



BY MARTIN SILVERSTONE

# WITH EYES CLOSED

HE WAS A NATURAL CASTER, AND WE EVEN SAID HE LOOKED GOOD ENOUGH TO DO IT IN HIS SLEEP. OUR WORDS CAME BACK TO HAUNT US.

**I**t was pitch black. And the roar of the falls, which was so soothing when I was falling asleep only a few hours ago, now was deafening and scary. Things change quickly when you're ripped from a deep sleep in a cabin in the wilderness at 1 A.M. to find a friend bloody and bleeding from an ugly, deep gash in his elbow.

Dean was pretty calm about it, even though it was his arm. "Guys, I think I need a hand," he called quietly from the kitchen to wake us up.

"How bad is it?" he asked and not waiting for me to look he walked into the bathroom trying to see his elbow in the mirror. In the stark white light of the wash-room I got a good look at the hole in his arm. As a rugby player, coach and referee I know the protocol, always downplay the severity not to stress the victim, but in this case Dean could read my shocked expression. It was bad, real bad.

Luckily Aaron was there. "Get me a towel and some tape!" the trained fireman and third member of our party barked as he came out of the bedroom. His urgent orders snapped me out of my stupor and I found the tape and a clean towel and helped him staunch the flow of blood. It wasn't pretty, duct tape isn't meant to be, but it did the job.

What was our next move? There was no phone service, we were a long way from any hospital and we had one man seriously wounded. Waking up the river guardian wasn't my first choice. We were already in his bad books from an incident that morning. We'd arrived late from Montreal the night before. A couple of Jameson's and a few beer drained away the tensions from the long drive and we were soon hard asleep. Not hard enough for Aaron, however.

He'd only been salmon fishing a year, since I introduced him to the sport of kings up on the Pabos River. On that trip, we were fishing the mythical pool 19 on the Grand Pabos North and our two other fishing companions had both already caught and released a salmon and a grilse. On Aaron's turn at this easy-to-fish pool he hooked a grilse, but lost it when his line exploded into a bird's nest tangle. From that moment on, whenever we went salmon fishing, it was like he was at war and he went at it with an intensity that was at times a little frightening.

His *modus operandii* was tenacity, and an early start. "Stone, Stone, c'mon let's go," his insistent voice called yesterday morning. He had no idea where the salmon pools were; otherwise he would have been long gone. He was already geared up so I led him up to the top of the falls and over the bridge. When I was here last year, the river was swollen and unfishable due to weeks of heavy rains.



A quick learner, Dean takes in every word on the walk into Quatre Temps Pool. Facing page: The teacher and pupil.



I remembered seeing an angler take a salmon before the fishing went south, right below a small lookout, so I told Aaron to wade in there. Big mistake. Almost immediately I felt someone watching us. It was the guardian, and he wasn't happy. First, as it turns out, our permits didn't include this stretch of water and second, we were wading where our flies should have been floating.

Well, he may have reason to think twice about helping us, but at least because of that encounter I knew his name. I knocked timidly on the door.

*"Est-ce que je peux t'aider?"* Raymond-Luc was dressed and outside in seconds. We explained as well as we could and I'll give him full credit. Although my french is anything but smooth, especially under nerve

wracking circumstances, he didn't need much more info than to see we were in deep trouble and in urgent need of medical assistance. He glanced at the broken kitchen window, but never said a word, which was good because I had no idea yet what had happened. He uttered two words that sure saved us a lot of trouble—"La Baie"—and then helped us load Dean into the Chevy Jimmy.

Dean had been a late addition to the fishing trip. He wasn't a salmon angler so when he decided to jump in it didn't take long to get him organized as he had no equipment to organize. And it was worth the little detour. Not only because he is the world's most careful driver, but he is a terrific and fit athlete from a wonderful family.

And he caught on quick. Right from the moment



▲ As the temperatures rose, the tired expression on an overheated pooch said it all. It was time for a new fishing technique: Touch and release.

◀ The Petit Saguenay passes through a narrow gorge, a breathtaking sight when viewed from an ancient footpath that looks down from the clifftops.

Faruk tied on a fly and handed him the rod, Dean was sketching out smooth rounded loops on his backcasts. We all sat there on the picnic table at Quatre Temps pool mesmerized. There are more productive pools on the Petit Saguenay, Chute for instance, where we screwed up and met Raymond-Luc earlier that morning, is as sure a place as you'll ever find to catch a salmon. And there are also more scenic pools—like La Poussière which we have written about in these pages (Spring 2009) and is so picture perfect, it actually hurts to think about it.

Neither, however, have the gently sloping sandy beach of Quatre Temps that allows a first time angler to wade far enough into the pool so that there is no danger

◀ Prelude to a disaster: Buying a live release license, learning the knots of the trade and a dog day afternoon.

of smacking a branch or rock on a back cast. And very few pools anywhere are as protected from the wind as this small bulge sandwiched beneath towering cliffs on one side and thick spruce and birch forest on the other.

No lesser an authority than Faruk Ekich, the godfather of a generation of live release anglers on the Petit Saguenay, described Dean's casting as beautiful. Perhaps it helped that Dean wasn't trying to hook a fish, something the fishing warrior, Aaron, was attempting a few metres upstream where the tea-stained waters tumbled into the head of the pool before slowing to a foam speckled swirl.

They were both young, but for some reason I seemed to have failed with Aaron and for him, fly-fishing for Atlantic salmon was all about catching one. For Dean whose casts went further and further as Aaron got more and more frustrated, it was more art than sport. He painted a pretty scene and I lay back on the picnic table and dozed off.

