

# CutBank

---

Volume 1  
Issue 41 *CutBank* 41

Article 7

---

Winter 1994

## Kiss the Fish

Michael Lancaster

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Lancaster, Michael (1994) "Kiss the Fish," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 41 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss41/7>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

Michael Lancaster

# Kiss the Fish

The boy, Jesse, rides in back with the fishing poles, huddling close to the cab to keep out of the wind. Tiny shaved flakes of dry April snow drift slowly, hardly falling, on lazy currents of air; the sun, breaking through the clouds, shines into the canyon and turns the flakes silver. Jesse's father, Walt, drives in the loose gravel at the side of the road to keep off the washboard while his best friend Nick sips a morning beer and watches the creek.

Nick spots movement in the tall grass on the far side of the stream—the white flick of a fawn's tail—and he's relieved at the chance to break the silence.

"Deer," Nick says. "Two of them. Whitetail."

Walt stops the truck and raps on the glass to get the boy's attention. He gestures toward the deer. Jesse looks in that direction, his face blank, his mouth open. Today is the last of three days of fishing, and Jesse still hasn't caught one.

Walt shouts so the boy can hear him through the glass. He jabs his finger toward the creek, but the boy shakes his head.

"I tell you, Nick, I can't believe him sometimes. Now watch. He'll say he saw them."

Walt rolls down his window and leans his head out.

"See those deer?"

"Yeah."

"How many?"

Jesse's mouth hangs open again. He wears his Dodgers cap back on his head, his hair sheared close on the sides with a tuft on top that falls across his forehead. He looks back toward the creek.

"Three," he says.

Walt pulls his head in and gives Nick a look, raised eyebrows and pursed lips, an expression Nick has seen a hundred times in bars when a drunk says something Walt finds asinine. Nick shrugs. What difference does it make if the boy can't spot deer? he thinks. He's tempted to tell Walt to ease off, but he doesn't want to make things worse. Walt pops the clutch and Jesse has to hang on. The deer lift their heads and stare as the truck throws gravel and rumbles away.

Walt has his son for a week this year, spring vacation. He'd called Nick the night before the boy was to arrive, told him he'd finally figured out what he could do for Jesse that the boy's step-father couldn't: teach him to fish. "Not crappie or perch or whatever they catch in California," Walt said. "I'm talking rainbows, German browns."

Once, when Walt was still married to Betty, he and Nick had taken Jesse fishing, but the boy had been distracted by chipmunks and anthills. Didn't have the patience to pursue something he couldn't see. That was five years ago, when Jesse had been a delicate little boy with his mother's features.

"It'll be different this time," Walt had promised. "The boy's got fishing in his blood. He just doesn't know it yet."

A dusting of snow covers the trail down to the water, unmarred by footprints of other fishermen. They put Jesse on the best hole, a smooth stretch of deep water behind a huge boulder. The rocks in this section of the

creek are grey, round, rising from the dark water like the haunches of elephants. On either side of the stream the canyon walls rise sharply, vast talus slopes of grey rock fanning out beneath the evergreens that cling to the ridge-tops.

"Throw it to the end of the pool, then start reeling," Walt says. "If you don't get a strike after five or six casts, move downstream."

Walt walks up the creek to the next hole. Nick heads the opposite direction, the boy between them. Jesse, left alone, throws a couple short casts before a loop tangles his reel. He's pulling on the ball of line when Nick hooks a fish.

"Got one." Nick's pole arcs toward the stream, the tip jerking downward. The trout breaks water trying to shake loose the lure, then makes a short run with the current. Nick reels in steadily, gaining line as the fish tires, bringing it to shore. He removes the hooks and holds the fish so Walt and Jesse can see before he puts it back in the cold water. The fish works its gills, then wriggles out of Nick's hand.

"How big?" Jesse shouts.

"Fourteen, maybe fifteen," Nick answers. "Rainbow."

Walt works farther upstream. A few more casts, then he scrambles halfway up the bank where he sits on a rock and takes a beer from his vest. Walt raises the can in a kind of salute, and Nick nods and points at Jesse, whose line is still out of the water, the tangle grown to the size of a fist. Nick rests his pole on the rocks and goes to help the boy.

