

the GIFT of HOME

illustrated by
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Waters

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*In the pools of a languid little river,
an angler finds his grasp is well suited to his new reach.*

IF A FISHERMAN IS FORTUNATE, he has a watery place he calls his own. He may not have legal title to the spot, probably doesn't, considering the slipshod habits and depleted finances of us "brothers of the angle," but he has made it his own by fishing it often and sometimes well. He has claimed his water by casting and catching, by watching and studying.

If fortune has indeed shone brightly upon him, a fisherman's home waters are running waters that are clear enough that he can see a fish eat his fly, or approach, investigate and turn away, having found some flaw in the offering. Either act can be instructive.

Like most fishermen, I've called many bodies of water my own, and some of them I have known intimately, known their moods, their pleasures and their occasional disappointing ways. They have taught me much about fishing and fish, and they have allowed me to learn lessons beyond fishing.

Other waters I have only trifled with, knowing from the start that they would at best make do until I found a better piece of water. Something about them wasn't right. I wouldn't delight in those waters for long; we simply happened to come together for a time, and the water gave up fish, perhaps very good fish, but it had no spirit. The water was nothing special, just another lovely reach of water, and beauty alone cannot define home waters.



Occasionally, those home waters you have loved lose their attraction. Maybe the water becomes too predictable; its quirks, once intriguing and charming, are now just tedious. The passion that attracted the fisherman to those waters diminishes to but a smoky wisp of remembrance, something less when the angler wants more. Is that the water's fault or the angler's? Perhaps it is both; either way, it is fatal to the union of man and water.

THE SHORT ROAD HOME

One day a fisherman realizes he has made a decision without thinking, a common enough practice among anglers, and is looking for new home water. His search will not be a single-minded pursuit, no quest for a mythical lost gold mine that might drive a man mad with its promise and futility. He will look when he can, for anglers, like indolent suitors, trust in inevitability; they cleave to the tenets of *mañana*. He will stumble upon the object of his desire in the randomness of everyday life. Like when he turns around in a crowded store and stares into the eyes of a smiling stranger who he feels instantly could be the love of his life, the angler will know only at the moment of discovery when he has found what he is seeking. If that sounds a bit romantic and quixotic, it is. Practicality and angling tend to be mutually exclusive.

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In their truest sense, home waters should be near a fisherman's home, but we needn't be unnecessarily scrupulous about our definition of home. Home waters really are where your heart wants to be, and as my photographer friend Amy Dickerson says, "The heart wants what it wants." That is the way of people and the way of men and water.

My heart, if not my corporeal self, often finds its home in eastern North Carolina. It is impossible for me not to stop and gaze at the upper reaches of the Alligator River when traveling south on N.C. 94 toward Lake Mattamuskeet, which is a good three hours from my home. In that place and among those people I reclaim a peace that can be elusive elsewhere. As I study the river and note the direction of the wind bending the marsh grasses, I float around the first

bend and recall places that should have produced fish and didn't, others that shouldn't have surrendered fish and did. I'd like to figure out that water some day. It's a good place for the quiet study of the mystery that is fishing.

Today my home waters are but a short drive away. I didn't find these waters on my own; they were a gift from my daughter, Betsy, who one day said, "Daddy, you want to go fishing? I know a place."

And indeed she did. She led me to a beautiful little river that runs through a suddenly hilly portion of the Piedmont, a place that requires little imagination to believe might be at the edge of the mountains. The river cuts between two bluffs, and the riffing water flows quickly into a large, clear, rocky pool. The stream falls into more riffles, and another pool lies in the shadow of a tall white bridge. I have waded this entire stretch and never found water deeper than 2 or 3 feet.

It is a dark place in the afternoons, shadowy but pleasant still and cool in the summer, a shady place to escape and mend lines and lives. In the mornings, the sun shines hard on the river and into your eyes. On the banks grow pines, mixed hardwoods and some of the healthiest poison ivy I've ever seen. Hundreds of opened mussel shells cover the banks, the remnants perhaps of some raccoon repast, their white interiors looking like a sudden spring explosion of flowering bloodroot.

