

KEEGAN & BIG GREY



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The stream ran through the back of the old Thompson place at Ocean Park. It didn't have a name. Most times of the year, especially in the summer months, it was pretty sluggish. In the winter months, if the weather was not too cold and there was a lot of rain, the water ran fast and clean. There were a number of twists and turns as it meandered through the over-grown fields, flowing by bunches of reeds and bulrushes. This provided a lot of cover for the brown trout in the many back eddies and pools. The Thompson place had been vacant for three years, ever since the recession hit the town of Ocean Park pretty hard. The Thompsons had loaded up a truck and trailer with their possessions, plonked a For Sale sign at the front gate and left town. The only stores still open were Mr. Shama's General Store, the Kwik-Shop grocery store, Windy's Barber Shop with the old style barber pole out front and a solitary gas station.

Keegan Clark was just five years of age when his grandpa began teaching him the fine art of fly fishing. And not only fishing but how to tie flies, how to determine if a rod has that extra quality that makes it special, what is the best filament, how to catch and release doing the least harm to the fish and most of all, how fish can outsmart a human being.



"They got a brain the size of a pea," Grandpa Mack said on a number of occasions, "But never underestimate the smarts of a brown trout."

He added, "Nothing brings a person closer to the spirit of the earth than fishing."

Keegan didn't think there was anyone in the world who knew more about fishing than his grandpa. Before he had retired, he had been a fishing guide all over the Northwest. He had written several books on fly-fishing, his specialty, and had even been featured on a local TV fishing show for several seasons before the show had run its course. He had told Keegan one warm summer's day when they were out for an afternoon of fishing.

"Figure out what you want to do in life Keegan and then find a way to get paid to do it. That's the secret of life. So many people go through their life trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. Just don't make sense."

Keegan pondered these words of wisdom and thought to himself.

"Not only is Grandpa Mack the best fisherman in the world but he's got a lot of other smarts as well."



Keegan felt very proud his grandpa was confiding such words of wisdom in him, and him just a kid and all. When Keegan's 10th birthday came around, he and Grandpa Mack had driven over to Silver City in his grandad's old pickup truck to Smittys Tackle Store. Grandpa bought Keegan a brand new Redington Crosswater rod with a Shimona Sedona reel. Keegan couldn't believe it. Afterwards, they went for pancakes, fritters and shakes at grandpa's favorite diner.

The next day, which was overcast with a threat of drizzle, they loaded their gear into the pickup truck along with Keegan's new rod and reel, some sandwiches, a couple of cans of soda and a thermos of coffee for Grandpa Mack and headed up the highway. Keegan was beside himself with excitement. Not only was he going to try out his new birthday gift, Grandpa Mack was finally taking him to his "secret fishing spot". They drove up the highway a bit, parallel with the stream. They passed the community swimming hole, drove by the abandoned gas station at Hwy 6 and Polliver Road, then stopped at a rusty, sagging farm gate in the property with the old red wheat silo that was also sagging. Keegan had commented on this and his grandpa had said.

"Everything sags as you get older Keegan. Just a fact of life."

Closing the gate behind them, they drove down a dusty gravel road, until they came across several willow trees that sat on the edge of the stream. The water looked cool and inviting. A breeze had come up from the north and was ruffling the surface of the stream. It looked the perfect fishing spot. They hauled their gear out of the truck and set up beside the river under one of the trees. Once Grandpa Mack had rigged Keegan's new rod, they had a discussion about flies, water temperature and some other serious fishing matters and then Grandpa Mack said to Keegan.

"Let's sit down for a few minutes. I want to share something with you."

Keegan looked at his grandpa curiously. They sat down in their folding chairs, Grandpa Mack leaning towards Keegan with a twinkle in his eye.

"Just before you were born Keegan, I almost caught the largest brown trout I have ever seen. I was trying out a new fly and suddenly, wham!" He snapped his fingers, "My line took off, almost pulling me over into the water. Well, I played that fish for about twenty minutes – had a couple of glimpses of him but he was a cunning critter and he finally made his escape. That was the last I saw of my fly too. Over the last twelve or so years, I've hooked him a couple of times but he always got away from me. This guy is really smart and he never goes for the same fly twice. Never. I call him Big Grey. The couple of glimpses I've had of him, he's an unusual looking fish. He has patches of grey on the top of his body. So today, I'm going to try and introduce you to Big Grey. He likes to hang around this part of the stream and who knows, this may be your lucky day."

Keegan looked at his grandpa and grinned.

"Well, lets get to it grandpa."

"Okay, but just remember young feller, brown trout are harder to catch than rainbow, brook or cutthroat trout or - a mosquito at the north pole for that matter."

Big Grey was nowhere to be seen that day or any other day over the next twelve months and just after Keegan's eleventh birthday, Grandpa Mack died. Keegan didn't think anything could pain so much. He felt like a big chunk had been taken out of him. His mom, Pricilla, his dad Walt and Grandma Cassie did their best to console him but things were never the same with his grandpa gone.