"Jeez, this stupid reel," Jesse says when Nick takes his rod.

"You have to make sure you don't have a loop when you cast," Nick says. "If you cast with a loop, this is what



you get."

"Did that fish fight a lot?" Jesse asks.

"It was okay."

"Man, I hope I catch one."

"You will," Nick says. "You just have to keep at it. And listen to what your dad and I tell you."

Nick holds one section of line apart from the rest and pulls the lure through a loop. He works at it until the tangle is gone and gives the rod back to Jesse.

"Now, I want you to check it every time you cast to make sure there's no loop," Nick says. "You know what I mean?"

Jesse nods. He examines his reel before he casts back into the hole.

Nick looks up the stream at Walt, whose head is tilted back beneath the beer can. If he were Walt, Nick thinks, he'd be giving the boy these lessons himself. If he were Walt, well, he tries to imagine how it would feel to be in Walt's situation, to have a son you saw once a year, somebody else's son for fifty-one weeks out of fifty-two. You might tell him to check for loops in his line, but he'd forget by the next time you saw him. You didn't know when he was small that you'd only have a few years to make your mark, so you didn't use the time like you could have, and then the boy and his mother are gone, down to California for a fresh start where she finds a new man, a man you've never met, who gets to sleep with your wife and raise your son.

Walt hops from rock to rock, coming toward them, his pole in one hand, a beer in the other. He points across the stream toward the steep cliffs of the far canyon wall, the pines and firs clinging to the rocky slope, spires of gray rock rising from the green.

"Hawk," Walt says, and they watch the black speck

spiral above the cliffs, growing smaller with each revolution.

"How can you tell?" Jesse asks.

"I don't know. You just can," Walt says. "Once you've seen enough of them." He raises his beer can, waggles it and takes a drink. "Eagles are bigger."

"Yeah, and sparrows are smaller," Nick says. He winks at Jesse and the boy sputters laughter.

"And turkeys wear funny haircuts and get their line tangled," Walt says.

"And they don't catch any fish," Nick says.

"Nope," Walt says. "Eagles, osprey, now those birds catch fish. Those are cool birds. But turkeys—"

"We eat turkeys," Nick says.

"And this one's getting nice and plump." Walt pokes Jesse in the ribs and holds him until the boy squirms away.

"Knock it off," Jesse says.

"Knock it off," mimics Walt. He drops into the pose of a fighter, towering over Jesse even in his crouch. He shuffles his feet, throws absurd punches at the sky, the ground.

"C'mon. Put 'em up. Put 'em up. Let's see what you've got."

Jesse finally laughs. He emulates his father's stance, raises his fists and dances at the water's edge. He steps backward each time Walt steps toward him, steps forward whenever Walt steps back.

"I'm gonna beat the crap out of both of you if you don't settle down," Nick says. "Are we here to fish or fight?"

"Fish," Jesse shouts.

"Fish," Walt says.

"All right, then," Nick says. "Let's get in the truck and go."

The clouds Walt insisted would be burned off by noon bunch thicker now, and the breeze bites stronger. At the next hole, they fish until Jesse breaks his line. Walt helps him tie on a new lure and they climb the bank to the truck and pile their gear in the back. Jesse stands next to the tailgate staring at the ground, swaying slightly, his mouth open.

"Getting cold, Jess?" Nick asks.

"Kind of."

"Here." Nick tosses him a pair of wool gloves. "Put these on."

The boy's lip shivers as he pulls on the gloves.

"Why don't you ride up front for a while," Nick says. Jesse climbs in and scoots next to his dad. It's tight with the three of them inside, Walt hunched over the wheel, Jesse in the middle, Nick's arm stretched behind the boy's neck.

"About time you caught a fish, don't you think?" Nick's voice is gruff, teasing. Jesse doesn't answer, but he grins like he's trying to think of something smart to say.

"So, you gonna kiss that fish when you catch it?" Nick asks.

He stares at the boy until Jesse smiles.

"No."

"What do you mean, 'No'? It's a rule, man. You gotta kiss your first fish of the season. Didn't you see me kiss that first one I caught the other day?"

"No." Jesse can't keep from laughing.

"Right before I turned him loose. I gave him a big smack on the lips. Right, Walt?"

