

Tenderfoot

I only knew Barry from college, but Irv and he were friends before, during, and after school. Consequently, when they bumped into each other at a Stater Bros. grocery, Irv invited him along on our annual Fall Fishing Extravaganza, and despite being something of a tenderfoot, Barry accepted.

We decided to camp at the Mono County campground along Mill Creek, which flows from Lundy Lake down the mountainside into Mono Lake. This was a primitive campground with heavily rutted dirt roads, simple outhouses, and no potable water. It suited our needs well because at night our group tended to get a little raucous around the campfire. Being primitive meant fewer campers around whom we might disturb. Besides, it was close enough to the portal to Yosemite that most campers went over the pass to experience the beauty of that natural phenomenon rather than stop on the more austere eastern side of the Sierras.

When I arrived, Jerry was already there. He'd set up a basecamp in the center of some empty sites. I pulled into a site adjacent to the basecamp and got out of my SUV. We embraced in greeting, and I asked him where his site was. Typically, the basecamp was left to Michael and Dan, since they were usually the last to go to bed. The rest of us camped nearby and away from the campfire in an effort to get some quiet when we wanted to go to sleep.

Jerry gestured to the site next to mine. "Over there," he said. I saw his assembled orange tent.

I got to work unpacking the SUV and setting up my own tent. After doing so, I brought a bottle of Bulleit bourbon to the basecamp. Jerry had set up a pop-up with a folding table under it as a makeshift bar. His bottle of Old Overholt rye was already on the table. Under it was an icechest.

"Blehs?" I asked.

"Sure," he said.

A "bleh" was a drink of Jerry's invention, a take on the time-tested boilermaker. Once on a whim, he'd drank some of his PBR and refilled it with rye whiskey. After he took a sip, I asked him how it tasted. He replied "Bleh," and the drink found its name. We popped open two cans of Pabst from the icechest and settled into some folding chairs with the rye between us.

"Did you notice there's no campfires?" he asked.

"No campfires? What do you mean?"

"It's posted on the camp bulletin board."

"Well, shit," I said. "That's going to make for a cold, dark evening." Although sunny and clear, this was sweatshirt weather in the mountains. The clear skies also meant that it might drop close to freezing in the night.

Eventually, Michael and Dan rolled up in Dan's brown pickup towing his 16-foot boat. The bed was fully stocked with firewood.

"Don't bother unloading that," I told him after the usual greeting pleasantries. "No campfires are allowed."

"Bullshit. You just need to get a permit."

"How and where do you do that?"

"Back down the hill at that fire station near 395. It's an interagency fire station, so they cover both the county and the feds."

"I'll help Michael with the wood if you guys want to run down there," Jerry offered.

"Thanks," said Michael. "After I set up our tent."

Dan loaded into my SUV, and we drove the five miles back to the fire station.

The station looked closed. The lights were off, and the door was locked. After walking around the side, however, we discovered one of the truck bays was open. We went in. There was a fire truck and a tender in the garage.

“Hello!” we called.

A young man dressed in jeans and a khaki shirt with two breast pockets stepped through a doorway at the side of the garage.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“We need a burn permit,” said Dan.

“Burning is prohibited.”

“Dude, I know. That’s why we need a permit.”

Sensing this might not go as planned, I stepped back out into the sunshine and looked out over the otherworldly landscape of Mono Lake with its salt flats and tufa. Eventually, Dan reappeared with a permit in hand.

“I thought that kid wasn’t going to give you one,” I said.

“He wasn’t. Dumbass didn’t know what I was talking about. But his supervisor heard us and came out and issued me one.”

“Problem solved,” I said, and we loaded back into the SUV.

Upon returning to camp, we discovered both Tom and George had arrived separately and were busy with their respective tents. After saying “hello,” I got started on a second bleh and flopped into a folding chair. Just then, Irv’s white pickup materialized in front of the basecamp site. Irv and Barry got out, and the greetings began anew for the final time.

