

## Lures

"I'm going to show you all how to handle a rod," Dave says. That gets him some laughs, even though he says it dead-pan. One of the women reckons she's so expert already she could teach *him* a thing or two and she treats us all to a wink so we're certain sure she's not talking about fishing. Christ, this is going to be a long weekend.

There are sixteen of us standing in front of the fishing hut: fifteen women and Dave. The others have started to bond. I've been watching them for the half-hour or so of Dave's ice-breaking intro: all smiles and open questions. One woman is passing round a contact details sheet so we can all waste time after the course has finished cluttering up cyberspace with pointless positive thinking. I think about refusing to sign but it seems like too much effort so I scrawl [julia@buggeroff.com](mailto:julia@buggeroff.com) across the page and pass it on.

We've selected our fishing spots for the weekend – pegs, Dave calls them. Mine is number seven, down at the furthest end of the pool, the one with the most space between it and its neighbour. The pool is long and broad, a lake in miniature, its furze-green water fringed with trees shading the low plank fishing benches. Now the summer's reaching its peak, the leaves are full and pumped with life; the willow behind my seat drapes round in a kind of bower and I think about sloping off to it, away from the hen party with its strutting cockerel. Away from squandering any more time.

"So," Dave says, "technicalities. As in everything, there's a right and a wrong way to do things."

The others twitter at him, heads coquetting to one side, chins dipping and rising like they're on strings. It's all too deferential for me. Too accepting of why we've found ourselves lumped here together with nothing in common but a few rogue cells.

My temper flares. "Why can't we just lob the end of the line in any old how and see what happens? It'll be a bloody sight more relaxing than worrying about technique and I thought relaxation was the whole point of this weekend. We haven't got long enough to get everything just so."

They all stare at me and I hold my hands up. "Sorry. Just saying, that's all."

Dave looks amused but the row of women stiffens in a united front of disapproval.

I step out of the line and wander off down to my seat. The morning heat has filtered through the cascade of willow leaves and warmed the smooth silvered oak of the bench. I run my fingers over it feeling each knot and ridge. This is what counts now: cupping every moment in my hand so I can feel the weight of it. Over the past few weeks I've been re-learning how to live. Diving to the depths of each minute of existence. Touching, tasting, scenting, listening. Watching the light grow and change and fade. I think: *I've been a skater for far too long.*

Dave has placed a small heap of equipment beside each of the benches. I ignore it, sit down and close my eyes.

I can hear the other women: there's a shriek and a splash as something is dropped, a few snatches of competitive lack of confidence. Above them, a buzzard calls. A not-quite-the-river scent hangs in the heavy air.

There's a crunch on the gravelled path which runs round the perimeter of the water. A man's tread. It stops beside me. Dave. I keep my eyes shut.

"I've found you're more likely to catch a fish if you actually watch where you're casting," Dave says, "that's assuming you ever pick up the rod and have a go."

I open my eyes. He's blocking out my sun-heat and I want him gone. "What if I don't want to catch a fish?"

I see him considering me. He's a little older than I am, fiftyish, but has kept his looks. He's flirtable with and knows it, is up for it, despite the thick gold band on his fourth finger. I don't want to flirt any more than I want to fish and I stare him out.

Dave says, "I can't see the point of you being here if you won't join in. What made you come?"

"My mother signed me up. She thought it would help. She's one of those who gets sucked in by hype – she'd have me drinking baboon's blood if she thought it'd make a

difference." I take a breath, "I don't even like the *all-girls-together* thing. I have three brothers, I've worked with men all my life and being a woman has never seemed particularly relevant to anything, until now."

There's a pause, then Dave says, "Seeing as you are here, how about backing off with the attitude and having a go? The others are game to give this weekend a chance and it's not fair on them. They've got as much at stake as you, after all."

This is a fair point and I feel a tiny bit shabby. "Okay. How about we compromise? You let me be, I'll promise to stay out of the way over here and you get on with the others without me snarking from the side-lines. I like this place and I like this seat. I'll be able to relax here if people don't bother me. Can you let that be enough for you?"

He says nothing; picks up the rod from the ground beside me and dusts off a bit of loose earth.

"Really. I mean it. Go teach the ones who want to learn."

"They're okay for a few minutes. They're practising their rod handling."

"Sounds like some of them think they're pretty good at it already."

He grins at me. "There's always a joker."

He turns his attention back to the rod and fixes something onto the end of the line. It's bright and orange-coloured, sharp against the muted shadows under the willow. He stands to one side and then moves his arm, fast, casting the line out high. The orange object lands on the surface and bobs about.