A few weeks after Grandpa Mack's funeral, Keegan's mom and dad suggested they go out for the day. The weather was warm and Uncle Charlie said it was a great day for a family swim and a picnic, maybe a bit of fishing. Grandma Cassie and Pricilla with help from Keegan's younger sister Mattie packed a big picnic basket, Walt loaded up the family van with all the gear and they headed off up the road to the swimming hole. There were plenty of shade trees and when they arrived they managed to snag a picnic table down by the small sandy beach under one of the trees. Grandma Cassie loved to swim and spent a lot of time in the water with Mattie who was just learning. Keegan's mom and dad relaxed in their



chairs, dozing and reading in the shade. Uncle Charlie decided to take Keegan upstream a bit to do some fishing. After a while with no bites they figured it time to quit. The day was too hot to bring any fish out of the cool shade at the banks of the river. So they packed up their gear and ambled back to the swimming hole. Keegan had decided to join his grandma and sister in the pool when his grandmother suddenly called out.

“Oh no! I’ve lost my bracelet.”

Keegan’s mom and dad got up from their chairs and came over to the edge of the water.

“What’s the matter Cassie?” called out Keegan’s mom.

“My bracelet, the one Mack gave me on our 50th wedding anniversary. It’s gone off my wrist.”

“Where? When? Just now?” called Uncle Charlie

“I don’t know,” wailed Cassie. “I just noticed it missing from my wrist.”



On the 50th wedding anniversary of Keegan’s grandparents, Mack had given Cassie a bracelet made of semi-precious stones he had mined himself up in the Klondike during a short-lived stint as a prospector. He had cut and polished the gems himself and made into a bracelet with a silver chain that Cassie had fallen in love with from the minute that Mack had placed it on her wrist. She refused to take it off, even the one time they had gone through airport security on a two week vacation to Hawaii.

Keegan called out. “Grandma, I have my diving mask in my bag. Let me get it and I’ll see if I can find your bracelet.”

“Oh bless you Keegan. Please see if you can.”

Uncle Charlie, Walt and a few other men waded into the water and jiggled their feet around covering most of the swimming pond. As a result of their jiggling though, the water got churned up and Keegan couldn’t see a darned thing. After an hour or so, they gave up. Priscilla put her arm around Cassie and consoled her and Keegan gave her a big hug promising to bike down to the swimming hole each day until he found it.

“The water’s too murky now Grandma. Tomorrow morning, it’ll be a lot clearer and I bet I’ll find it for you.”

Grandma Cassie gave Keegan a sad smile and patted him on the arm.

“You’re a good boy Keegan. You’d make Mack proud.”

The next morning when Keegan awoke, it was pouring rain. He put on his rain slicker, wheeled his bike out of the garage and pedaled off to the swimming hole anyway. When he got there, the water level had risen and there was a strong current running in what had yesterday been a calm pond. He stood at the edge of the water shaking his head, wondering at the vagaries of life. First, he and grandma lose grandpa, now grandma loses her precious bracelet. Keegan wondered what would be next.



Summer came to an end and though there had been the occasional foray down to the pond to find the bracelet, it was nowhere to be found. Life went on in the Clark family and Keegan gradually began coming to terms with the loss of his grandpa. Every now and then he thought about Grandpa Mack, Big Grey and his grandma's bracelet.

A series of thunderstorms rolled across the countryside in early fall and the stream flooded in parts, turning the fields into swamps. Eventually, the rain stopped, the water receded and the stream returned to normal. Keegan decided to take a bike ride up to Grandpa Mack's secret fishing hole. He finished off his chores, got an OK and a "be careful" from his mom, got his fishing gear together along with a few new ties he had created and set off the way he remembered his grandpa had taken him. He reached the gate and with a bit of struggle, got it open enough to get his bike through. Closing the gate behind him, he rode down the now muddy road to the willow trees. He carefully assembled his rod, laying out his flies on an old piece of board. He did an "eeny, meeny miny mo", to select a fly.

He had just made his first cast when a movement in the water a few feet away, under an overhang, caught his eye. He laid his rod down and walked over to the edge of the river bank. He lay down and peered over the edge. In the shallow water under the overhang was the biggest trout he had ever seen. He stared at it, goggled eyed. But, there was something wrong. Then he noticed blood seeping from one of its gills. Keegan got to his feet and walked back to where the stream bank met the water. He waded in and made his way down to the overhang, holding

on to some rocks poking out from the bank. He reached the spot where the trout was feebly moving in the still water. Even though he had made a few splashes, it didn't move away.

"Weird." thought Keegan. Then he muttered.

"Hey, that doesn't look good. It looks injured."

He wondered what one did with an injured fish. That was when he noticed the grey patches on its back.

"Oh heck. It's Big Grey." Keegan breathed.