When I awoke alone, the sun was high in the sky. And it was hot. Too hot. I could tell right way there would be few taking fish today and for the ones that might be motivated to attack a fly, survival would be unlikely. Last year we were faced with cold and rain and so much water in the river the Petit Saguenay became dangerous for humans. This year the water was low and with the scorching day ahead it wouldn't be safe for any salmon that would be hooked.

High seas interceptory fisheries, pollution such as toxic spills from mining operations, dams and other river blockages, and poachers using everything from gill nets to jigs are all mortal threats to *Salmo salar*. Yet all these dangers, as deadly as they are, pale in comparison to warm water.

As temperatures rise, oxygen levels decrease. Stressed fish can die with no interference from humans. Few will take as they go into survival mode just trying to get enough oxygen. This was a situation that occurred last summer on the Miramichi River, when during a prolonged heat wave many salmon were found floating dead. Fish that do take can be quickly exhausted past the point where they can be revived. This is why on rivers in Newfoundland where only live release is permitted, fishing is closed when water temperatures rise above 18 degrees centigrade.

Last year Aaron and I couldn't fish because the pools were blown out by high water. Would we be turned back by warm water this year? Like many who want to pass on the salmon virus to friends, I was stressed out over the fishing conditions.

At La Poussière the trail comes out of the woods, literally on top of the river. Down below, Aaron was working hard, his usual intensity driving cast after cast into the tail of the pool.

He looked up between casts. "There's two behind that rock," and after a few minutes the two fish finning in the current became visible.



I frowned, and Faruk must have noticed my displeasure. Before I could announce a closure of the day's fishing, he climbed up the stairs and leaned against the railing.

"He's poetry in motion," Faruk nodded toward Dean who was perched on a rock just upstream, curling nice round loops and landing a dry fly across the river.

"You don't think it's too hot?" Faruk was the last person I expected to want to catch a fish under such warm conditions.

"Twenty-two degrees," he told me, pulling out his thermometer. "Much too warm, but don't worry, there is no chance they will hook a fish." It seemed strange that Faruk would dismiss that possibility. After all, any time a fly is in the water there is a chance. Faruk picked up his rod and held up a large dry fly. "This is what they are using."

"Less chance they will rise to a dry?" I still wasn't convinced although it's true that in warm water the fish are much less active.

"Yes," Faruk answered, "but even if one does, I made sure it won't be hooked." He pushed the fly closer. That's when I noticed that the hook was broken off at the bend, as if it had clipped a rock on the back cast (See *Plenty of Bark, No Bite*, page 60).

"I call it touch and release," Faruk laughed. "This lets an angler stay on the river and experience what it's all about—connecting, even for a brief instant with a wild salmon."

Despite the heat, Dean and Aaron were able to continue fishing hard all day, into the early evening. Just before dark, we found ourselves 5 kilometres from the car on a pool called Debarquadaire. We could see five salmon and the two casted across their noses, Dean's accuracy was truly phenomenal.

Afterwards we walked slowly back downstream. Oh to be young again. Dean and Aaron had fished for over 12 hours, nonstop on a day with oppressive heat. Yet,



▲ The morning after: A broken window, sharp glass and a tired boy in a cast make for a fishing trip not soon forgotten.

◀ A natural caster, but needs to be watched when he falls asleep.

they walked like it wasn't 30 degrees. They were hooked and their excitement cranked up a few notches when Faruk announced that their names had been drawn for Chute Pool the next day. Oaths were sworn to hit the hay early after only a few drinks (yeah sure, I thought, they had brought enough booze to open a bar).

It was no contest. When we got back to our cabin, I strolled outside to watch the moon rise, expecting a cold beer and dinner waiting for me, but I was met with snores. The two kids were fast asleep, likely dreaming of the Chute Pool and cooler temps in the early morning.

Well, you've heard the rest. Somewhere on our wild nighttime ride to the hospital in La Baie, as Dean slipped in and out of consciousness, we discovered he was a chronic sleep walker. At first I had trouble believing him, but found out later that sleepwalking, also known as somnambulism, is actually not that uncommon. Sleepwalkers have also been known to do clean-

◀ A tiring but fulfilling first day.

ing, cook, drive, and although rare, become violent. Even less likely, but still reported, are crazier episodes such as the Australian woman who had sex with strangers in her sleep.

No such luck for Dean. He vaguely remembers dreaming that the cabin was going to be crushed by rising floodwaters. To the best we can figure this is why he climbed up on the sink and tried to elbow his way through the thick window glass. We could only consider ourselves lucky he didn't simply walk out the door to be swept away in the rapids.

No, despite appearances, we lucked out, thanks mainly to Guardian Raymond-Luc. La Baie was less than an hour away and the emergency room doctor was not busy and a top-notch surgeon. He rushed Dean into the operating room, reattaching the tendons and ligaments and stitching muscle and skin like a virtuoso.

Aaron and I spent the night sleeping in the waiting room and the Jimmy and by the time Dean was released it was midday. Back at the Petit Saguenay Zec office, all were concerned for Dean's well being. Our story, as unbelievable as it seemed, was never questioned. This may seem like a small thing but when you are far from home, the trust of strangers is something you can truly appreciate. There was nothing left to do but pack up and leave a note and gift for Raymond-Luc before heading home. Aaron and Dean's date with a "Chute" salmon would have to wait for another day.

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Martin Silverstone is editor of the *Journal*. He plans on going fishing with Dean again this summer but will tie his leg to the bedpost. Stay tuned. 🐟

