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## Dick Hugo, Grits Greshman, The Hamm's Bear

Paul Zarzyski

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## DICK HUGO, GRITS GRESHAM, THE HAMM'S BEAR

As Dick and I hoisted the featherweight, heavy-duty, polyvinyl canoe—his birthday gift from Ripley—on top the Buick, I knew right then our annual early-spring fishing run to Twin Lakes would not be the usual lawnchair, bobber, sunshine, “wonder-what-the-poor-people-are-doing-today” affair. *No way* could I be convinced anything this lean and light, this streamlined, was going to keep afloat Dick Hugo and his trunk-and-a-half full of fishing paraphernalia, cooler of beer, 2 cement-filled bucket anchors, and me—175 hydrophobic pounds of landlubbing Polack-Wop convulsing with a deathgrip to the gunwales. If only Dick had served in the Navy instead of as a bombardier; if only Ripley had opted for the 20-foot Mirrorcraft Ski & Troll with pontoon outriggers; if only I had built a lighter lunch.

“Did you remember the life preservers, Dick?” I quizzed in strained nonchalance as we hit the interstate.

Instead of regarding the usual stop at Joe’s Smoke Ring in Evaro for beer and discount cigs a waste of prime fishing time, this trip I relished the delay. Yet the 90-minute drive from Missoula to Twin still seemed as if it took mere seconds, and before you could say “pass the garden hackle” I found myself fulcrumed over water so dark with depth, it barely cast a reflection—Dick manning the stern and me in the bow not really manning much of anything. And I say *over* the water because that, literally, is where I perched. Dick, on the other hand, sat ribcage deep, the waterline an inch below the gunnel, that “inch” shrinking to some infinitesimal fraction with each cast he took. So there we were: me, the symbol of stonefright on one pan of blind Justice’s scale, out-counterpoised by Dick epitomising the forces of pride, composure, and complete confidence on the opposite pan. There we were: the ultimate “odd couple.”

And then the monsoons hit—right in the middle of both ours and the trout’s feeding frenzy. We were having Alfredo Cipolato’s famous doctored-up pastrami, triple-layered, on white with Havarti cheese and mayo, a half-pint side apiece of my mom’s antipasta, biscottis, and Schlitz 16-ouncers. The cutthroats—finicky bastards—were ordering up just one cuisine: juicy dew-worm and pink marshmallow à la Hugo. I was getting about as much respect as Rodney

Dangerfield himself, and kept bellyaching that I was just too damn far away from the water and if I didn't snag something with fins, pronto, I would have to resort to the ol' reliable Dupont Lure: dynamite. I kept griping and Dick kept tally and kept me busy netting his fish, my heart rate quadrupling instantaneously each time he set the hook and the canoe jumped. But, as I started to say, that was before the downpour began adding extra poundage to this vessel already defying 2-fold its maximum carrying capacity, before we decided we better "call it"—Dick leading 7-zip—on account of rain, and head in.

Safe on shore, closer to the water, and with my pulse and angling savvy back on course, I began my comeback—the tides turned. *Or*, as Dick would've put it, scowling comically, had our situations been reversed: "the forces of righteousness once again prevailed over the forces of evil." Fact is, he was catching cold and I was catching fish after fish while his lead dwindled like his slack line in the wind. Finally, bottom of the ninth, I tied it up 7-all. By this time, Dick was soaked, sulking, and slugging down the second 12-pack to Blue Devils jazz in the car, heater running full-tilt and all windows steamed except for a porthole he palmed clear between spokes of the steering wheel, just above the dash. With each trout I beached, I turned and flashed him a finger count, and I swear I saw through that windshield peepsight those Buick V wakes in his forehead corrugating deeper and deeper.

"Way to go, Zarzisk," he'd holler with a forced grin, without one fingerling of truth in his voice—the way a starting player, sidelined so the coach's kid can play, feigns encouragement from the bench.

Then I rallied—went 2 cuts ahead and was threatening to fill my limit and start in on his. And *that*, in the words of Popeye The Sailor, "was all he could stands." Next thing I know, there's the crunch of wet gravel and I turn to witness—I swear it on my creel—Hugo coasting the Buick down the bank—no boat ramp, mind you—as if he was captaining one of those James Bond 007 amphibious crafts that at the wink of an eye converts to anything from pontoon plane to sea nymph to hot-air balloon. He set the brakes bumper-to-bumper with the lap of waves, boiled out, hurled his usual 250-foot cast (one foot for each of his pounds), calculated the 10 or so feet of slack he needed to backtrack to the driver's seat, threaded the rod through the half-opened window, and, I shit you not, resumed catching fish. In minutes he filled his limit, then mine, *then* bagged one extra just for spite, bragging rights, and the risk of it.



It took us a dozen tries, at one point the front fenders barely above the surf (“Never has your Buick/ found this forward a gear”) before the back treads took hold, and high ground miraculously won the tug of war with Twin Lake. By then, however, no tight squeeze could faze me. Dick had placed his lucky stone face-up on the seat between us, and I was firmly convinced that when you went fishing with Richard Hugo, the gods tagged along as mascots. I believed with fervor, the way I believed the lines of his poems, that Izaak Walton himself couldn’t hold a canepole to Dick when he got serious with his magic, heavy-action, Shakespeare wand—when he became blood brother to the home of fish and got close to water via lawnchair, canoe, Muse, or his Buick Sloop.