"Everybody knows you have to kiss the first fish."

"You didn't kiss yours, Dad."

"What do you mean? Hell yes, I did. Anyway, if you



don't get your act together soon, you won't have to worry about it. You're in Montana now, son. If you can't catch a fish here, I don't know what's left. Where else can we go? Alaska?"

Walt laughs after he says this, and Jesse laughs along. "Seems like there were more fish to catch when I was a kid," Walt says. "I remember the first time my dad took me stream fishing, on Manastash Creek."

Nick has heard this story before.

"Dad had already filled his limit, so he started throwing fish across the stream for me to thread onto my stringer. He'd lob a brook trout onto the bank and I'd try to block its path to the water. I was down on my knees, smothering the fish against the deep grass with both hands. Just as I'd get one under control, another would come sailing over the water. I'd see a dark shape against the sun one second, then a fish would land flip-flopping on the bank. He was catching them as fast as I could string them. We took home two limits, fried them up with some butter and onions. Now everything's catch and release."

Walt stops as if the story needs no more explanation.

"How many did you catch that day?" Jesse asks.

"I don't know," Walt says. "It doesn't matter how many I caught. The point is there were more fish back then. Fishing was different."

They let Jesse off to fish a hole where the creek curves, tell him they'll drive the truck to the next wide spot. Nick watches through the rear window as Jesse, standing at the side of the road, reaches to unhook the lure from his rod.

"Oh, no," Nick says, laughing.

"What?"

"Take a look."



Walt stares into the rearview mirror, shakes his head and starts laughing too. The fingers of Jesse's right glove are hooked fast to the lure, treble barbs sunk into wool. Jesse tries to free the hooks without first removing his other glove, and soon both gloved hands are hooked to the lure at the end of the pole. "Jesus Christ," Walt says, stopping the truck. "I'd better go give him a hand. Why don't you get out here and fish your way back. At least one of us ought to have a line in the water."

Nick picks his way down the bank. He drags his lure through a deep hole at the edge of the stream, but his mind isn't on fish. It's strange, Nick thinks, how one thing leads to another and you wind up in places you could never have predicted. Once, years ago, when Walt and Nick and Betty were drinking after Jesse was in bed, it must have been the winter before Betty left, the conversation turned serious, and Walt made a solemn proclamation that if he and Betty were to die in a car crash, he'd want no one but Nick to take care of Jesse.

"Jesus, Walt," Betty had said. "Thanks for bringing everybody down. Why'd you have to say something like that?"

"We need to think ahead," he said. "You never know what might happen."

"And what if Nick doesn't want to be a daddy?" Betty said. "You ever stop to think about that?"

"You'd take him, wouldn't you Nicky?" Walt said.

Nick hesitated just long enough to make them all feel awkward before he said, "Of course I would!"

That was the last time the subject came up.

If things had worked out differently, Nick thinks, he might have been the one to marry Betty. When he and Walt used to stop at the restaurant for breakfast on their way out of town to go fishing or hunting, they'd sit at

the counter, dipping toast in their egg yolks, and each time Betty refilled their cups one of them would say something nice to her, competing a little, and she'd smile and linger a moment, rearrange the salt and pepper shakers, wipe down the counter. Afterwards, Nick and Walt would say how they'd like to get to know Betty, and how Betty sure seemed like a nice girl. But Walt asked her out first, simple as that. And Nick never did anything to interfere. Women came and went in Nick's life, but nothing serious, nothing permanent.

Nick quits the hole without a strike and heads back for the truck. He hopes Walt wasn't too sarcastic with the boy, half expects to see tears in Jesse's eyes. But Jesse lies stretched out on the seat like he's taking a nap, and Walt leans against the side of the truck.

"Here," Walt says, "I owe you some gloves. Had to cut them loose."

"Don't worry about it," Nick says. "They were getting old anyway."

Jesse gets out of the cab and apologizes to Nick.

"Sorry I ruined your gloves, Nick," he says.

"No problem," Nick says. "It's okay." And he pats Jesse's shoulder, twice, awkwardly.

The next time they stop, Nick lingers at the truck while Walt and Jesse disappear toward the stream. He gets a beer from the cooler, drinks a third of it, and stuffs two more in his vest. It feels good to be alone a few minutes.