Wading out of the water, he scrambled up the bank to his bag and fumbled around for his cell phone. It had been a present from his mom and dad on his twelfth birthday with strict limits on its usage but to be used any time in an emergency. Well, Keegan figured, this was one of those "any times". He hit his dad's number and when he answered, said breathlessly.

"Dad, Dad, I'm up at grandpa's secret fishing hole and there's this giant fish and I think it's injured and I don't know what to do." He paused, listening.

"What do you mean you don't know where grandpa's secret fishing place is? He never told you?"

Another pause.

"Okay dad. Just come up the road to Highway 6. You know where that big old red barn is? Yeah, yeah. Near the old gas station. There's a gate there. Open the gate and follow the road down towards the willow trees. Yeah, yeah. And bring Uncle Charlie – and hurry".

Closing his phone, Keegan climbed back down into the river. The trout was still there, moving very feebly. Blood was still running out of one its gills. It seemed forever until Keegan heard the engine of his dad's truck. He waded out of the water, up the bank as his dad and Uncle Charlie pulled up.

"What do you have young feller?" asked Uncle Charlie.

"More to the point," said his dad. "When did your grandpa tell you about this place?"

"Well dad, you were never into fishing and Grandpa was kind of sad about that so he kept this spot secret. When I started getting interested in fishing, he decided to share it with me."

"I'll be darned." His dad said shaking his head. "So what do we have here?"

"Grandpa had hooked this huge trout about fifteen years ago but it got away." Answered Keegan. "Which is OK cause Grandpa was into catch and release. He got a couple more hits over the years but he said brown trout as they got older got

more cunning. He called it Big Grey because of its funny coloring. After my chores this morning, I decided to come down here - I was kinda thinking of Grandpa – and just when I started casting, I saw this big fish in the stream in the shallows. C'mon this way and I'll show you."

All three of them scrambled down the bank, into the water and slipped and slid along the bank to where the fish was still motionless in the water.

"Well, I'll be darned." said Uncle Charlie this time. "That is the biggest darn fish I have ever seen. You say that's Big Grey?"

"I don't think there would be too many fish this size and with that coloring." said Keegan's dad. "Not in one place. Is that blood coming out of one of its gills?"

"Yeah, I think its injured dad. What can we do?"

"Well, that's sure a head scratcher. What dya reckon Charlie?"

Uncle Charlie looked at the fish.

"If it was a sick dog or a sick cow or a land animal of some kind, I could do a diagnosis. I've never had to deal with a sick fish before."

"But Uncle Charlie, aren't veterinarians supposed to know about all kinds of animal? And isn't a fish an animal?"

Uncle Charlie scratched his head again, thinking.

"Well, we got a big old fish tank back in the barn. We could fill it with water. I think I have a pump and an oxygenator. We could get a couple other fellas to help lift it and get it back. No promises. Besides, I think a brown trout that old wouldn't be very good eating. What dya think Walt?"

Keegan's dad nodded thoughtfully.

"Let's give it go."

So that's what they did. It took five of them plus Keegan to manhandle the tank into the river and then slide an unresisting Big Grey into it. Once they got the tank on the back of the truck, they filled it with river water and Uncle Charlie got the pump working and they drove very slowly back to the barn. Big Grey was still moving feebly and Keegan was saying all kinds of prayers under his breath. Especially a few to Grandpa who Keegan was sure was looking down and giving them all two thumbs up.



That afternoon, Uncle Charlie expanded his veterinarian horizons. After an examination down Big Greys gullet, he determined the cause of his injury and his

discomfort was a little silver bracelet made of shiny gem stones. How Big Grey found it and why he swallowed it was anyone's guess. Uncle Charlie managed to hook it out with one of his veterinary instruments. Keegan reckoned it must have looked like some kind of insect to Big Grey. Uncle Charlie was able to close up the cut under Big Grey's gill with some kind of staples. He then pumped some antibiotic into the big fish. They loaded the tank back on the truck, drove back to the stream and after a lot more heaving and grunting, got the tank down to the water, slowly tipping it over so Big Grey could slide out. A flick of his tail, and he was gone.

"Well, that's gratitude for you." said Clark, one of Grandpa Mack's old friends. "Aint gonna see a fish that big again for a long time."

"Keegan looked up into the sky. He gave a thumbs-up and said under his breath.

"Thanks Grandpa."

That evening, the family sat around the dinner table. After everyone was seated, Mattie was given the task of presenting a wrapped package to Grandma Cassie. With everyone looking at her expectantly, she opened it up. When she saw the bracelet, she began to cry softly. She looked around the table.

"Where on earth did you find this? Who found it? Oh my goodness. I just cannot believe this."

Keegan grinned at his grandma, got up from his chair and put an arm around her.

"Grandma, in a kind of a way, it came back to you through Grandpa."

Then he went on to tell the story of Grandpa's secret fishing hole, which was no longer a secret and how the bracelet was found and how Uncle Charlie, retired veterinarian, maybe saved Big Grey's life and finally how he thought Grandpa was looking down at them all with a big smile on his face.

No one ever saw Big Grey again.

