CHUK COULTER

The Tree

Remote. Powerful. Unforgiving. A river wild. Just the way the world's biggest Arctic char like it

BY PATRICK WALSH

THERE'S NOTHING left of the far-flung RCMP detachment where Corporal William Doak once lorded over the foreboding Arctic landscape, exerting Ottawa's sovereignty and bringing the white man's ways and the white man's justice to a place that saw little of either. There's no windswept stone foundation, no weather-bleached lumber. Nothing. Nor is there any sign of the neighbouring Hudson's Bay Company trading post, where manager Otto Binder once catered to the region's scattered population of trappers, explorers, missionaries and indigenous inhabitants.

No, all that remains at the mouth of the Tree River, where its aqua blue waters empty into Coronation Gulf and the dark, frigid embrace of the Arctic Ocean, are the two men's lonely graves.

And the stories.

Stories such as how Doak travelled northeast to Kent Peninsula in 1920 to arrest two Inuit men, today known only through sketchy records as Alikomiak and Tàtimagana, for the alleged murders of three other Inuit. Of how Doak did not confine the suspects when he brought them back to the Tree, instead enlisting them to do household chores as they awaited trial. Of how Alikomiak took exception to the women's work of chewing Doak's sealskin boots to make the tough leather soles more supple. Of how he shot the sleeping officer in the upper thigh and watched as he slowly bled to death. Of how Alikomiak then shot Otto Binder through the heart when the trader dropped by for his customary morning cup of tea. Of the show trial that sent both Alikomiak and Tàtimagana to the gallows four years later in the transport shed of the RCMP detachment on distant Herschel Island, making them the first Inuit to be executed under Canadian law.

And of how the stoic pair, resigned to their fate, spent their last night making traditional Inuit nets for catching Arctic char.

The char.

They also remain, of course, continuing to push their way up the Tree from the open sea, past the rocky barrens harbouring the graves of Doak and Binder, battling the wild current to reach their wintering pools nine kilometres upstream. And with the ignominy of the murders all but relegated to northern campfire storytime, it's because of these very fish that Nunavut's Tree River is now far better known—at least among anglers who care to dream.

For it's here, in this unique riverine haven some 1,900 kilometres due north of Calgary, that the world's largest Arctic char, all crimson and

chrome in readiness for the late-summer spawn and the harsh winter months ahead, make their annual appearance.

I CAN'T imagine my Inuit fishing guide, Morris Onipkak, shooting me in the upper leg and watching me bleed to death. His calming presence, even after watching me lose my second fish, and even after I snag yet again on the boulder-strewn riverbed, is beyond me. Beyond me because *I* want to shoot myself in the upper leg and watch myself bleed to death. It's August 17, my first outing on the Tree, and I have precisely this afternoon, one full day and one morning to catch-and-release one of the river's legendary giant char. In particular, I want to bring a huge, spawn-bound male to hand—if for no reason other than to hold it in my hands, examine up close its almost preternatural beauty and boast that I actually landed one. A humpbacked brook trout on steroids, I imagine it, with its massive kype jutting past its snout, its fin tips bright white against an impossibly red flank peppered with a stunning galaxy of blue-ringed, eye-popping fire-orange dots.

But here I am, two hours in, and still without a fish. Not that I should be surprised: the rough-and-tumble Tree, thundering by me at 80 cubic metres a second, is notorious for eating tackle, smashing dreams and otherwise humbling the most proficient of anglers. Still, I can't help but beat myself up.

Then Morris, the only Inuit guide still at camp this late in the season—I'm with the last group of anglers for 2008—points to a specific spot in the rushing river. "There. Look."

I'm wearing polarized sunglasses. Morris isn't. I follow his finger. I know by now what to look for, a flash of red below the surface, but the light's flat and I see nothing but white overcast sky reflecting on the rushing current.

Morris chuckles. "He's playing peekaboo with you."

I keep looking, and finally I see it, a mere red sliver. A big male. I cast upstream, letting my Pixee flutter and bounce off the rocky bottom with the current as I slowly retrieve it, keeping the line taut, right past the place where I'm sure the fish's snout should be. Nothing. Again I cast. Again nothing.

Morris shakes his head. "Come on," he says, and we move to another pool, continuing to work the lower portion of the river below the humble clutch of canvas-roofed cabins that is Plummer's Tree River Camp.