Dave points to it. "That's a float. Keep your attention on it – it'll act as a reference point for you so you can see where your hook is, or whether the fish has bitten."

I yawn.

Dave says, "You try."

"Don't you ever give up?"

"No, I don't. I can't sleep at night unless I've forced at least one stroppy woman to discover the joys of fishing."

"Oh, for God's sake." I fidget about on my perch. "Will you go away if I promise to do it once?"

"I might."

"Might's not good enough. I have one go, you'll leave me in peace. Deal?"

He nods.

"Okay." I take the rod from him. Near the handle is a reel, metal, with holes. It reminds me of a sewing thread bobbin and I think that if the nylon of the line were a thread, I could patch up all the shapes and colours around this pond into one huge quilt. I could stitch myself into it, preserved forever with sewn metallic light and felted trees.

Dave says, "Concentrate."

"I was thinking about sewing. It's what I like doing most, when I'm not at work. Making things."

"What, like dresses?"

"Textile art."

"Really? I wouldn't have guessed that. It sounds like such a quiet, gentle thing to do. Not a pastime I'd associate with what I've gathered about you so far."

"You haven't seen my artwork. Think Munch in appliqué."

Dave picks up a box. "Perhaps you'll like these, then, if you like colour and texture. Lots of people tie their own. If you're good with your hands, you could learn how to make them."

There are flies in the box. Fake flies. Flies designed to trick the unwary trout into thinking that his dinner has conveniently arrived beside him. According to Dave, my job will be to cast a line with a fly on it over the pool and then twitch it about to look like it's swimming.

"Then what?" I ask.

"Then you pull it slowly towards you. If you get a bite, I'll help you reel it in."

"And then what?"

"We land it. With any luck."

"Am I meant to kill it? Or put it back?"

"It's up to you. You're entitled to take five trout over the weekend if you want to – all included in the price of the course - so you can choose to let it live another day and release it, or if you want to take it home but don't fancy killing it yourself, I can do it for you."

It strikes me that I have a choice. Just this once, I will have power over life and death and I won't even have to dirty my hands to be the executioner. This fish, this as yet hypothetical fish on the end of my line, will be entirely at the mercy of my caprices. It's a novel and rather engaging concept. I sit up a bit straighter and take the box.

Dave's right. I do like the flies. Some are accurate imitations of caddis flies, mayflies, Daddy-Long-Legs. Their fine fibre hairs bristle around the barbarous curve of the hook, hiding it. There are others too, which look like no natural insect I've ever seen; concoctions of bright, feathery garishness. Show girls.

"What are these for?" I ask Dave.

"They're lures. They're not meant to look realistic. They're intended to provoke the trout's natural aggression so that he goes on the attack."

There's a vivacity to the lures, an enticement which pulls at me. "I'd like to choose one of these."

I select the gaudiest one, a fluffy copper and red. Dave oversees its attachment to the line.

"Are you okay to have a go at casting, then?"

"Looks like I don't have much choice. But only if you go away."

"I'll be watching you. Good luck."

I give a non-committal grunt and wait as he makes his way towards the jokey girl, the expert rod-handler with the good-time mouth. He has a canvas bag with him and he swings it over his shoulder as he walks. I think: *I used to have a stride as easy as that*. Before they sliced into my skin, through the fat of my tissue, the flat flesh over my rib-span. Before the drip drip of the poison. Before I realised that being a woman would get me in the end.

I make no effort to mimic his actions with the rod and sit, motionless, watching the real flies zip to and fro over the water. It looks exhausting to me, this frenetic merry-go-round of swirling, ducking, diving. So much effort to keep up there, to stay alive. I wonder if they are ever tempted to surrender. To sink down and rest on the surface tension of the water. To seek death in the wide grey cavern of a trout's mouth.

I look at the other women around the pool. No one else is sitting immobile like me; they're all engaging with the task, sticking flies on and casting and pulling the line in. Even the weakest, the ones with moon faces or smudges of exhaustion beneath their eyes. The bustling contact-sheet woman has got a fish to bite, or thinks she has. She's jumping around like she's won the lottery. Her energy saps me.

I shut my eyes again and slow my breathing. Visualise a clock with the hands grinding to a halt around the face. Imagine the spaces between the ticks widening to infinity. Warmth bathes me, the inside of my eyelids show red. I have reduced my world to no more than this stretching out of time.

"Caught anything yet?"

I start. Dave must have crept up behind me on his tip-toes. I tell him so.

"Creeping? Not my style. You'd fallen asleep."

