

scraped clean

Natural Bridge

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my skin a mirror

foreign, this virgin

Writing / Status // Politics / Gender

*stretchmarks and scars
ancient trade routes*

don't talk about

body refracted

Spooking Ralph's Trout

Ralph Bell was my roommate at Cornell. Since then, most of the time anyway, he's been my best friend.

Right after graduating, Ralph went to work for IBM in Poughkeepsie, New York, and he'd been there for seven years. He liked IBM but he wasn't crazy about Poughkeepsie. One day he called me and suggested that we go fishing in Montana. He wanted to get out of Poughkeepsie and he'd heard some kind of "hatch" would be taking place on some Montana river at some date he thought he could predict.

I didn't know anything about fishing, certainly not about fly-fishing, which is what Ralph wanted to do. He was something of a fly-fishing specialist, having been brought up by a fanatical fly-fishing father. His dad had equipped a room in their basement with fly-tying ingredients like chicken feathers, slabs of deer skin, minute little vises, and hundreds of spools of colored thread for tying the chicken feathers and deer hair on to barbed hooks, some of which were so small you could hardly see them. There was supposed to be a mystique, almost a religion about this, Ralph explained when he showed me around his father's sanctuary. Turning fur and feathers into insects needs faith as well as near-microscopic skills.

We decided to drive across the country. We both took three weeks off in August, which, in my case, meant two weeks without pay, but I didn't need much money to live on anyway. I think Ralph borrowed some vacation time at IBM so his paychecks were uninterrupted, which is one of the several ways that Ralph and I are different. He likes order and predictability.

The cross-country trip was pretty uneventful. We managed to avoid the most contentious topics—politics and Alice. Alice was Ralph's wife.

Things started picking up when we got to Montana. The scenery was terrific and Ralph had a contact, a man in one of the fly fishing shops in Bozeman, who knew his father, so we got some good advice. The famous insect hatch hadn't materialized, but the man directed us to some small rivers where he said the dry-fly fishing had been excellent.

The first one was called Caliph Creek and it was so narrow you could step across it in a few places. But there were some wide spots too,

and some deep pools where the river undercut the bank, or backed up behind logs. Ralph told me that in this kind of river you either had to get a trout to strike on the first cast into a pool or you were probably not going to get a strike: no second chance. The fish liked to stay down deep in the holes and pools where, according to Ralph, they were less likely to be carried off by hawks. That made sense to me.

I watched Ralph as he worked over some of these trout hiding spots. Sometimes he would actually crawl up toward the pool on his hands and knees so the fish couldn't see him, then he would cast back and forth with the heavy fly line making big loops in the air, and with a final flick he'd send a tiny little piece of fur with a hook in the middle to the surface of the pool. Surprisingly often, a trout would come charging up from below and grab it.

Ralph caught a half dozen fish this way, two of which we kept to cook for lunch, and then he started teaching me. He had offered to teach me before he began fishing, of course. Ralph is like that. He would never just start doing something without including the other person. But I told him to go ahead and catch a few fish first, so that we would have something for lunch, and I could watch him and see how it was done.

The three easiest dumb mistakes you can make when you're fly-fishing for trout in a very small stream are, one, scaring all the fish by clambering up too close to the pool and knocking rocks into the pool and generally kicking things around and ruining the fishing in that pool probably for the next six months; two, not knowing how to cast, so that you throw the big heavy fly line back and forth over your head a few times, then throw it at the pool, and have about twenty feet of line all coiled up in a big spaghetti-like ball landing in the middle of the pool with a huge splat which, like item one, scares the fish to the point that they probably won't eat anything for a long time; and, three, getting the fly more or less where you want it on the end of a straight line but having no slack in the line at all so that, as the current pulls the fly downstream, there is a nice V-shaped wake behind the fly immediately informing all of the fish in the vicinity that this is not a naturally drifting insect but rather a dangerous invader or at least something to be avoided like the plague. I committed all three of these sins, with several variations, repeatedly, for two or three hours.