Nick started this business about kissing the fish the first morning they went out. It was just something silly to say, something to lighten the mood. It's good for Jesse to see Walt being silly, he thinks. Outside of watching his language a little, Nick has tried to act as if Jesse weren't there, telling stupid jokes, singing songs with



lyrics based on road signs.

He made up the rule about kissing the fish to tease the boy, but the more he thinks about it, the more he likes the idea. He remembers a story he once read about a boy who goes bear hunting for the first time, and after the boy kills a bear the seasoned hunters smear its blood on the boy's face. For reasons he's not sure of, Nick wants some sort of ritual for Jesse's first trout. He wants the boy to remember it forever. He wants to be part of it himself.

Now, however, Nick is beginning to lose faith. It's possible, he thinks, that Jesse won't catch one. For three days they've put him on all the best holes, done everything short of casting the boy's line, but somehow Jesse screws it up: he makes too big a splash with the lure, he snags a branch and scares the fish away. Nick is beginning to understand why Walt loses patience sometimes, why he rides the boy so hard. If only Jesse would land a nice fish. One fish. Then Walt wouldn't badger him and the kid could relax a little and enjoy himself.

And if he doesn't, well, life will go on, but it'll be just one more thing getting between Walt and Jesse. Walt pressures the boy, Nick thinks, expects too much from a twelve year old. But who is he to criticize? He's not the boy's father.

Nick tilts his beer straight up and drinks too fast, the cold hurting his temples. His stomach suddenly feels bloated and for a moment he's afraid he might be sick, but the feeling passes.

Nick sees Walt sitting with his back against a tree, facing the creek, and slowly picks his way down the slope toward his friend.

"Beer?" Nick says, handing Walt a can.



"Thanks. I probably shouldn't, but what the hell."

They look down the stream forty yards where Jesse systematically throws out his lure, then retrieves it, time after time.

"You've got to hand it to him," Nick says. "The little bastard is sticking with it. He hasn't given up yet."

"Yeah. I would have thought he'd lose interest by now. Guess this is a little different from the kind of fishing they do in California."

"Crappie," Nick says and laughs.

"Christ." Walt shakes his head.

Walt is staring at his beer can when Nick says, "Look." Jesse's rod is bent toward the water. The boy starts shouting.

"Dad. Dad. I've got one."

"Jesus Christ," Walt says, and he runs through the trees to help the boy land the fish.

"Keep your tip up," Walt shouts as he runs. "Don't give him any slack."

Jesse is laughing and holding the pole straight up, its tip curving down, when the men arrive.

"Bring him in," Walt says. "You're doing fine."

When the fish breaks water close to shore, Walt charges into the stream, up to his knees in the current. He squats between the fish and the deeper water and gets both hands down to make sure the fish can't get away. Still laughing, Jesse holds the rod tip up. Walt scoops the fish with both hands and presses it against the bank, holding it there until the fish quits slapping its tail against the rocks. He takes out the hooks and holds the fish for his son to see.

"What is it?" Jesse takes the fish from him.

"Brown trout," Walt says. "I'd guess thirteen inches."

"Way to go, Jess," Nick says.

Jesse holds the fish, its skin spotted red and yellow, its black eyes shining, gills working the air.

"Okay, Jess," Walt says. "Give it a kiss."

Jesse looks at the glistening fish.

"No way."

"C'mon" Walt shouts, towering over the boy. "Kiss it."

"Huh-uh," Jesse says, but now he's grinning.

Walt starts to chant.

"Kiss the fish. Kiss the fish."

Nick joins in. Their voices are deep, loud, bouncing off the rocky canyon walls.

"Kiss the fish. Kiss the fish. Kiss the fish."

Jesse raises the trout to his face. He kisses the fish just above its mouth.

"Yeah!" Walt and Nick shout.

"Yes! Yes! All right!"

Jesse puts the fish back into the shallow water and holds it against the current as he's watched Walt and Nick do. It works its gills but doesn't move. Finally, the fish wiggles out of his hand, disappearing quickly as a morning dream into the deeper water.

