

It happened to me. That thing that happens to someone else. Usually I would read about it, eyes glaze over as I imagined the straining rod repeatedly bending and quietly mutter to myself '*you jammy bugger*'.

I knew it could happen, but I wasn't prepared for it happening...

A mini-flood had finally broken the summer drought. Within a couple of days, the website confirmed the gushing river height had dropped back and by Saturday all fisheries were catching fish, lots of fish. You could imagine the energy along the riverbanks. '*Monday will be perfect*' I thought as I excitedly re-packed all my kit into the big bag.

Two rods, two reels, waders, boots, net and a range of tips, lines and flies. Before each trip, I re-stocked the small box of flies that snugly resides in my waders. Carefully selecting the squad like a national team manager. Thoughtful consideration of the predicted conditions and what that means for my starting line-up. Big Willie Gunn at Centre-Half and the racy Sun Ray Shadow up front. That type of thing all adding to the anticipation.

'Have a nice time. We'll be just fine' said my wife with an understanding smile as I left after Sunday lunch. She got it, it wasn't her thing, but she understood what it meant to me. I tried to keep it to myself but she saw through my veil, it overwhelmed my mind the day before. I waved as I drove away, sunglasses hiding the excitement in my eyes. IYKYK

At Dyce though, it was unexpectedly pouring so heavily that the passengers sprinted for the terminal. My feet shuffled by the carousel as I waited for the big bag nervously studying the waves bouncing off the tarmac outside. Still raining thirty minutes later as I hurriedly closed the cottage door behind me and headed straight up the wooden hills.

Shaken by the alarm on my phone, I blinked before realising where I was. I stopped the noise and immediately opened my browser to check the river levels. It had risen by 18 inches at Ballater, *shit only a few hours before it reaches us*. The Feugh was flooding too. I knew my best chance would be before this deluge inundated the river, so it wasn't long before I was heading East, hastily grabbing lunch in Banchory as I passed through.

A quick coffee with my host whilst I set up the rod, I was keen to get going. Very aware that last night's rainfall was rapidly funnelling down the valley, I made small talk but my mind was downstream. I was to start at the end of the beat which suited me. I knew the floating bank pool well and soon I was confidently covering the main lies with my Red Frances. There was regular activity and I anticipated the line tightening with every cast, even imagining it but despite the presence of a good number of fish, nothing grabbed my fly.

Feeling slightly annoyed, I contemplated fishing the pool again with a different pattern but there was an angler just starting on the opposite bank, so I headed up to the Pantoch. As I carefully edged down the slope, I was greeted by two simultaneous splashes about a third of the way across. I hastily pulled some line from the reel and, led by my left hand, propelled it towards the far bank. It felt more effective than attractive but did the job and the light green line swung like a hyper-active clock hand. I was soon covering the exact area that the

fish had jumped, willing one of them to take a dislike to the fly. *C'mon you beauty*. But it didn't happen.

I retraced to the neck of the pool and took a seat on the grass where I engaged my mind into sport mode and analysed my tactics. They were there, that was sure. The conditions were ok, not too bright and the spate hadn't reached us yet. 'What now? Bigger or smaller? Lighter or deeper?'. I just couldn't get them interested - the story of my season.

I was efficiently adjusting my set-up, as I had done so many times that year when I felt the change. A rumbling sound announcing the arrival. The glassy, white surface changed to a brown one littered with leaves and you could feel the pulse of the swelling river. Such a transformation as the chaos of this mini tsunami hit, like a burst dam. It felt strange to see this surge when it was a pleasant and dry morning, but that's how the system works. After a few minutes and the odd swear word I plodded my way back to the boiling kettle in the hut, all the early spring gone from my boots.

Nothing in nature is impossible but I knew the odds of catching had now widened though they should improve significantly once the river began to normalise. The following day I would be fishing further upstream, quite a lot further so I messaged the ghillie to check how things were, knowing the beat was well above one of the main flooded tributaries. A promising response informed me it was already dropping and even better, I had been invited to fish the last few hours of today, as nobody would be there.

Was the river half-full or half-empty? I'm a half-full kind of angler so after lunch I gave it another go, as more a courtesy than anything else. This volume of water would disturb the fish and they would only settle when the river height started to drop. After a tactful interval I thanked the ghillie, put my rod on the bonnet and slowly headed off along the A93.

Parked again and now standing by my car, I looked at the familiar, inky pool. Thought back to the iridescent salmon I had caught back in April. After so many days, easier measured in weeks, of nothing it had finally happened, and I had got my season off the mark. There was nothing splashing on that cold, dull, still day. Wintery fingertips still clung on. Such a contrast to today as the swifts zoomed up and down the colourful beat. I decided to change the headwear I was wearing. My lucky cap, that should do the trick.

Although the water was high it was thankfully running clear and I attached a bigger fly, deep orange in colour. I decided to start half-way down this special pool, just opposite the wooden bench and stepped gently in but only as deep as my shins. I started to roll out the line and within a few casts I was unleashing the fly so it reached most of the way across then swung nicely back to my bank.

I was content. Actually I was truly happy, and probably wore a faint smile though often whilst fishing I know that I pinch my lips together in concentration. Sometimes a random tune looped between my ears as I mentally moved the jumbled jigsaw pieces of my world back into place.

Soon we were in helix-like sync, rhythmic motion. My bpm aligned with the tempo of my casts which followed the pace of the current. The orchestral river with a silver conductor. Consumed by the imaginary symphony, I calmly drifted until a sudden kettle drum roll and clash of symbols jolted me, tugging at my right arm.

Instantly under the spotlight and I didn't fluff my lines. *Don't strike, let what's on the end set the hook then gradually lift the rod tip.* After a couple of seconds of modest wrestling, the stubborn head-shaking fish surged away, initially turning on the surface then rapidly pulling line off the reel as it sought to escape.

I was strangely calm despite the adrenal shot. It felt like a rehearsal, no audience to stress me. I relished the thrusting run-around then gradually coaxed her towards me with almost constant pressure, using the rod-tip to cushion the resistance. She lay on her side in the shallows, temporarily tamed. Autumn colours to match the September trees. I unhooked the Snaelda, created an indelible image I would look back on in the future and with a gentle push she headed upstream, towards her spawning finale.

Got one. Blank avoided. It wouldn't make too much difference to my enjoyment, but it is always nice to be able to send to the family, almost in justification of my absence. They don't get too excited by yet another mid-stream image of a river.

Returning to the same spot, a euphoric endorphin warmth washed over me. Although my right hand still trembled, calmness descended again prompting a peaceful grin. I looked around me, like I had transported from another planet, absorbing nature as if never seeing her before. In time, releasing the line and picking up where I had left off. Everything the same.

There is simply nothing like the experience of hooking a salmon, it shouldn't really be possible and yet as I rolled out the fly it happened again, and again. Ninety minutes later, dusk approaching as I reached the end of the pool. I wound in and slowly stepped back to sit on a large, grey rock. Rod beside me, elbows on knees, I looked once more at the familiar pool. Only this time it was intimate, we had shared something special. Everything different.

I spent fifteen days pursuing my first salmon that year. Sounds desperate unless you get it, then you really get it. For me, each visit to a river is like a safari, sometimes they are there and sometimes they aren't, but it is a beautiful, natural place to be. And sometimes, it happens. You are a part of the cheetah's heart-pumping success. And sometimes, it happens. You catch as many in a couple of hours as the rest of the year put together.