Ralph did his best. "Stop the back-cast at two o'clock," he'd say. You aren't supposed to let your arm go back too far when you cast. At one point Ralph grabbed the rod, his hand overlapping my fingers, to show how the rod should be moved. This feeling was interesting. I've never

been attracted to men, but there was a very nice sensation out there on the river in the warm sunlight with Ralph's body pushing up against mine and his hand covering my fingers over the cork grip on Ralph's 5-weight Sage fly rod.

It didn't improve my casting much, though. I was a spaghetti-ball specialist, tangling up the line into a bunch on about half my casts.

Then, a couple of times, I got it right. In one long pool where the river took a gradual curve of nearly 90 degrees, Ralph stationed me behind some low shrubs in the gravel area inside the river's arc and told me to drop the little Adams dry fly toward the upstream end and let it float down. I false-cast a few times—casting the line back and forth over my head without letting it drop down—then I said Here Goes and I let the fly come down in the general vicinity of where Ralph pointed, and, Bam! there was a nice splash, I jerked on the rod and the trout came right up on the gravel, flapping and jumping.

"Great!" Ralph said. "Perfect cast."

I felt like a hero. There is something very special about trying something difficult and doing it right and, for me, it was all the more so because my friend had taught me, with his hand on top of mine, and now I had earned his praise. At that moment I felt very close to him and very good.

For just a second I thought about Alice.

My trout was a nice rainbow with a pale pink stripe on its side. It was about a foot long and we saved it for lunch along with Ralph's two.

Around two-thirty we found a shady spot under a big elm next to the river where there was a good place to build a fire. I helped Ralph gather up some dry wood, and then I sat on a rock and watched him make a little teepee out of twigs.

Up to that point, I had not even thought about the vodka in our thermos. I'd been about as close as I get to being reasonably happy without any artificial stimulus. Mind you there's nothing artificial about fermented grapes or distilled spirits from grain, and there is certainly nothing artificial about coca or cannabis. All good natural stuff, don't let anybody tell you different. But I'd been in a good mood, so there was no need for a boost.

Still, when we sat down for lunch I started thinking how nice it would be to have a little buzz on to go with our trout lunch. I got out the thermos of iced tea that we had doctored to make it about one-third vodka, and took a few swigs.

Ralph lit the pile of twigs he had put together and started fanning

the flames, as it were. The fire was right down next to the creek where there was plenty of water handy if it should start to spread. Ralph was very conscientious.

I felt I had done my part. I had dropped my spaghetti loops of fly line on a couple of dozen trout; I had scared a few others by knocking rocks into their pools, and I had made one perfect cast. I had also gathered up wood for the fire, so now I could have a little tempered tepid tea, a little Brooke Bond Finlandia.

Booze has several effects on me, almost all of them benign. That day the first thing it did was spread that well-known warmth around the middle of my body. Even on a very warm day, that particular kind of warmth is pleasurable in the stomach. The second thing that always seems to happen is that my stomach area begins to lose its tension. We are apparently descended from creatures who were in a constant state of tension, due to the need to flee from saber-toothed tigers, or fight with other men over a mate, or some goddamn thing or other, and the natural state of the area between the pubic bone and the breastbone, internally, seems to be a large unpleasant knot of tension, a tension not productive in the modern world, a tension that conduces to things like ulcers and high blood pressure.

What alcohol does, at least for me, is to begin untying that knot, relaxing all the muscles in the middle of my body, letting things go a little bit lax, and that is an almost indescribably pleasurable sensation.

Then, of course, there's the mind. I had a friend my senior year who was a recovering alcoholic, and his wife, a diminutive Guatemalan lady, had, upon drinking her first entire glass of wine, subsequently pronounced that she didn't like alcohol because "it makes my head feel funny." At times like this, sitting on a river bank waiting for Ralph to finish his perfect cooking fire, I was filled with wonderment that there could be fellow human beings, from Guatemala or anywhere else, who would not take utter delight in the funny feeling that was creeping into my head. How could they not love that feeling? It lightens the mood. It improves acuity, or at least seems to. It makes the world seem more interesting, diverse and lively. For a brief time at least, it makes the human condition look better and people, even fools, seem more bearable. That's something, it really is.