After Jesse's first fish, Nick and Walt quit giving him advice about where to fish and what to do. They stop the truck, grab their poles, and head for the water, leaving Jesse to find his own spot. Still, before either of the men has a strike, Jesse hooks another fish and lands this one without help.

"That's two for me today," Jesse says when they're back at the truck. "How many have you caught, Nick?"

"Two," Nick says.

"How about you, Dad? How many have you caught today?"

"The day's not over yet, smart ass," Walt says.

"So I've caught two, and Nick's caught two, and you haven't caught any. All I need is to catch one more. Then I'll have more than both of you."

"Jeez, the kid catches a fish and he turns into Joe Sportsman," Nick says.

"Two fish," Jesse says.

"Excuse me."

"Hey, Dad," Jesse says. "If you catch a fish today, don't forget to kiss it."

Walt stares at the boy, doesn't say anything.

The sun disappears behind a cloud. Gusts sweep through the canyon and scuff the smooth water on the deep holes. They're getting close to the end of the road, and it's wearing into late afternoon. When they stop the truck, Jesse races ahead to get the best spot. Walt and Nick finish their beers before they follow.

"Well, he caught a fish," Nick says. "He even kissed the son-of-a-bitch. I still can't believe that. That was great."

"Yeah. Except now he thinks he's hot shit."

"He's having fun," Nick says. "He's a kid."

"Yeah. I can just see it now. He'll get back home and they'll gather around the swimming pool and Jesse will re-enact the great battle. Betty'll say how proud she is and Dick the dad will pat him on the head and slip him a twenty."

Nick matches Walt's stare. The boy will be gone in a couple days, but Walt will be there all year long. Nick doesn't say anything.

By the time Walt and Nick reach the water, Jesse is already fishing. He throws his lure to the middle of the stream, looks over his shoulder while he reels.

"Hey, dad," he says. "If I catch another one, I'll let you kiss it." He stands on a rock at the edge of the water,



his head still turned toward Walt, his smile a reckless gleam.

Jesse's rod tip jerks.

"Hey!" he says. He brings the small fish in quickly, dragging it across the top of the water. He manages to remove the hooks and holds the fish up to his father.

"Here you go," he says, smiling, his eyes laughing at his joke.

Walt stares at the boy, then reaches for the fish. He grasps it with one hand and raises it to his face, his expression perfectly calm. He brings the fish toward his mouth slowly, as though preparing for a luxurious kiss, his eyes locked onto his son's. Then he opens wide and chomps down, biting through the backbone, tearing off the head. Walt bares his teeth and blood runs out his mouth. The fish body wriggles, bleeding in Walt's hand until it slips to the rocks, flopping. Walt spits the head toward the boy and it lands at his feet. Jesse looks from the fish head to his father, and the blood drains from the boy's face along with his smile. Tears well in his eyes. For a moment the only sound is water slapping rocks. They're all frozen in place. Then Jesse turns to the stream and vomits. Bent over, gagging, he starts to sob.

Nick steps forward and grabs Walt's arm but Walt throws him off and moves toward the boy, takes Jesse by the shoulders and straightens him. Tears stream down Jesse's cheeks. His body shakes and his mouth is twisted with retching and fear. Blood drips off Walt's chin. He holds the boy at arm's length, looks at his face. Nick is afraid Walt will do something stupid, that he'll hurt the boy, but something tells him to stay out of this, that whatever happens is between father and son. Nick doesn't move. He watches as Walt pulls Jesse to his chest and holds him there. Jesse's Dodgers cap falls to the

ground and the boy struggles to break out of his father's arms. Walt tries to speak, but he's crying now himself, and his words are a moan, a guttural plea. He presses his bloody mouth against the top of Jesse's head.

Nick lowers his eyes to the ground and thinks about slipping off quietly, so Walt won't notice. He takes a couple steps away from the stream and stops. Nick realizes he doesn't want to leave. He moves forward and plucks Jesse's cap from the wet rocks at the edge of the rushing water. The boy has quit struggling against his father's embrace and the two of them stand locked together, rocking slowly, Walt speaking low and fast into the boy's bloodstained hair, Jesse's shoulders shuddering each time he breathes. They don't look at Nick, who stands still for a moment and fingers the cap before he picks up his fishing pole and walks to the truck alone.