

CUTBANK DOWN AND OUT IN ENNIS

Words:
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BETTER THAN TWO DECADES have come and gone since Rick threw his last pass as a college quarterback, but he could still generate impressive velocity with that golden arm. To his credit, he simply walked down the road a few paces and began zinging rocks at a nearby fence post. The anger probably helped some, too.

Brown also walked down the road, but in the opposite direction and for different reasons. Hands in pockets and head down, presumably he was looking for a crack in the earth into which he could disappear. Rick's truck had lurched to a very definitive stop less than a mile outside of Ennis, MT, and Brown's answer to the question, "You did put diesel in, right?" had been the wrong one.

Shawn and I took a couple of beers out of the cooler and mostly tried to stay out of the way until the situation settled a bit. Any hope of an evening session on the Beaverhead was shot, but that was the least of our troubles. We needed a mechanic. On a Sunday afternoon. In Ennis, MT. Right.

The third towing company we called picked up.

"Yep," said the voice on the other end. "No problem. We're only a couple of minutes away."

We asked about repair shops.

"Well no," the voice answered, "there aren't any mechanics on duty. The shop is closed until tomorrow. You know it's Sunday, right?"

Yeah, we knew.

"Sit tight," the voice said, "we'll be right there."

"We" turned out to be Cody and John, a couple of young locals who handled most of the towing calls for one of the shops in town. Broad-shouldered and cheerful, they clearly enjoyed their work, teasing each other as they wrestled various hooks and harnesses into place. The way they threw the towing gear around reminded me of cowboys manhandling

livestock in the small-town rodeos I occasionally attended with my kids back home in north Georgia.

"All right," Cody said after Rick's truck was locked down, "we're good. And me and John have been talking. We think we have a deal to get you rolling today so you won't have to wait for the shop to open up tomorrow. If you're interested."

We were interested.

Cody explained that he happened to have a set of keys to the garage and had nothing better to do that day. He and John would be glad to pull the truck in and fix it themselves. They figured they could have us on our way to Dillon and the Beaverhead before sunset. The charge would be \$250 cash.

"And," John added, "two fifths of Wild Turkey."

Sideways glances and raised eyebrows were exchanged, but Rick didn't hesitate.

«RIGHT»

"On our way to fish for Atlantic salmon on Quebec's Bonaventure River, we got a flat in the middle of a lonely gravel road without a spare. We flagged down the first passerby and he drove us to a gas station where we got the tire fixed and returned to put it on. Danny Bird, Susan Rockrise (in head net) and the stranger did the honors. We arrived at the river a bit late, but still caught a 22-pound fresh-run fish and were thankful for the happy ending."
Photo: Val Atkinson



“Done.”

Cody dropped us off at the Long Branch Saloon and said he would call us when the truck was ready. Brown, visibly relieved that his error might turn out to be something less than catastrophic, started a tab and refused all offers of recompense. He may not have been able to take back his screw-up, but he could at least get us drunk. Beers were poured, emptied and poured again. A few random notes of Jimmy Buffett trickled through the general din of the place. Somebody ordered shots of whiskey. Rick allowed that, what the hell, the Beaverhead probably wasn't fishing all that great anyway. Somebody ordered another round of shots. At some point two shiny new bottles of Wild Turkey appeared on our table.

Someone once wrote that failure is always a better story than success. And it's true that my most vivid memories aren't of the fishing trips where I just showed

up and caught a bunch of fish. There are a few of those, but the trips I remember, the ones I tend to think about during idle moments, are those where plans went right off the rails and the day was lost and people were pissed and somebody wound up throwing rocks at a fence post somewhere in the middle of Montana. I remember when the new guy put high octane in the diesel truck; when my buddy stepped in the wrong place on the trail in the Smokies and the yellow jackets that boiled out of the ground left us to fish the rest of the day through tears and clenched teeth; when our canoe rolled on a submerged rock an hour from the takeout on the Watauga. In January. I remember when that line of heavy storms daisy-chained over our campsite at 2 a.m. in the Snowbird Mountains and we spent the night cringing at the shotgun crack of splintering wood as limbs thudded to the ground around our tents.

◀BELOW▶

“Not long after I moved to northern Idaho, I bought a '78 Ford F-150 from a family friend for a song. It was meant to be my firewood-getter, my dirt-hauler—and little else. But damn if I didn't fall in love with the rumble that old V8 would make. I've since moved on to something more economical, with 4WD for the winter months and the mountain roads. I'm not sure the view down a dusty country road will ever feel quite the same behind any other windshield.”

Photo: Elias Carlson



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If we fished only for the prospect of catching fish, we probably wouldn't do it very long or with much enthusiasm.

I'm now packing for this year's excursion to Montana. It's our annual trip with pretty much the same itinerary every year. The fishing is always good although the catching can vary. It's mostly the same group of guys and we fish mostly the same stretches of the same rivers. We stay in the same sketchy motels and eat at the same dives. But there's always room for a deviation or two from the norm, space for new traditions to develop. For example, these days we always make time to stop in Ennis for a round or three at the Long Branch. "Diesel" Brown, as he's now known, is on the hook for the tab. ☞

◀BELOW▶

A rainstorm passes over a roadside pond east of Ennis, MT.
Photo: Arian Stevens