“Do you remember me?” I asked Barry.

“Vaguely,” he admitted.

“Yeah, that was decades ago, and you were a couple of years older than me. I was a young punk.”

Irv said, “Now you’re an old punk.”

“Want a drink?” Jerry asked.

“What are you guys drinking? PBRs?”

Jerry explained what a bleh was.

“If you don’t want one of those, we’ve got other bulk beer – Miller’s High Life – and some sipping beer – Sierra Nevada, I think.”

Barry looked at the bar table. “Jesus, it looks like you’ve got a full bar there.”

With the contributions of the others, it *was* beginning to look like a full bar. Besides the whiskeys, there were now bottles of gin, rum, and vodka – not to mention the mixers.

“Why do you guys have so much booze?” Barry asked.

“Options,” I said. “Suppose you want something more refreshing in the afternoon. You can go gin and tonic or rum and coke. Maybe you want something a little more sophisticated for the evening. How about an old fashioned? Michael’s got to have his Harvey Wallbangers at night and bloody Marys in the morning, so he brought the big bottle of Smirnoff’s.”

“I brought tequila,” said Irv. “Patrón.”

“Yikes,” George said.

“Yeah, that’s trouble,” said Tom.

“How about a G&T then?” Irv said to Barry.

“I’ll take one of those,” said Barry.

“I assume you want a lime wedge.”

“You guys brought limes?!”

“Of course,” I said. “We’re not animals.”

We sat sipping our drinks and tying on tackle, so we could go up to the lake. Irv lent Barry one of his rods and showed him how to rig it for Powerbait. A couple of us followed suit, while a couple rigged up for worms. George tied on a lure. We stuffed ourselves into two vehicles and drove to the main road, turned left, then turned left again onto the dam road. We rolled out in the empty parking

area. Jerry and I brought chairs and rod holders, so we grabbed those, our tackle bags, and rods and walked around the dam to the lake.

The sight was disappointing. Since it was October, the water level was so low that it was a hike to get to its edge. Once there, the water still wasn't deep enough to fish. We had to cast our baits as far as we could just to reach a place that might support a trout.

"I wish we had a boat," said Jerry next to me in his chair. "There's fish out there trapped in the middle, if we can get to them."

"With the water this low, Dan couldn't even launch his boat here," I said. "They close up the little resort at the other end of the lake by this time in the year."

George was the first to accept our situation. He reeled in, found a soft spot in the shade, and laid down for a nap. It didn't take too much longer for the rest of us to decide to pack it in as well. We jammed into the vehicles and rode back to camp.

Once there, we poured some cocktails and set about rigging our lightest tackle for stream fishing. Irv showed Barry how to tie on a hook to float a salmon egg, which was a good idea given how small Mill Creek was, so I followed his lead. Jerry opted for a small, gold Super Duper instead. After rigging up, I grabbed my little lure box with extra egg hooks and split shot, put my needle-nose pliers in my back pocket, held my rod and a jar of Pautzke salmon eggs ("Small but satisfying!") in one hand and my bleh in the other, and headed upstream toward the dam.

I saw moderate action with very small rainbows, but it was more stimulating than the lake. I'd occasionally bump into one of the guys as I worked downstream, and they were having a similar experience. Eventually, I ran into Irv.

"Have you seen Barry?" he asked.

I told him I hadn't.

"Shit. I'm worried he might be lost. I feel responsible for him."

Michael wandered up.

"Have you seen Barry?" Irv asked.

Michael said he had.

"Which way is he?"

Michael hesitated, started to point downstream, then spun and pointed upstream. He walked off in that direction.

"I just came from there. I didn't see him," I said.

"Yeah, I think he's downstream where Michael started to point."

I went with him to try to locate our friend. We walked along the bank of Mill Creek when we could and back from the stream calling his name when we couldn't. After about 100 yards without success, we decided to go back to camp to get Irv's truck. We drove it through the campground, stopping every so often to scout and call for Barry. We even continued paralleling the creek after the campground ended, again to no avail.

