

The First Time

A Short Story
by
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The cold crisp crunch of frozen snow brings me back to my senses as I lift yet another shovel full of the white stuff that has encased my driveway. The western North Carolina air is so cold it crackles as I take a breath. It's January, and I'm lost in thoughts of a similar day some thirty years ago.

I'm twenty-eight years old again. It's early April, my first wife is pregnant with our first child, and I am full of anticipation as I make my way from the relative safety of the roadside along Route 23, somewhere near Tannersville, New York, down the steep embankment toward the waiting waters of Schoharie Creek. A thin crust of frozen snow covers the ground, and as I move along, the boots of my waders make a sound like gigantic popcorn popping on some alien landscape, as I trudge toward the water.

Along with me are Bob and his son, Robbie, and my new acquaintance, Hans. Actually, it is I who is "along," having been invited at the last minute to join this early spring fishing expedition engineered by Hans. "You'll really like it," he had said. "There's nothing like standing knee deep in a stream full of trout." The idea had seemed like a good one at the time, when we first discussed it in the warmth and security of the sporting goods store where we both worked.

Now, I question my decision, my breath forming mini clouds in the cold morning air. I stand there shivering in my new Hodgman waders in the cold, dark waters of a stream whose bottom feels like a collection of slippery marbles, just waiting for me to make one false step. I picture myself tumbling helplessly; icy water filling my waders, a gigantic waterfall waiting downstream to engulf me in its watery clutches. In reality, the current is very benign, and its gentle lapping against my canvas and rubber boots is very soothing.

While the other three fellows will all be fly-fishing, I will be using the new spinning rod and open-faced reel that my wife had just given me for my birthday. Hans had recommended some small silver and gold spinners for me to use, and I had crammed a dozen or so into a little, clear plastic utility box, along with some split shot and gold salmon egg hooks. Now, the salmon eggs reside in a spiffy new holder attached to my wading belt. The header on the package advertised "...a spring-loaded top which allows easy access to one egg at a time." I chuckle softly to myself, and smile in smug satisfaction at my selection of such a clever device.

Bob and Robbie position themselves approximately a hundred feet or so on either side of me, and begin false casting almost immediately. I watch them as they work the ivory colored fly line through the air with graceful strokes, and I'm impressed with their skill. Intent as they are upon reaching their invisible targets, for the life of me I cannot detect even one single object floating downstream on the dark surface of the water. But, not being a fly fisherman, I assume that they must know something that I don't.

Hans, apparently in search of solace, has marched several hundred yards downstream, but unlike the other two, he has yet to wet his line. He stands stock still, crouched over the water, studying its surface, much like a biologist over a microscope, focused on a Petri dish full of bacteria. In later years, I will come to recognize this same pose in that of a heron as it stands motionless at the edge of a trout-filled pool, observing its quarry. Man and animal, so different, yet so much alike.

After a few limp-wristed casts with my spinning outfit fail to yield even a bump, and having observed a similar lack of results on either side of me, I decide to meander downstream and join Hans. He sees me coming, and pauses his casting long enough to allow me to slip in alongside him. He is a full head taller than I, and has long blonde hair that is almost white, with matching moustache and beard. With his rimless glasses perched precariously on the end of his nose, and his cheeks red from the cold, he reminds me of a benign Santa Claus. I am like a child in the presence of the great "gift giver." And, truly, he has bestowed a gift upon me this morning. For, I would have never dreamed of such an adventure on my own.

As I stand to his left, Hans begins working out line, and makes a short, deliberate cast to his right. As soon as the fly hits the water, its arrival is greeted by a splashy rise, and Hans is into a small trout. He plays it gently, and in no time at all skids it across the surface of the water to his waiting hands. He wets his hand and gently grasps the fish in his enormous hand. With a deftness befitting a surgeon, he carefully removes the fly and releases the fish into the dark water. It is the first time I have ever seen a trout caught on a fly rod. I am in awe.

