

## A Few Miles of Trail

The sun had sunk below the ridgeline to our west. Topped with tundra, the ridge stood above and beyond an eight hundred foot cliff at the end of a large lake. A conspiracy of ravens loitered and bickered near the top of the cliff, and at its bottom a large field of rocky debris poured motionless into the water. A few times a day we heard rockfall from over there, and sometimes it was very loud and we were startled. In the shade of the ridge the sky was less bright, but daylight would linger for two more hours.

The first serving of trout was frying in the pan. Its cornmeal coating and the onion slices were still light-colored and the oil was at the perfect temperature, roiling in the pan atop the backpacking stove. Jerry had cooked fish this way for more than half a century and they would be very good. They were not ready yet.

"Fit nice in the pan," he said.

"A little more work to clean when they're small like that, I suppose," I replied.

"Oh, it's no big deal."

But I knew it was. Not because it was more work; Jerry never minded cleaning the fish. He would find a spot a few hundred yards from the tent, set up on a boulder or a fallen log, then fillet, skin, and debone them flawlessly. He buried the guts as deeply as he could in the rocky earth, thick with roots, and washed off the fillets and the knife in the lake.

No, it wasn't the work. It was disappointment, disclosed by his slightly chipper tone, that the fish were smaller this year. In particular the rainbows, which were the ones we kept and cooked, were mostly ten or eleven inches, instead of the twelve or thirteen they had run last time we camped at this particular lake. The smaller ones were not as much fun to catch and you felt like you were keeping them just to make a meal.

We had been taking this fishing trip to Colorado every summer for eight years. In all those trips, we had never gone a day without having fish for either lunch or dinner. Over time, unspoken, that fact had turned into a source of pride, and eventually established itself as a goal.

Still, we tried not to kill the native cutthroats. We realized that they were descended from restoration stocking and were not the leading edge of wild, unbroken eons of trout that had evolved here, but it seemed better to release them. Not for any deep spiritual reason; just

because we liked having them here and knew that they already struggled against more aggressive species. Sometimes a cutthroat would swallow a lure and we could see it was not going to survive, so we would keep it. “That’s a shame. No sense letting it go to waste, though,” one of us would say.

We watched the fish fry, and after a long pause I suggested, “Maybe tomorrow let’s hike over that pass and try the lake on the other side.”

“Can’t hurt,” he said.

“I don’t know what’s in there. Could be a dead lake for all I know.”

“That’s all right. Don’t know until you try.”

“Will you be ok with the altitude? There’s a lot of elevation gain each way.”

“I’ll do it.”

“If we don’t get anything, I can always hike down to the creek in the afternoon and pick up a few brookies for dinner. They’re not very big but easy to catch.”

“Or we can just take whatever we get out of this here lake,” he said, as though he were already feeling the prospective letdown a little.

Dinner was as good as expected. The fresh-caught fish were tender beneath the crisp coating and they had a strong fried flavor without being greasy. We wolfed down the first serving and Jerry loaded the pan again, using up the remainder of the catch.

We had it worked out pretty well. Jerry cleaned the fish and cooked, and I carried the heavier items in my backpack: the oil and onion and other food; the tent, stove, and water purifier. He didn’t do very well in the altitude and had twelve years on me. I didn’t have his meal preparation experience: on my own, I mostly fly-fished in running water, almost always catch-and-release. But I was a good pack animal. It seemed like a fair trade.

After dinner we cleaned up the kitchen gear, and I hung the food bag and put some things away for the night. Then we grabbed our rigs and headed back down to the water. Unlike many alpine lakes, the trout here would strike any time of day, but it was still better at dawn and dusk. We wouldn’t keep anything now—this was just for fun. Well, it was all just for fun, but men are mystically drawn to purpose. To escape it, we have to intentionally cordon off an activity and eliminate instrumental concerns. Only then can the endeavor

become an end in itself, a kind of aesthetic. An artist might paint all day on a piece that is part of a planned exhibition, then sculpt in the evening purely for enjoyment. It feels different. And sometimes the greatest works are those apparently frivolous ones. That's how it was with evening fishing.