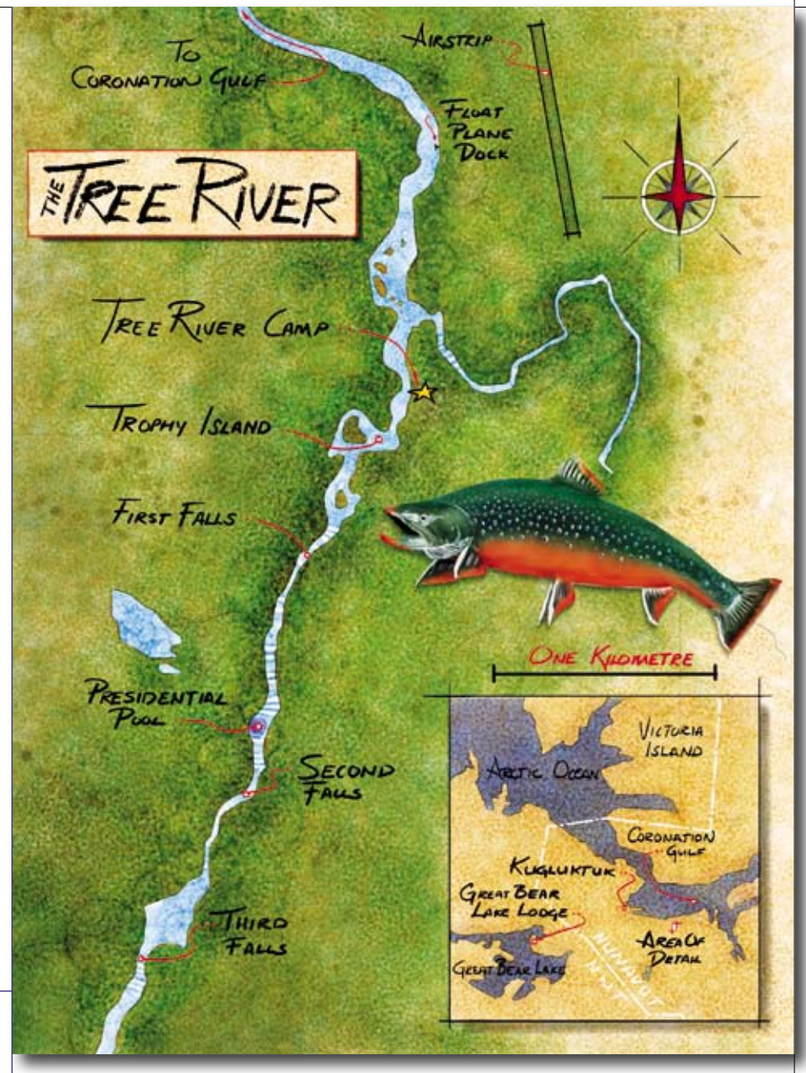
A good start: The author and one of his several smaller Tree River Arctic char; [below, left to right] the sign greeting guests arriving at the camp; the Tree River, where it flows past the camp's canvas-roofed cabins; the author and his Inuit fishing guide, Morris Onipkak

Before he started working for Plummer's five years ago, Morris had never visited the Tree, but he sure knows his char from fishing the Coppermine River, which also empties into Coronation Bay, near his home in Kugluktuk, another 150 kilometres or so to the west along the rugged Arctic Ocean coast. Plummer's typically flies the Inuit staff back and forth between the camp and the 1,000-member hamlet, although Morris says he once made the hike on foot in short order. I can believe it.

Now, I should note that I have more than a few inches on Morris in terms of height, and should therefore have a longer stride. I'm also younger than Morris, and I don't share his affinity for tobacco. As it turns out, that's no match for his intimate knowledge of the rocky, muddy, slippery and sometimes devilish terrain—ground squirrel burrow, anyone?—that flanks either side of the Tree. I've seen this home ground advantage before on my travels, with the tiny Bushmen of Botswana's Kalahari Desert, for example, and the skinny Chagga porters on Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro, guys who looked like they had no business besting me on a hike. But they did, without even breaking a sweat. It's the same deal with Morris, who's always loping along a good 30 metres or so ahead of me.