Almost as if reading my mind, Hans says, "I've got an old Fenwick all rigged up, back in the car. Want to try it out?" I hesitate, and he repeats the offer.

"S-s-sure," I say. He gives me the keys to the car, and in no time at all I am back at his side, holding the fly rod stiffly, almost warily, uncertain how to begin using this strange instrument. I am not sure I can do this, and I stand there like a statue, waiting for the proverbial pigeon.

Hans smiles down at me, tucks his rod under his arm, and shows me how to thread the line and leader through the guides. He is careful to double the line, "...so it won't slip back through the guides."

“Now, Joey,” he says. “Just practice for a while without a fly, ‘til you get the hang of it.” He is the only person, other than my mother, whom I will allow to call me by the diminutive of my name. I nod in agreement, and move downstream to begin my assignment.

Watching Hans out of the corner of my eye, I begin to imitate his rhythmic movements. Soon I am false casting like a pro (or at least I think I am). I have noticed several flies on the water, and sporadic splashes indicating rising fish, so I implore Hans to give me a fly.

“Just keep practicing,” he says. “You’ll only break it off anyway.”

“I’ll pay you for damn thing,” I reply sarcastically. “Just give me a fly, will you!”

I am growing impatient by the second (and gaining false confidence). *Damn Dutchman’s such a cheapskate*, I think. Then I realize how foolish my thoughts are. After all, he *has* been generous enough to share this experience with me in the first place—and it’s *his* rod that I’m using.

Reluctantly, Hans extracts a dark gray fly from the little round plastic fly box he carries in his vest pocket and extends his hand. “Here,” he says. “Don’t lose it. I don’t have that many.” I shuffle over and take the fly, my face creased with a broad smile. “Thanks,” I say. “I won’t lose it.” Then, almost as an afterthought, I add, “I promise.”

I shuffle tentatively downstream until I am safely out of Hans’ casting range. With fingers that tremble as much from anticipation as the cold, I carefully tie the fly to the end of the tippet. The square knot with which I affix the fly seems secure enough, and at last I am ready to try my hand at fly-fishing.

My heart beats faster than usual as I begin to false cast. The first attempt ends abruptly when the fly catches on the sleeve of my shirt. With numb fingers I manage to extract the fly from the flannel material (no vest yet) and try again. This time I succeed in getting the fly in the air, and begin working out line as I had observed Hans do earlier.

As soon as the fly hits the water I’m into a fish, and just as quickly I’m not! I shrug and begin false casting again, this time watching the water for signs of rising fish. Soon I spot a rise just upstream from where the last fish was hooked, and deliver my fly to immediate vicinity. Instantly, the water erupts, and a fat 10-inch trout impales itself upon my fly. This time I am ready, and force myself not to overreact, playing the finny adversary carefully until I am able to bring him to my waiting hand.

I caught and landed five more trout that day. I didn’t know for sure whether they were brown, brook, or rainbow (I would later find out that they were indeed, browns) and, no, I didn’t lose that fly! But, none of that mattered. I had begun a love affair with an activity that would serve me well for the rest of my life. That evening, I actually bought that fly outfit from Hans, and many years later gave it to a boyfriend of my stepdaughter.

It has been nearly thirty years since that day on Schoharie Creek, and I have fished for trout in Vermont, New Hampshire, and North Carolina. I've traveled as far as Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia to fish for Atlantic salmon. I have fished "under the light" at New York's Montauk Point, in vain attempts to capture striped bass, and I have landed five-pound largemouth's on the fly. My knots now have names like clinch (both regular and improved) and palomar. The leaders are hand-tied, and my landing net comes from the Katadan region of Maine. When I cast, my loops are tighter, and the rod is graphite. I have been privileged to meet some of the biggest names in fly-fishing, and have fished alongside good friends, as well as strangers.

There have been many improvements and acquisitions, and numerous experiences over these many years. But, every once in a while, on a day like today, my mind will recall that special day, the most important day of my fishing life. The day I first caught a fish on a fly. As the late Jackie Gleason would have said, "HmMMM.... How sweet it is!"

The End