We had the lake to ourselves, which created the satisfying illusion that no one else inhabited the entire wilderness. Though we cast no masterpieces that evening, I managed to find a thirteen-inch cutthroat, and Jerry pulled in a twelve-inch rainbow. The rainbow fought above its weight and jumped a couple of times and we were smiling when we turned on our headlamps and started walking back around the lake to camp.

"Figures that we'd get the nicest fish of the day when we're not keeping them," he said with false frustration.

"At least we know there are still some in here that size," I replied.

We arrived at the tent, hung our rods in a tree, and got into the tent and our sleeping bags without any fuss. It was early, but the mosquitoes were out and dawn was also early this time of year. "G'night," we each said, and rolled over to sleep. We were not much for long talks in the tent. Despite being brothers, we didn't grow up together. He left with dad, as a teenager; still a toddler, I stayed with mom. We saw each other on holidays and our relationship was more like that of cousins of different generations.

When he was passing sixty and I approached fifty, we decided to try backpacking together for some high-altitude fishing. Left unsaid was that we would be leaning on a shared love of the outdoors, and of fishing in particular, to reconnect, or perhaps to connect for the first time. Now he was almost seventy, and we probably knew each other as well as we were going to, which was not all that well, but well enough.

"Let's go, Junior!" I heard from beyond my eyelids. On the whole I hadn't slept too soundly, but the last couple of hours had been a deep sleep with dreams of long, arcing casts. Jerry was already out of the tent and had the stove going to make coffee. "Yup," I said, for lack of any articulate response. It was well past dawn but still before sunrise, and it was cold and the rain fly on the tent was wet with condensation. I dressed quickly; we ate a couple of granola bars washed down with black coffee, loaded our day packs, grabbed the rods, and got moving.

Shortly after we passed timberline, an enormous crash bellowed to the west. We both jerked, then looked back toward the cliff as we heard rubble sliding. We couldn't pick out where the boulder had fallen, but as we were scanning a golden eagle alighted from its nest

in the cliff. It flew eastward far above the lake, its subtle dark colors glinting in the horizontal sunlight that had not yet worked its way down to us. The great raptor glided ever downward and finally it flapped powerfully to land in a tree near the shore. We were mesmerized by its size and grace.

“Not every day you see one of those,” I said unnecessarily.

“Nope. Beautiful,” Jerry replied. “Hope he stays away from the keepers, though,” he added, only half-sarcastically. I chuckled.

We pulled the pass, and Jerry was breathing hard but seemed fine. Three hundred feet below us on the other side was a sizable lake, entirely above the trees, and we could see that it was deep enough to hold fish. There was an outlet running on the far side toward a long valley in the trees below, which was also encouraging.

I theorized out loud, “Has to be something in there. It’s harder to get to, so maybe it won’t be as fished out.”

“Hope so,” Jerry said.

The trail took us to the far side of the lake, and we quickly rigged up and got our lines in the water. Jerry was throwing a spoon with his spinning rod and I had a medium-sized caddis on the end of my tippet. Nothing happened for a few minutes. I noticed that it was a pretty spot. Then Jerry’s rod bent and started throbbing. My heart rate doubled. As I watched him playing the fish, I heard a splash off to the side and remembered that I had a fly on the water. I lifted the rod out of instinct, without looking, and felt it bend. I called out and we both laughed and grinned as we worked to keep the fish from tangling each other. In less than a minute, both trout were splashing in our respective nets. Two cutthroats. Mine was a chunky fifteen-inch, but Jerry’s was a full eighteen. It filled his backpacking-sized net, and wore vibrant dense spots near its tail with only a few toward the head. The namesake red slashes around the gills were dramatic. Happily, the lure fell out of its mouth and Jerry eased the fish from the net. It found a rock on the bottom about ten feet away and lay there for a moment, gilling rapidly. Then it bolted for the deep water.

“Guess they’re in here,” he said.