"He wouldn't have walked this far," I said. "Maybe Michael was right after all. Maybe I just missed him."

We drove back to camp, parked the truck, and headed upstream. Almost immediately, we walked right into Barry. He was fishing a small hole I'd fished earlier. He excitedly told us about all the tiny trout he'd caught.

That evening we had our usual Friday Night Meat Fest. Jerry got the charcoal going on his little Webber Smokey Joe. When it was white hot, he placed the sausages he'd brought on the grill. Those cooked quickly, and he transferred them to a paper plate while I loaded the grill with the NY strips I'd brought. As the steaks cooked, we ate the sliced sausages dipped in mustard. When we moved on to devour the steaks, Tom placed his kebobs on the grill. Those also cooked quickly, and we each grabbed one and slid its contents off its stick and onto a plate. Finally, Dan put his burger patties on

the grill. Some of us ate the coleslaw-in-a-bag Michael mixed up, either waiting for the burgers to cook or with a burger itself.

After dinner we settled with cocktails in hand around the fire and discussed tomorrow. The group reached the consensus that we should head south to June Lake in the morning. We knew the marina didn't close until the end of the month and reckoned we could rent a pontoon boat. Between that and Dan's 16-footer, there'd be room for everybody.

In the morning, I awoke to find Irv cooking bacon – just in case someone hadn't had enough meat the night before – on Michael's propane grill. Jerry's blue-coated metal coffee pot boiled next to the skillet. I grabbed a bacon sandwich and a cup of coffee after I hit the outhouse.

It was another clear, crisp autumn day, and I was a bit surprised that the marina had an unreserved pontoon when we got there around 8:00. We did a half-day rental. George said he'd fish with Dan in his boat, which was also a bit surprising since Michael and Dan were close friends – until it became clear that Michael really wanted to drive the pontoon. He got no argument from anybody because the rest of us wanted to fish and not do double duty. We loaded our gear onto the pontoon and left the dock.

We trolled the length of the lake. I was using my go-to for June, a Thomas Buoyant with perch coloring. The lure was so successful that most of the paint at the business end of the spoon was worn off by fish teeth. Jerry and I fished off the stern, and Tom fished midship on one side with Irv and Barry on the other.

We'd just turned around near the swimming beach at the far end when Irv called for some help. "Can someone bring me my backpack?" he asked.

I'd assumed Irv's backpack contained fishing tackle since that was usual. I reeled in and fetched his backpack from the deck in front of the steering console. When I brought it to him, I found him engaged with Barry, which was why he couldn't get the backpack for himself. Irv was holding Barry's right wrist, and a Thomas Buoyant extended from the thumb of that hand. Barry had somehow hooked himself.

Seeing Barry, I instantly slid back in my mind to an incident a couple of years earlier. Irv and I were fishing the Lower Twin from my Father's Day gift: an inflatable boat. (I refer to it as a "boat" because according to the paperwork, it was large enough to take a small motor, although all I had were the oars that it came with.) We launched from the north shore where there was a parking area and a beach, and I'd paddled us about fifty yards out when our lines tangled. I'd crossed over Irv's line on my cast, and the lines twisted. I reeled in slowly while Irv worked at untangling us. Soon, the ¼ oz Kastmaster I was flinging came into view. Irv passed it from one hand to the other as he worked it around his line. To keep both his hands free, he held his cigarette in his lips.

I could see my lure was completely free from his line as he held it up between the fingers of one hand while he used his other to do something to his own tackle.

"Am I free?" I asked, knowing I was. Irv didn't answer.

"Am I free?" I repeated, still without reply.

"Let go," I said, and, thinking he would, I pulled my rod to the right to clear the lure of the boat.

Instead of letting go, however, Irv kept it pinched between his fingers, and when I pulled, I pulled the hook into his index finger. He yelped as my lure came free. When he yelped, Irv's cigarette dropped from his lips onto the inflatable boat.

