the fly crosswise to the current. Bam! The rod doubles over and my reel starts screaming. I lift the rod tip up, and a trout--I swear it was as long as my arm--okay, maybe not--but longer than my wrist to the elbow-jumps clear of the water, grabs one of the overhanging branches with his fins and starts to shimmy upward. I can't believe what I'm seeing! Except instead of running downstream like a normal trout, it's running up--like a squirrel--up! For a moment, I just stand there, stunned. By the time I think to tip the rod sideways to pull him free, it's too late. He's gone. He's wrapped me up, the fly has come out, and just like that, he leaves me standing there feeling like an idiot--with my line firmly attached to the cedar tree.**

**It's the only moss-backed muddler I have, so I wade across the stream to retrieve it, rather than risk trying to pull it free. I look downstream. From the bottom of the run, my friend is watching. He shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head and spits.**

**I know that my wading has disturbed every fish in top end of the run by now, but I fish on through anyhow. It doesn't seem to matter. Three more fish I hit, each one the same as the first. They leave me hanging: once on a half-sunken log, once in a salmonberry bush, and the last one runs back upstream into that first overhanging cedar. No matter what I do, the end result is the same--a gone fish and high overhead, the tangled fly.**

**Well, that's the story, and I wouldn't blame you for dismissing it all as a pack of lies. I didn't beach a single fish, and I can't even prove that I touched any. The only thing I can say is this: if you look into my old green fly box, I can show you the missing fly.**