Patrick Walsh (camp sign; Walsh and Onipkak); Chuk Coulter (Tree River); Morris Onipkak (Walsh with char); Robert Bindon (map)

Of course, it doesn't help that I'm wearing camp-issue rubber chest waders, but on I trudge, single-minded in my quest. And I do end up catching fish before we call it a day, two colourful females not quite 10 pounds apiece, beauties to be sure. Later, as I settle into bed under a heap of blankets, exhausted and with a belly full of wine after going for a post-dinner polar bear dip downstream at the rivermouth, I get to thinking: What if there were no Arctic char, if they had never tempted us? Would the itinerant angler, always seeking adventure and giant fish still trek to places as far-flung as the Tree? Or would he be content just to admire the striking Arctic landscape, inhale the crisp, clean, cold air, and otherwise marvel at the fact he's visiting the top of Canada? I doubt it. For once you've brought one of these fish to hand, you can't imagine any other reason for being here. Or so I thought as I met sleep against the warm hum of the cabin's vintage oil heater. I'd spent just one afternoon on the Tree, and while I hadn't caught the giant spawning buck of my dreams, I already knew this river was without parallel.



MANITOBA-BORN adventurer Warren Plummer can take the credit for restoring the Tree's reputation, long tarnished by the 1920 murders. That started in 1960, when he established Tree River Camp six kilometres upriver from the mouth, flying in char-hungry anglers from his lodge at Great Bear Lake, another 375 kilometres to the southwest. Plummer clearly knew a good thing when he saw it, recognizing the river's potential for awesome fishing. Certainly his instincts had already served him well.

In 1938, Plummer and his father, Chummy, set out by motorized canoe from Yellowknife, venturing northeast across Great Slave Lake to check out reports of outstanding fishing for giant lake trout at Taltheilei Narrows. The reports were true. Eleven years later, he returned to the same spot to set up his first sport-fishing destination, Great Slave Lake Lodge. Then in 1959, he opened his second lodge, farther to the north on Great Bear Lake's Conjuror Bay, re-establishing it another nine years later in its present location on the lake's northeast Dease Arm. To this day, both lodges continue to host adventure-seeking anglers, and Plummer's son, named Chummy after the family patriarch, now oversees the entire operation—including the Tree River Camp.

What Warren Plummer realized back in 1960 remains unchanged today: if you want to catch a true trophy char, a 15-year-old repeat spawner topping 20 pounds, your best chance of success lies at the Tree. For it's here that the current world-record char, a 32-pound nine-ounce whopper, was caught in 1981. And while the run itself may not be huge, the average size of the fish is comparatively large: 10 to 12 pounds. By contrast, the Coppermine serves up char averaging just seven pounds, with five or six pounds the maximum in most other char waters around the circumpolar hinterland. So explains one of the fly fishermen at camp, Craig Blackie, a fisheries biologist who's made the pilgrimage several times to the Tree during the eight years he's spent studying lake trout on Great Bear. "There's nowhere on earth that compares to the Tree in terms of average size," he says.

That's precisely why this remote river is such a big draw for those in the know, luring intrepid anglers from as far away as

Chile, Russia and Australia. And like me, they all seem to have their own goals while at the Tree, some more ambitious than others. Frank Bluch from Corio, Australia, wants to catch a 20-pound-plus char on the fly, for example, and he's truly having at it, probably fishing harder than anyone else at camp, no doubt due to the fact he's travelled from the other side of the planet to get here. Most of the other anglers in our group, however, seem content to just catch a char, at least one, size be damned. But if you're throwing big, heavy spoons and jigs, as I am, and you can get them down in the current, the chances are good that, if you're going to catch just one fish, it's going to be big.

As to why exactly the Tree produces such giants, the science is inconclusive, and various explanations abound. "It's such a puzzle," Blackie says. It could be the fish bulk up on capelin while out in the Arctic Ocean, or pig out on the river's own rich forage base of sculpin, whitefish, lake trout and much smaller resident char. Camp manager and head guide Sean Barfoot offers another possibility, that the char are so large because of the nature of the river itself: with a mere one-kilometre stretch suitable for redds—making for intense competition—only the strongest and biggest fish prevail.

Also no doubt playing a role is the low fishing pressure and the camp's catch-and-release policy. Only 250 guests a year get the privilege of fishing the Tree, most staying just one night between the first week of July and the third week of August. And while the Department of Fisheries and Oceans allows the camp to harvest 350 fish a season, only one fish per group—for a total of 32 over the entire season—is kept for the table. On my visit, we retain one of my chunky, eating-sized char, the eight-pounder's vibrant orange-red backstrap making for superb sashimi, while the rest of the fish performs outstandingly as baked fillets.