"Why do we do things like this?" I asked Ralph, the tension entirely gone from the middle part of my body.

"Like what? You mean fishing, being outdoors?"

"Yes. You and I don't have to fish to eat. It would be more efficient

to buy fish in the supermarket. So why do we do this?"

"Leftover instinct, probably. Why do people go camping? Our bodies haven't adapted probably. Alice says men are still programmed for hunting. It's in the DNA."

"She does? It is?" I took a gulp of my tea and decided to ignore the reference to Alice. "I understand about our bodies not being adapted," I said. "But our bodies obviously crave comfort. The Queen of Sheba would not have gone camping if she'd had air conditioning." Ralph nodded, indicating that I should hold out my paper plate, and he slid one of the cooked trout onto it.

The tempered tea was at just the right point inside me as I started on my trout. Ralph had sizzled them to perfection, and now mine had just enough lemon juice and salt, and the potato chips were crunching nicely with the fish, with the crispy fried skin on the fish. I felt very agreeable.

"Alice's brother is a fraud," Ralph said suddenly. "The discovery of this has changed her."

"For the better?" For some reason or other, Ralph wanted to discuss his wife despite our understanding that this was off limits. I could not fathom why, so I tried to joke about it.

"Afraid not." Ralph remained grim. He was quiet for quite a long time. I didn't interrupt because the vodka was doing its thing and, as I looked along the creek trying to spot feeding trout, there were fascinating moves taking place. A kingfisher flitted along the branches of trees on the bank, presumably looking for minnows. The wind, lazy, turned a few leaves so that their colors changed from the pale underside to the darker, shinier leaf tops. From where I sat, the sun overhead hit a spot in the creek where the water bulged over the top of a rock at the head of a rapids, sparkling and dancing in a way that my mind's perception, now so nicely enhanced, found beautiful. I didn't want to hear about Alice's brother. Alice was a danger zone.

"She thinks her defective brother defines her own fallibility, or some crap," he said. "She believes that her genes are defective."

"Maybe he's not really a fraud," I said.

"He's a fraud." Ralph looked at me and seemed to be sizing me up, trying to decide if it was appropriate to tell me about this, perhaps wondering if I would take it seriously. I returned his gaze with as much interest as I could; he was my friend.

"He's four years older than Alice. He's a deadbeat. He showed up at our house two years ago. After sponging off us for two weeks, he asked for money."

"What's his name?" I said. I knew his name. Emile. I asked because my supposed ignorance about her brother gave me some distance.

"Emile," Ralph said.

"Emile? Isn't that French?" Now I felt like a fucking fraud. Some of the euphoria was slipping away.

"Yes. We gave him a thousand dollars and he left." Ralph held out his plastic cup with the threads on the inside, the Thermos top, for me to pour him a little more tempered tea. I did, making sure there would still be plenty to keep me going.

"Last year he showed up again. Needed more money." Ralph paused and took a sip from the screw-top cup. "We gave him another thousand dollars. He said that wouldn't be enough, he needed at least five thousand dollars. Alice and I argued about it. Finally, I agreed and we gave him a check for another thousand dollars, which was absolutely all we could spare, and I thought maybe, just maybe, that would be the end of it. But of course it wasn't." He looked back at the river and I thought perhaps the scene there might recapture his attention. The kingfisher was still moving from tree to tree and the sunlight glinted on the water where it surged smoothly over the big rock. But Ralph went back to Emile.

"He had cancer he said. Some growth in his stomach. A lot of people owed him money. He'd saved up a lot of money and he'd lent a half million dollars to some friends who were starting a new business. They were going to pay him back from the profits and that would start next year for a certainty. Meantime he needed medical treatment. No insurance. Twenty-five thousand dollars would cover it.

