

A Fishing Girlfriend

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For years I didn't fly fish, but then I started looking longingly at rivers.

Like someone who had lost faith and stopped attending church, I missed the ritual of tying—placing the hook in the vice and following the thread as I added the tail, body, and hackle to the finished fly. I missed getting up before the first hatch, pouring coffee in a thermos; and I even missed donning clammy waders left in the car the night before. These held the same kind of significance that singing, bowing my head, and wearing my Sunday best did; except, perhaps, fishing meant more.

Many years ago, I was in love with a young man who was in love with fish. He read about fish, talked about fish, dreamed about fish, so naturally, his major in college was Fisheries. I refer to him now as “Fish-boy,” though not unkindly. Early on, I realized that to spend time with Fish-boy, I would have to learn his sport and join his trips to the remotest lakes and rivers. I also had to tolerate his contempt for mere gear and bait brutes. He was a fly fisherman, so trout and steelhead were his passion. I learned eventually my place on his list of passions.

Some of the best meals of my life were of trout cooked on a campfire and paired with beans and canned beer. My freezer was full of slabs of fin-clipped steelhead, rows of trout, and the occasional lingcod from when we mixed things up and ventured out on saltwater to bounce jigs off the bottom. “These are heavy lures,” I would tease him. “Not flies.” He would just

smile and bring up a gaping rockfish, and my mouth would water. Those glorious fillets spoiled me so much that I can no longer order fish in restaurants—it's never fresh enough, and it's not sauced with the hunger of rocking on a wave-pitched boat or wading a river all day endlessly casting into an eddy.

The problem with my plan to be his fishing girlfriend is that people who fly fish together without the aid of a boat are rarely actually together. My boyfriend would drift off in his float tube, leaving me on shore, or he would push through the tangled thickets to places where I had no hope of casting. I had to venture back to angle the clear places he had rejected along the way. “Are you okay here?” he'd ask over his shoulder. “Sure,” I would say to his back as it disappeared in the dense overhanging brush.

The benefit of being alone so long with his second-best rod and reel was that I came to enjoy fishing for what it is:

a meditative sport. The long hours put into stalking a fish or working a promising hole or run gave me focus, which erased all else on my mind. Perfecting my roll cast in a tight spot or mending over and over in strong current was not boring when my target was a gulping monster within reach. During the two years I dated Fish-boy, I caught a few fish on the fly. Those hookups and landings were thrilling, but they certainly weren't enough to sustain me all those other days I stood on the shore, alone, watching him float by.

My painful and prolonged break-up with Fish-boy, which denied me access to all his tackle, brought my fishing days to an end. Then I felt the urge to take it up again. I listened to my many angler friends talk of rivers, and their stories of raising beautiful fish and stalking dark shadows in quiet pools stirred the mystical in me. I had

fantasies of lifting an improbable goddess out of the water, feeling the solid muscle under her skin, and letting her go. Hooking her, raising her, then releasing her—a fitting metaphor, perhaps.

But the thrill of actually catching a fish is less attractive to me than the process of thinking about fish while knee-deep in a cool eddy. It is spiritual and restorative to think about fish, partly because you cannot think about fish and people at the same time. If you are thinking about the man floating away from you, you aren't thinking about those flashes of silver swallowing minnows in the cool water ahead of you, so there would be no chance you would pick a white streamer with glinting metallic threads from your box and twitch it like an injured fry until a fat rainbow latches on, which would cause you to whoop for joy, not because you have fooled an animal with a brain the size of a lentil, but because someone across the lake in a float tube is going to be mighty jealous.