Along with producing lunker char, the Tree also feeds a unique riparian ecosystem as it wends its way seaward, itself the confluence of a 5,810-square-kilometre watershed. It reminds me of the Nile River as it cuts a swath of green through the sun-baked Sahara from Aswan to Cairo, luring and sustaining abundant flora and fauna, from Egyptian lotus and papyrus sedge to whiskered terns and thirsty camels. Likewise, the Tree streams through what is also a desolate landscape, in this case bare Precambrian rock streaked with veins of tundra. And it also creates an inviting habitat in the process.

"It's an oasis in the Arctic," Chummy Plummer would later tell me back at Great Bear Lodge. "I've called it that forever. It's a really special place." That it is. Look down and see mountain avens, cinquefoil and purple lupines; look up and spot peregrine falcons in the cliffs cradling the Third Falls, where they nest before winging south to Argentina for the winter. You can also spy gyrfalcons and golden and bald eagles, depending on the timing of your visit. And on the water, look for Arctic loons, as well as common loons fattening up in preparation for their hike south.

Then there are the mammals: muskoxen, foxes, wolverines and, late in the season, barren-ground caribou. There are barren-ground grizzlies, too, and timber wolves; two anglers in our group caught a scrawny specimen eyeing them from a ridge lording over one of the many fish-filled pools. Moose have also been seen here, an incredulous proposition to many, given the Tree lies north of the Arctic Circle and well beyond the boreal treeline. And, of course, there are the ground squirrels, always lurking by the guest cabins, snapping to attention at our every move and scurrying out of sight should we get too close.

The creatures other than the char I'm most enamoured with, however, are the willow ptarmigan. They're big, fat birds—tasty, for sure. Or so I fantasize. I suggest to Morris they would make for a great shorelunch. How hard could it be to bean one with a stream rock, after all? They don't flush unless you get in their face, and they're grouped in clutches of a dozen or so birds, lurking among the riverbank tangles of dwarf birch, felt-leaf willow and white Arctic heather.

But we're here for the fish, and my thoughts of quite possibly trampling Nunavut's hunting regs are quickly sidelined when Morris points to a distant point on the river, indiscernible to me from all the other distant points on the river by the mere fact I've never been very good at following someone's finger to the distant points I'm intended to see. But then, almost miraculously, I see it. A flash of red.

I quickly cast, heaving my pink-bellied Pixee into the river's roar, sailing over the churning froth to a mid-river patch of slack water. Wham! No sooner does the spoon begin to sink in the current than it's seized by a giant red fish. I know it's a giant red fish because it immediately tears downstream, leaping once, its tailfin waving sideways as though to propel itself through the air, flying a good 10 feet parallel to the water's surface before disappearing into the tail-out and breaking off.

I can sense that Morris can sense my frustration, but onward we trek, continuing to hit all the Tree's likely hot spots, such as the Presidential Pool, where former Edmonton Oilers owner and then spend-happy millionaire Peter Pocklington mounted a plaque to the shoreside bedrock, signifying his visit in 1995 with George Bush Sr. Eventually, we make it to the foot of the Third Falls, almost three kilometres upstream from camp.

The Third Falls. This is the end of the road for the char, and it's here in the giant pool—a small lake, really—below the falls that the fish spend their winters, lest they freeze to death out in the frigid Arctic. It's here, too, that lake trout enter the lower river system, inadvertently dropping over the 40-foot cascade, never to return upstream to the series of river widenings, offshoots, glacial canals and other waterbodies such as Inulik Lake, said to be the Tree's ultimate headwater, rising 500 metres above sea level another 100 kilometres to the southwest.

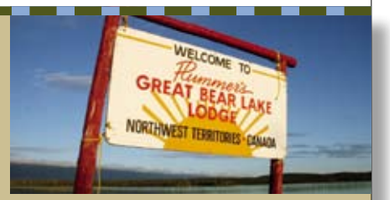
By the end of the day, I've caught a couple of nice, 10-pound-range char, as well as a small lake trout. But I still haven't netted a big, scarlet buck, and I'm beginning to think that I, too, like the char below the Third Falls, have come to the end of my journey.