"Paddle!" he yelled.

"Paddle? Why? What happened?"

"Just hurry the fuck up and start paddling!"

"Did you just burn a hole in my boat?" I said, paddling for shore.

"Just hurry up and paddle. I've got my thumb in it."

"Your thumb? How big is this hole?"

“The biggest one is a little bigger than my thumb,” he said.

“The biggest one? You mean there’s more than one?!”

“Just shut up and paddle faster!”

The sides of the boat were already soft and on their way to total collapse. I paddled as hard as I could while I let fly a series of profane invectives. When we glided up on shore, both the outer hull and the inner safety hull were deflated. All that remained was the bottom, so we looked like we were riding a pool float made for sunning. Once on shore, we could hear fishermen all around our part of the lake laughing.

Such went the maiden and sole voyage of my inflatable.

While Irv merely got a good jab, Barry’s problem now was much deeper. One of the treble hooks was sunk in his thumb past the barb and well into the bend. There were only two ways to extract it: either cut his thumb or push the tip through and cut off the barb. Both were nasty.

Irv let go of Barry’s wrist and busied himself with his backpack. It was not full of fishing tackle; it was full of ice and a giant bottle of Patrón silver he’d purchased at Costco.

“Barry, I’m not going to lie to you,” he said, pulling the tequila from the bag. “This is going to hurt like a motherfucker. What I want you to do is drink a bunch of this tequila first.” He swirled the bottle in his hands. “Ooo,” he said, “that’s ice cold.”

Instead of handing the bottle to Barry, he hung onto it himself, popped the seal, and took a big swig.

“Let me try that,” I said, and he handed the bottle to me. When I swallowed, the burning of the alcohol was delightfully ameliorated by its freezing temperature. “Oh man, that’s good.”

Tom gave a wave to indicate he wanted the bottle. After taking a pull, he called to Jerry at the stern.

“Irv busted out the tequila? Nice.”

All this time, Barry sat with his hand aloft and a Thomas Buoyant dangling from his thumb. Irv took another drink when the bottle came around before turning his attention back on Barry.

“Ok, now drink a bunch of this tequila.”

Barry did as instructed.

After he’d had what Irv deemed enough, Irv took charge of extracting the lure. He grabbed Barry’s thumb and pushed the point through until the barb popped free. He took his needle-nose pliers and cut off the end of the hook. Barry gritted his teeth and a sputtered some drool during the procedure, but he was free of the lure.

“Does anybody have a band-aid?” asked Irv.

“No, but I’ve got some duct tape,” Jerry said.

“Duct tape? Why do you have duct tape?”

“Now you know why,” he replied.

Irv finished doctoring up Barry and after Barry took a couple more shots, we passed the bottle around the pontoon again until everyone had their fill. Everyone, that is, except Barry. He was done fishing for the day and clutched the bottle in his lap. Occasionally, someone would call for it again, but mostly we concentrated on trolling.

As we neared the end of our rental period and headed back to the marina, Barry lay passed out on the deck in the fetal position wrapped around the empty bottle of Patrón.

When we tied up, we left Barry in peace and unloaded our gear onto the dock. Suddenly, Barry sprang up, jumped out of the pontoon, and ran for shore. It was a floating dock, and as he ran, it tipped precariously. Without slowing, he somehow managed to navigate his way along the edge until he reached the ramp. Although he didn’t, we thought he’d fall in for certain, and so did some mallards floating along the water’s edge. They protested loudly as Barry ran by.

After we'd cleaned our fish, we headed back to the parking lot. On the gravel between Dan's and Irv's trucks, Barry lay on his stomach. We decided he needed some rest and left him there while we walked up to the Tiger Bar for some lunch.

When we returned to camp, we decided Barry had the right idea, and we all took a long nap before driving in to Lee Vining for dinner at Nicely's in the late afternoon.