

Heaven

It's not a long way to heaven. I can get there in under an hour. But first, I make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for the journey, then gas up the truck and head out on Route 28, a state highway that each year has claimed more lives than a serial murderer. I don't plan to be the next victim and land in the real heaven, so I leave early, drive with care and tip my hat to Saint Brendan the Navigator. He's the guy who replaced St. Christopher. He was also pretty savvy about fishing.

Frankly, my favorite little corner of paradise is better for its scenery than the fishing. At a beautiful bend in the stream where the water runs along the foot of the mountains, and lacey hemlock boughs cascade down the mountainside right to the shoreline, the deer will sometimes come out of the woods to take a sip from the creek only yards away, ignoring me if I remain still. There are quiet pools along the edges of the stream where I can stand in water up to my knees and listen as the trout sip flies off the surface. And in the early morning I have the place all to myself.

The sun is up but hiding behind the mountain when I park above the stream near the road and drop the rear gate of the truck to use as a seat. Hopping up ... well OK, hauling myself up after a lifetime addiction to donuts ... I pull on my waders and prepare my fishing costume, arranging the gear as meticulously as a priest or minister might don vestments before a communion service. I always think of it that way, my altar boy mind still focused on ritual after all the years.

When I was younger and new to fly fishing, my costuming and preparation ... dressing in waders and vest, checking the rod, reel, line, leaders, tippet, fly boxes, tyers, etc. ... was a bothersome chore, a preliminary task quickly completed so I could get out on the water. But now I take my time, fastening each buckle and tying each knot with care. I tell myself I'm doing it to be safe, and to ensure a successful time on the stream, but I know the observance of ritual has for some reason become just as important to me.

My tools of the trade are carried on the vest and were derived from the great tradition of fly fishing. Some are useful. Only a few are really necessary. Most are not. The rubber leader straightener, for example, has been a popular item with fishermen for many years. It looks impressive, but I've used it only once, ten years ago. Still, we who fish truly love gadgets. The easiest way to engage a fly fisherman in conversation is to point to a tool on his vest and ask "what's that doo-dad for?" During my early years of fishing, I may have bought every little tool in the Orvis catalog, from knot tyers to zingers to leader snips. Clomping down the stream with so much regalia hanging on me, I might have been mistaken for RoboCop.

When I'm ready, I carefully pick my way down the embankment, climbing over boulders the State Fishing Department has helpfully deposited to keep the stream within its banks during the spring floods. The rocks seem larger and more slippery each year. By the size of them, the State must think most fishermen are teenagers. Yet all I ever see out here on the stream are us old guys, tripping over the boulders.

At water's edge, I look for signs of insects, the trout's food. The type and color of the bugs crawling here among the rocks or flying above the water will help me to choose just the right artificial fly from among the many I've tied this year. I'll also look to see how the water has changed since my last visit. Most people don't

notice, but a stream constantly shifts itself around underwater. The rocks rearrange themselves and hiding places for the fish are constantly on the move.

In front of me and upstream, the little white riffles dancing on the water signal a large boulder just under the surface. Any trout worth the bait would hang out in that cozy spot. He could sit there all day behind the rock, just outside the rushing water that saps his energy, waiting for food to drift by. Reviewing all the signs, I convince myself to fish a small fly called The Professor. It's an old fly, and was a favorite of Mary Orvis Marbury, daughter of the Vermont family that turned fishing into a retail empire. Mary was no 19th century wilting lily. She published a book of favorite flies more than a century ago, and I've heard she was a killer fisherman with a bamboo rod.

Armed with research, equipment and tradition, I'm ready to get in the water and catch "the big one." But first, I rummage around in my vest, find the squashed peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and sit down on an official State Fishing Department boulder and begin to eat.

Ever since my boyhood friend Georgie and I cast worms for sunnies on the Oriskany Creek in the 1950's, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich has been a necessary component of any fishing trip. Chewing on the sandwich, the ingredients of which if put through a blender would easily pass for industrial waste ... or worse ... I laugh to myself about forgetting to bring the traditional chocolate milk. My memory is getting bad, I say, but in fact I always forget the chocolate milk, because I really don't like it. And the stuff probably hasn't had any chocolate in it since 1958.

Finishing the sandwich, I'm finally ready to begin the contest between man and fish. Stepping out on the water, I quickly say the age-old Fisherman's Prayer: "Please don't let me do something stupid and drown." Carefulness is more important as I age, because dumb mistakes seem more common now. In

the Post Office the other day, instead of a twenty I mistakenly handed the clerk a prayer card from a recent funeral service. She passed it back, saying, "We can't pray on government property."

"Of all places," I replied.

I used to fish for hours, moving about from place to place on the stream. I'd try one spot for a while, then pick another likely location and move upstream or down, working my way through different pools, runs and riffles. I'd catch a decent amount of fish if I applied a modest degree of effort.

But today I move around less and stay longer in one spot. And I really don't care if I catch anything. I never worry about how many fish I catch. In his book, "Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis," Howell Raines's fishing partner advised him, "If you're going to keep score, you might as well be on a golf course."

So instead of applying myself to the task, I watch a blue heron as he stands on a rock in the middle of the creek, seemingly bored, but ever ready to pounce down on a trout. Or I'll pause while a brace of 6 or 7 ducks fly by me only 3 feet off the water, veering slightly out of my way. They don't get excited. I'm just another object to fly around. I love it when they do that; I feel like a part of the stream, a piece of nature. To me, the birds are saying I'm welcome.

Later, as I travel home, I have to admit that driving all this way to not catch any fish and to sit on a rock eating a sandwich might not sound appealing to many people. But I've seen the most beautiful sights in the world and spent an hour or two in heaven.

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