

Fishing

by Ian Anderson

Twelve, going on twelve and a quarter. Sitting on the bank, inexpertly flicking line into river. Thick, light brown hair hanging low over his eyes; dark tee-shirt; faded jeans round long, slim legs. Alone and stomach-kickingly beautiful. I swing off the bike and push it casually nearer – and make out the writing on his front:

IF YOU CAN'T READ THIS, YOU AREN'T CLOSE ENOUGH

Hmm. I cast round for an opening line. “Does it work?” I ask.

He looks up, startled. I've broken his concentration.

“What?”

I point helpfully.

“Oh!” Chin tucks down to chest as he follows the direction of my finger, to come back up immediately, his lips widening into a smile. He laughs.

“Not often,” but, eyebrows rising, doing a Frankie Howard, “Who knows.”

From the bottom of my eyes I follow blue-jeaned legs down to trainered feet. New Balance, huh! Expensive tastes – or a proud father, perhaps, recognizing the future athlete in him; obvious, already, to me, a connoisseur of budding Seb Coes.

“Caught anything yet?” I lay the bike down against a nearby tree-stump, near enough to signal friendship but not so near as to encroach on any territorial imperatives. Or to remind him of parental warnings.

“Caught anything – you must be joking. A two-pound boot, is all. Won't get into the Guinness Book of Records with that!”

Oh-ho. A wit. To boot. Perhaps a half-volley back? “I wouldn't carp at that, myself.”

He groans in mock dismay – but smiling and with another look.

I sit down and pick a blade of grass to chew – as a good non-smoking

smoker. And watch for a minute or two as he goes on fishing, his concentration back, but with no improvement in technique. Until the itch to help has to be scratched.

“Look. Do you mind if I...?” and I gesture towards the rod.

“What?” A touch of suspicion in the frown. I quickly explain.

“Sure.” The smile's back.

I show him, return the rod and coax, oh so carefully and, of course, enjoyably, a slower, lighter touch from slim boy arms. No slouch, him; a quick learner who is soon dropping his line more or less on target.

“Hey, that's pretty good, em... What is your name, by the way?”

“John. What's yours?” Much happier, now – relaxed.

“Tim.”

“Hi.”

“Hi. How long you been fishing, then?”

“My dad gave me this for my birthday three weeks ago.”

Going on twelve and a twelfth.

“Ah.” Pause. “How do you like it?”

“It's O.K. I just wish I could bloody catch something, that's all. He sighs with exasperation, and I'm thinking, *Stupid bloody fish! What's wrong with them, passing up such an attractive lure?*

I lie down on my stomach and watch for another minute or two and he casts line, I cast looks which he notices and, sometimes, returns, with, finally, another smile. A bite? Which suddenly, explosively, is reflected by reality and he is on his feet, reeling in a jumping, flashing bar of silver. A brief flurry of activity and it's lying there, wriggling almost as much as John.

“Look! I got one! Look! Geez, a whopper!”

What indeed. Cross my heart. 4/5 pounder.

“Hey! I'll bet there are lots more. I bet I get another one soon.” He re-baits his hook as I watch with baited breath.

And so on; until passing time calms excited small boy nerves and we start chatting again. John lives in Ashburnham Grove, goes to Mountjoy, likes it, supports West Ham (aren't they just, though!), has a best friend called Tommy (No, he doesn't – fish, that is), hates Jammy (maths), once got over 75,000 on Space Invaders, is going to Sète in July, camping (holiday plans mentally rearranged) and has seen all the Bond films. On his dad's video. Yeah?

“You want to come round some time and see some?”

“I'd love to.”

But not right now. Later.

For now I want to do something else. Very much so. So I gently place my right hand on John's left thigh. Warm, soft/hard. Nice: But what's this? A sudden silence. The one that got away? Wait – his left hand edges towards his trouser pocket, just above my hand. He straightens his legs and the hand slips into the pocket. Which movement leaves me, breathless, heart beating, with mine resting at the apex of those long, slim, terrifying legs.

Until suddenly he laughs and, under my fingers I feel the first, faint stirrings of interest. And he is putting down his rod and turning to me, eyes wide and bright, resting on his left elbow.

My voice is hollow. “What happened?”

A giggle. “You'll never believe it, but I thought you were trying to pick my pocket. I've got me bus fare home there!”

“You're nice,” he says, later, “I like you.” We had a great time at Sète, too.