"No I hadn't. Sleeping's a waste of life."

"It'll be a waste of your mum's money and effort in sorting this weekend if you only sit there."

"I thought you were going to stop hassling me? We had a deal."

"And you broke it. You've not even picked that rod up yet – I've been keeping an eye on you."

I flick a fly away from the edge of my headscarf. If I didn't like this place so much I'd pack up, dump Mr Persistent and the sodding sisterhood and go back home. Tell Mum I'd not felt well in the heat. At least I could get some peace.

I shoot a malevolent glare at Dave. "They must pay you a bloody fortune to do this job, the amount of effort you put into it."

Dave gives me a long look and then drops his gaze to the gold band on his finger. "No one pays me anything at all. The course fee covers the hire of the facilities and the accommodation, that's it." He shifts, digs the toe of his boot into the gravel. "My late wife Helen had the idea for these weekends after she was diagnosed. She was convinced that peace and concentration could help the healing process. We set the organisation up together and I've carried it on."

"Didn't do much for her though, did it, in the end? Seeing as she died." My words hang, polluting the still, shining morning. A minute passes. "I'm sorry, that was a crap thing to say."

"It wasn't great."

"I'm angry."

"I can see that."

"Maybe you should just have left me alone, like I asked."

Dave shakes his head, "I can't."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I think this weekend will help you, if you give it a chance. You're all over the show and you don't know what you really want. Fists up one minute, in a coma the next. And what's that all about? The zoning out business?"

I swallow, press my nails into my palms. "Because I think that doing stuff – like the fishing, like anything – speeds time up. If I can just sit without moving and pare myself down to the basics – heartbeat, breathing, digestion, I might get a bit longer, you know? Slow time down to nothing, maybe even cheat the odds. Cells can't grow in a time-vacuum, surely?"

"What've they told you? About the outcome?"

"Fifty-fifty. It's my second bout."

For a minute or two, Dave says nothing. He fetches my rod from its abandoned position on the bank and winds the line in a little. Then he clears his throat. "Thing is, you're not really living though, are you, doing that. However long you've got. It's giving up. While you still have a life, you should live it, actively live it, I mean, not sit it out."

He checks that the rod's all set up as it should be and then casts, so quickly and fiercely that I jerk back in reflex. The line plays out into the air, bisecting my view of the lake.

"Here." He hands me the rod and I take it, feeling the slight weight of it, the undulations of the handle, warm from his palm. The lure gleams bold and brilliant. "Now, stand still, feet apart. That's it. Feel the play of the line." He takes a step back and scrutinises me. "You okay with that?"

I nod.

"Great. Keep going, nice and quiet, concentrating on that line. Don't, whatever happens, lose focus. I'll be back in a minute."

He gives me a little pat on the shoulder and moves off. Jokey Big-Mouth is waving at him to come over to her.

I stand. The lure bobs on the surface and I feel tension start to ratchet up inside me. A good sort of tension, like something exciting might happen. Like a kid on the first sunny day of spring.

There's a tug on the line. Not a huge pull, a tease, but I whip the line back. The tug comes again, stronger. I look over for Dave but he's absorbed in helping Big-Mouth. My body flushes; heat ignites down through me. Tug.

Sod Dave. If I'm going to do this thing, I'll do it on my own. I start to pull the line in, faster and faster, the spool whirring as the thread around it grows, the strain tightening the line until it flexes, bends like a bow. And then, with a burst of spray, the fish is aloft, out of its element, fresh gleaming scales flashing in the sunlight as it pitches from side to side, its tail rising and plunging.

As I wind, it moves towards me, half in, half out of the water. Its mouth is gaping, its gills heave as they search to suck oxygen from the dry air. And I have it, so close that I can see the viscous surface of its bulbous little eyes, the fight for life blazing beneath.

I hear pounding on the path behind me.

Dave says, "You got one! Stroppy beginner's luck or what! Do you want me to sort it out for you?" He takes the fish and disentangles the hook from its mouth. "It's okay, not damaged. It'll do fine if you want to put it back but it's your call. Fifty-fifty."

The fish thrashes about; its gills yawn in desperation, slashed crescents of scarlet against the subtle iridescence of its scales. Every cell of it is fighting, every atom of it wants to live, every heartbeat of its fragile life is priceless.

"Julia? Does it live or does it die?"

Time is suspended. I look at Dave, at the fish beating against the restraint of his hands. Light sparks from it like electricity.

I see the lure flaming against the dull earth of the bank.

I breathe in deep and long, balling my hands into fists. Fighting fists. And then I give him my answer.