"We told him to go to an internist Alice knew in Boston. The internist sent him to an oncologist. The oncologist gave him some tests. No stomach cancer. In fact, nothing was wrong with his stomach."

I wasn't at all sure what Ralph was driving at. He'd had as much Finlandia tea as I had, and there was a determination in his voice that frightened me. If this was going to turn out to be about Alice I wanted no part of it. Of course I sympathized about the brother. Those people can drive you nuts, and bleed you to death.

"The odd thing," Ralph went on, "is that he didn't seem fazed in the slightest at being caught out in these lies. I did some checking with one of the so-called business partners who was supposed to owe him all that money and they said Emile had never lent them anything, nor had they expected him to.

"Last week he phoned, insisting that he had to have more money or he would kill himself. I had reached the point where I thought maybe this

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would be a pretty good idea, but it put Alice in a quandary. Emile was such a mess it did actually seem possible he might kill himself, and Alice was out of her gourd about it."

"Where is he now?"

"He says he's in Boston, but who knows?" He took a swig of the tea. "There's drugs too, of course. He's totally useless. That's really hard for Alice to accept."

Ralph and I had been best friends for eight years. We agreed on most of the big things, like legal abortion and lower taxes, and when we disagreed I could still see his point because Ralph was rational and explained himself well. Today, we had been even closer. For that reason, especially for that reason, I wished he'd stay away from Alice. But he seemed determined to go on. "Now she thinks she must be useless too, and it's turning her into a miserable woman." He held out his cup again and I poured. I had a pretty good glow on so I gave him all but the last half-cup or so. Ralph stared off at the river, his eyes distracted, his voice distressed. "She seems to want to be degraded now." He glanced at me quickly. "In bed, yes, and in other ways too. She seems to be asking for punishment, to be demeaned."

Was he testing me? Was I supposed to say No, Alice could never be like that? Was he groping for proof that I didn't know about her masochism? We had an understanding that the best way to deal with the subject of Alice was not to discuss it. He said, "This has happened just since she's been forced to confront her brother's uselessness." No way José. I knew better. "So this man is destroying his sister, a woman who used to be loving and lovable." He stopped for just a second. "And pretty smart too."

"She's still smart," I said. And a self-flagellator. Blamed herself for global warming. Hunger in Africa was her fault.

"Of course. Only now that works against her. She believes she's carrying a bad seed."

"She's always tended to blame herself for things," I said.

"Yes."

"She told me once that she thought . . ."

"Yes?"

Ralph knew that Alice and I had gone out together for more than a year in college. He had to assume that Alice and I had been intimate, that I would know about her obsessive masochism. But as he and I had grown closer, we'd become more and more careful not to speak about this subject.

Ralph hadn't met Alice until our senior year, several months after she and I had broken up. And now he was seeing the Alice I had come to know, the Alice who eventually sent me running for the hills. Her desire to be dominated, to be punished, was powerful and I had been captured by it for a while, tying her hands to the bedstead, spanking her, harder and harder, making her come. And then it began to scare me, and I ran.

Ralph held out the frying pan with one last piece of trout. "No thanks," I said. The trout and the kingfisher and the rest of the day weren't looking quite so wonderful any more. I took a swig of tempered tea.

"I'd like to kill him," Ralph said.

"Emile?"

"Yes." He looked away, then back at me. "And then . . . Alice, in bed . . ."

I tried to look blank.

"Did you have sex with her?"

My stomach knotted up and all the good feeling from the tempered tea drained out of me. I tasted bile instead. He was looking right at me, his thermos-cup dangling in his fingers, and I saw the end of our friendship, saw it as clearly as I saw the kingfisher on a broken pine branch across the river, saw the casting lesson go up in smoke, saw the nicest man I ever knew crushing what we had, tearing himself from me, and why?

"No," I said. "We . . . thought about it. We . . . came pretty close. But no, we didn't."

The truth might have been worse, but I knew that now it didn't really matter. I looked at the pool below the rapids to see if any fish were rising. I couldn't see any. Then I poured the last of the tea into my own cup. To hell with Ralph.