I didn’t reply. I had already released my fish and moved along the shoreline to a new spot. Nothing. Jerry started working his way around the lake in the other direction. I kept moving, but no luck. Half an hour later, we were opposite each other. I caught one more there, just a twelve-inch. Jerry had now stopped moving and was fishing in one place where

the water was deep offshore. I wasn't watching him and I kept working my way around. I gave up before I got to him.

"You could just catch them all day in here," he said matter-of-factly.

"Hmmm," I said. "Not on the fly. How many?"

"I think half a dozen after that first one. All fourteen inches or better."

"Wow. All cutthroats?"

"Yeah. It's ok. Just for fun, right?"

"If you say so." I was not as sanguine, since it had been quite a bit slower for me. "Should we head back and catch dinner?"

"Sure. That could take a while."

We hiked back up to the saddle. Though we were starting higher this time, Jerry had to stop and catch his breath more than once. He was tired when we reached the top. As he rested, I took in the view and looked around for the eagle. There was a light breeze, and small waves on the lake below flashed in the mid-day sun. We trudged down, and I stopped at a fork in the trail well before we reached camp.

"I should be back by four," I said.

"Going for the sure thing, then?"

"Yeah. But one limit of those is a pretty light meal, so hopefully you'll get at least one or two."

It was about an hour hike each way to the deeper pools in the creek where I knew some suitable brook trout lurked. Once there, it would not take me long to catch a limit of four. The challenge was deciding whether to keep ten-inch fish, which dominated, or to hold out for something a little bigger. I had time. And I used it, hooking numerous eight- and nine-inch fish, and a few slim ten-inchers that just wouldn't do. I came to a nice pool above a jammed log, and there I was able to put a couple of fish on the stringer, one just a nose over eleven and another only ten but meaty. Then it slowed down, for no apparent reason. That's how it goes with trout fishing. I managed to get one more ten-inch, slimmer this time, and had to keep a nine-inch to return with a limit.

I had thought my own result was discouraging, but Jerry had been skunked all afternoon. Not even a strike. I joined him for a while but my luck was no better.

“I guess I should get to cleaning those,” Jerry said, as though he were surrendering to an enemy.

“Yeah. Not really enough, but we’ll count it,” I replied, referring obliquely to our streak of fish meals.

We had to augment dinner with a backpacking meal that I had brought as a backup. The fish tasted good enough but had a slightly mealy texture, probably because I had carried them for an hour in the warm afternoon sun. We would depart in the morning, so this was our last meal of the trip and our mood was a little gloomy.

“That beef stew is not bad for freeze-dried,” said Jerry without any conviction, attempting to bury the humiliation as though it were fish entrails.

I didn’t respond immediately and we ate silently for a few minutes.

“Has to be the fishing pressure. Not too crowded on weekdays but I bet they’re thick on the weekends,” I said.

“Yeah. Two groups came in while you were gone and set up camp on the far side. They haven’t fished yet but you can sure tell it’s Friday.”

As we were eating another newcomer passed by on the trail below our camp. He headed toward the cliff and we saw him setting up his tent on that end of the lake.

“None too smart, either,” Jerry said. We both shook our heads and stifled a laugh.

“The fishing here was really good back when we first found it. Word got out. There are just too many people,” I lamented.

“A guy could keep going to lakes like that one today,” Jerry replied, “but you can’t camp that high and anyway there weren’t any fish we’d keep.”

That was all true, but I also knew that he would not be able to carry a backpack to more remote lakes. Not any more.

Evening fishing provided a minor reprieve from the melancholy, though it was disheartening to see all the other fishermen circling the lake that had been ours alone for three days. To give them space we stayed on the side of the lake near our camp, and after an hour or so we had caught the fish that we were going to catch.

The next morning we broke camp and packed out. We didn't bother to try our luck before we left—all the other fishermen were lined up around the shore and it would hold no magic for us. Halfway through the hike I noticed Jerry's posture bent with fatigue, even though we were going downhill, and I knew then that this would be the last of our trips. Only a few miles of trail remained.