



The Brookie on the Back Deck

By Lou Bendrick

This past summer, Uncle Wally, who had never played a practical joke in his 79 years, caught a fat trout and dumped it into his wife's architectural "pond" at their house in northern Vermont. The pond, a deep square box perched upon the sun deck, was trimmed out with lily pads and awaiting a fresh shipment of goldfish to swim through its 600 gallons (the previous batch had not survived the winter).

Upon Wally's confession of the piscine prank, Aunt Anne canceled her order of goldfish, fearing they would become the trout's dinner. When the alleged trout then did not show himself for several weeks, she concluded her husband to be a liar at best and senile at worst. Eventually, though, she saw the trout rise. Then, because she could not catch the fish with a net, and because she is a big-hearted lover of just about every live creature, she spent the summer feeding him handfuls of pellets known as Fish Rise. We—family, friends and dinner guests—all fed the trout during cocktail hour, gingerly at first, careful not to spook the fish and hopeful to catch a glimpse of him. We became markedly less tentative when we watched him rise to the pellets with gusto while my daughter swished a naked plastic doll through his lily pads.

As the summer wore on, all of us, but mostly Aunt Anne, grew fretful. By late August we were engaged in a near-constant debate over How to Save the Trout. We resisted the tendency to name the trout—there was still a chance it might end up as dinner, and creatures with names are never as toothsome. The question was how to retrieve the fish in the least stressful manner and release it back into the wild before winter, for the pond was too shallow to protect him (as the first batch of goldfish had

evidently proved). We were also concerned that he was on the way to becoming too fat and spoiled to survive in the wild again.

But while everyone was worrying about getting him out of captivity and back to his rightful home, I worried about what sort of world he was being returned to. Although Uncle Wally remained interested in eating his finny guest, none of us really expected to, and not because of his quasi-pet status. No one was going to grill that fish in foil because his (or her) flesh was likely poisoned. Vermont is one of 21

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states that has issued statewide advisories warning about high mercury concentrations in inland freshwater lakes and rivers. Although it is known as forward- and green-thinking state, Vermont has been unable to protect itself from in-state and interstate mercury, which rains into the lakes and streams from coal-fired power plants. Those plants, particularly in the industrial Midwest and Canada, have dodged regulations that would have obliged them to reduce the quantity of mercury spewing from their stacks and drifting downwind.

Returning the trout to his home would be a small good thing—a tiny wrong righted in the natural kingdom—yet we were surely releasing him into a

doom soup. Thanks to the backward-thinking Bush administration, which is easing mercury emission regulations, this soup is likely to thicken.

For a while, several family members tried to lure the trout out of the pond with a dry fly—a parachute Adams was a favored but unsuccessful pattern. (Picture Cousin Lisa, in a cocktail dress and heels, casting into the deck-top tank.) But the wily fish would not be caught. Proposals were bandied about—use a net, drain the pond, electrify the damn thing—and rejected. It occurred to me more than once that we should eat the fish because we were all as mad as hatters anyway.

The summer waned and leaves started to turn. It was, fittingly, Uncle Wally who finally caught the fish, using a dry fly that looked much like a Fish Rise pellet. The chunky brook trout was quickly transferred to a bucket, into which anguished Aunt Anne had preemptively dumped a little "stress fluid," a sort of Paxil for strung-out fish. Evidently, Anne added a bit too much; the trout immediately went belly-up. She righted him a few times, and he recovered. When they released him a few minutes later into the big pond down the road, he simply swam away without looking back.

Aunt Anne was disappointed, I think, in the same way Theodore Roethke was when he wrote the poem "Meadow Mouse." In the poem, the narrator expresses dismay that a mouse he has been caring for escapes, "To run under the hawk's wing/Under the eye of the great owl watching from the elm-tree/To live by courtesy of the shrike, the snake, the tom-cat."

Or in this case, to swim away and live by courtesy of the angler, the river otter, and mercury from the sky.

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