IT'S THE final morning, my last few hours on the Tree. I've indeed resigned myself to not catching a kype-thrusting giant. And having at least landed a few smaller fish, I no longer feel compelled to shoot myself in the upper leg and watch myself bleed to death. Hey, it's great just to be fishing here, in the North, with my new Inuit buddy. But Morris seems to have other ideas, and after I bust off what was most likely a huge male in the fast water just off Third Island above camp, he orders me back into the 18-foot aluminum we'd used to get across the flow. Firing up the 25-horse, he pops us into the current, shifts into neutral, and down we drift to Trophy Island. It's a gravel bar, really, and at this time of the year, it's completely submerged, evident only due to a shank of rebar the guides had

What it's all about: Aussie fly fisherman Frank Bluch lands one of the Tree's famed fire-red Arctic char; [below, left to right] the plaque commemorating a visit from George Bush Sr.; guide Morris Onipkak at the Third Falls; the author with a colourful female char

PATRICK WALSH (PLAQUE; ONIPKAK AT THIRD FALLS; LODGE SIGN); MORRIS ONIPKAK (WALSH WITH CHAR); FRANK BLUCH (BLUCH WITH CHAR); CHUK COULTER (WALSH WITH LAKER, GRAYLING)

Beyond char



For many guests making their way to Plummer's Great Bear Lake Lodge in the Northwest Territories, a trip to neighbouring Nunavut's Tree River is not the main event. It's a great optional overnight diversion to mix things up, for sure, but for these anglers the name of the game is lake trout. Giant lake trout, to be exact. And just as the Tree promises the planet's biggest char, so, too, does the Bear hold out the carrot of the next world-record laker. And how big would that fish have to weigh? More than 72 pounds. That's the current world record, caught in 1995 by Lloyd Bull on—where else?—Great Bear Lake.

Thoughts of breaking records aside, there are plenty of just plain big fish to be had. The day before climbing aboard the turbo prop Otter for the two-hour jaunt up to the Tree, for example, I spent the afternoon with gung-ho guide Chuk Coulter hunting for giant lakers. Sure, you can go for numbers of fish, and catch lots of red-fin beauties in the five- to 15-pound range. Or, you can put in the time as Chuk and I did and go for the silver trophies. For us, that ultimately resulted in a 30-pound lunker slamming my hefty red-and-silver Half Wave, then posing for hero shots before swimming home.

Nor is the Tree River the only side trip on offer at Great Bear during a typical week's visit. There are also day-long fly-outs to places such as the Sulky River, a beautiful but relatively small wild river teeming with Arctic grayling, eager to put a bend in the rod of even the most novice of fly fishermen (trust me on that). The second day after returning to Great Bear from the Tree, for example, I caught so many Sulky grayling on dries that I honestly lost count. On the downside, mind you, I'm now completely spoiled when it comes to dry-fly fishing—just as I'm now wondering if I'll ever again tackle as fine a wild fighting fish as the Arctic char.

Plummer's Arctic Lodges manages the only sportfishing operations on both the Tree River and Great Bear Lake. For complete information, contact 1-800-665-0240; www.canadianarcticfishing.com.

pounded into the riverbed. Submerged sandbar or not, I like the promising name.

By now I've already pillaged Morris' tackle—a collection of cast-offs, hand-me-downs and found lures from guests long gone—having all but depleted or deemed unworthy the shiny new selection of hefty spoons I carted all the way to Nunavut from my home more than 3,350 kilometres to the south in Aurora, Ontario. I even gave fly fishing a shot, completely buggering up a borrowed rod, reel and sink-tip in the process. And I've raided the paltry end-of-season selection of tackle from the camp's humble tuck shop.

Which brings me to my lure of last resort: a white, one-ounce Jig-A-Jo Banana jig from the tuck shop, its dressing of white hair snipped off and replaced with a white curly tail grub. Now, I had been using grub-tipped jigs already, don't get me wrong—I brought a good supply with me. They were catching fish all right, too. But they were also losing them. The problem was, the blasted hooks were straightening out thanks to the wickedly strong current and the wickedly strong fish. It also didn't help that the barbs had to be pinched down, as per Nunavut's fishing regs. The hook on my new Banana jig, however, appears to be up to the task.

So we tie up to the rebar and I ease out of the boat, holding onto the gunwale as I get my footing in the strong, thigh-deep current. For a half-hour I flog the water to no avail before climbing back into the boat. We untie and scoot upstream, then drift down to the dark water just east and downriver of Trophy. There, Morris drops anchor, throwing overboard a chunk of Canadian Shield tethered to a rope. I stand in the bow and cast slightly upstream into a seam, then wait as the heavy jig sinks in the current until it clacks along the rocky bottom, telegraphing its movement up the braided line.

As I begin my retrieve, the jig suddenly stops with a soft thud and I feel the line snap to attention. A snag? I take no chance and set the hook. Boom! Line peels. Oh yeah, it's a fish. A big fish. It clears the water, tail swishing, not at all happy to be caught. That mythical red monster, the fish I've been waiting for?

No.

But it's a magnificent fish, a giant silver beauty—giant as in 23 pounds according to Morris' scale, clasped onto the landing net. It reminds me of a chromed steelhead, only far bigger and far stronger than any steelie I've ever caught. And it turns out it's a male all right, but I've clearly caught it during one of its off-years in terms of the spawn.

"NIIIIIICE FIIIIISH!!!" Morris seems genuinely stoked. He knows I've wanted to catch a trophy, and here I've done it. But he also knows I wanted a scarlet buck, so he's really playing it up, thinking, no doubt, *This is it for this guy*. After all, I had to get back to camp in a half-hour to meet the rest of our group for the boat ride downriver to the float plane.

Persistence (and a bit of luck) pays: The author and his two trophy Arctic char, both caught minutes apart—and from the same pool—during the final hour of his stay at the Tree River

Morris Onipcak

I'm thinking I'm done, too, so after Morris snaps a few trophy photos of me struggling to get the right pose—man, these char are slippery and slimy—we let the fish go and I take a perfunctory few more casts to the very same pool that just yielded my giant fish. And because I think I'm done, I take the time to take a last good look at the wild surroundings. And I look at Morris and we smile. I'm contented. Who wouldn't be with a 23-pound Arctic char, red or not? Then my line once again goes taut.

At times like this, in the twilight minutes of a phenomenal fishing adventure, you think to yourself: a) you dork, what a way to finish, with a snag, or b) could this be the one? So I set the hook. If it's a snag, well, what's one more lure surrendered to the Tree River. Heck, by now the hook on my Jig-a-Jo is hopelessly warped anyway, not just from the big silver char, but also from the relentless pounding of the rocky river bottom, rendering it all but useless for future use. And if it's a fish? Well, that's why I set the hook.

It's a fish.

Another big one.

And it's seemingly smarter, too, first darting upstream under the bow of the boat, then tearing downstream off the stern as though it desperately wants to go to Baffin Island. Several times—honestly, I can't remember how many, it was so exciting and so fast—I got the fish close to the boat, my line running perpendicular to the riverbed, but the son of a gun wouldn't rise to net range, at least giving us a visual, before tearing off yet again, aided by the current and my fear of horsing it home with mere 17-pound test.

Fifteen minutes into the dance, Morris finally yells, "NIIIIIICE FIIIIISH!!!" His voice has a little more urgency this time, and he's looking at me as if to say, "Do not screw this up." That's when I realize he can actually see the fish down in the depths—I still can't—and he knows it's finally my big red dream char.

Then I see it, flashing crimson as it turns sideways just under the bow and makes what ends up being its last bid for freedom. It's my fish. My giant buck. In spades. Finally, I ease it within range and Morris scoops it home, a 22-pounder according to the scales clipped to the landing net, another helluva fish.

And yes, I gaze down at its broad flank, marvelling at how nature decided to paint it, as I'd earlier imagined. But it's funny how, once you've caught that dream fish, you want to quickly let it go, as if holding it out of the water for too long will somehow spoil the moment, or jinx you for the next time out. Of course, deep down, you know, you just want the darn thing back in the water—gills working, tail kicking—as it should be. Maybe that's why some anglers are just as happy to release their fish boatside, slipping the hook without ever handling it, let alone measuring its length and girth, or weight. Not me. I have to touch the fish. Hold it. Be a Roman and give it the thumbs-up. Some innate, atavistic need? Perhaps. But with this fish, feeling it struggle as I clutch it tiredly to my chest and Morris fiddles with the camera's shutter button, there's no hesitation at all. I know it's a beauty. The perfect char.

And back it slides into the Tree, to swim another day past the lonely graves of Doak and Binder.❖