They help camouflage the occasional beer bottle or rusted soft drink can. Schools of minnows undulate in the shallows, moving in unison to some piscine cue that is beyond my knowing.

It is truly a place for fishing, yet only once have I encountered other anglers there, an old man in blue jeans and T-shirt flanked by two similarly dressed children, a boy and a girl. They were bait-fishing the spillway pool below the dam that holds back a tiny lake, and the children, hopeful of a bite, were staring down at their red-and-white bobbers like hungry hounds eyeing a bowl of table scraps. The old man had opened a can of Vienna sausages (VY-eenas in this part of the state) and was spearing them with a pocketknife and handing them to the children, who removed the weenies and put them in their mouths without taking their eyes from the water.



The river slides over the 10-foot-tall concrete spillway here, creating the sparkling sound of tumbling water. I was headed for the river proper, and I approached them from behind through the trees. With the sound of water filling their ears, they did not notice me as I stopped to watch and then turned downstream.

AN UNEXPECTED HAVEN

When Betsy and I fished the river, it was a Sunday in May, weeks after the first full flush of spring, but still early enough in the year that leaves on the trees seemed to emit an intense, pulsing green of young plant life. Despite the highway that paralleled the river and the bridge a hundred yards away, we were secluded, alone and laughing in this sanctuary of water.

Because I was unsure of where we would fish, I left my fly rod at home in favor of a couple of ultralight spinning outfits. We began tossing tiny Rapala floating minnows and at once started catching redbreast sunfish. Few of them were of any size, but they were beautiful olive-backed fish, especially the males, who displayed luminous reddish orange bellies typical of the spawning season. They were voracious. I don't recall making more than four consecutive casts without hooking into a fish.

Of the two of us, I caught more fish, but I was doing nothing but fishing. Betsy, standing in flip-flops in the riffles wearing Sofie shorts and a T-shirt, her long blond hair clipped up on her

head and hip cocked to one side, fished with one hand and sent text messages with the other. I couldn't help but think she was sort of missing the point and told her so. She looked at me and laughed, "I'm multitasking, Daddy. I heard that on *Oprah*." We proceeded to catch fish steadily for two hours. Betsy caught the only bass; I caught the only two crappies.

I have all my life been a counter of fish. It is, I am sure, a character flaw that will demand penance, perhaps a few hundred years languishing in a purgatory filled with mimes and devoid of beer. The urge to compile at least a figurative body count dates from my childhood, when I would see my dad come home from Kerr Lake with a big stringer of bass, for that lake in those days produced prodigious numbers of large-mouths. I would count the fish, dull in death on the cool summer grass, as he prepared to clean them. From such innocent beginnings sprang the need to assign a mathematical definition to an activity that needs no definition other than that it exists. Fishing is a simple act comprised of many elements, but ultimately it should be a state of being that results in bliss, not numbers.

And yet I can tell you that on that sunny afternoon in a shady haven in the North Carolina Piedmont, my daughter and I landed and released 38 redbreasts, six bluegills, one largemouth and two crappies. Forty-seven fish.

I could have fished into the evening and continued under white moonlight, but Betsy had

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places to be. I had nowhere to be and in fact spent considerable time wondering where, metaphysically, I was in the world. It was not a new thought. We gathered rods and a tackle box and headed back to the car. I had no

way of knowing that this Sunday would be the last time Betsy and I would fish before she left for college, as she took one large step from childhood into a world of adults.

"I love this place," I told her as I removed my hip waders and arranged tackle in the trunk. She smiled. "It's a good place," she said.

STAKING A CLAIM

In fact, I loved it so much that after work the next day I hurried back to the river, to see if it was truly that good, to make sure it retained its nature from one day to the next. If the first afternoon had been some liquid illusion, I wanted to know now. In an hour I caught 18 fish, all redbreasts but for a single bluegill.

I claimed the river that day, fishing alone on a warm spring evening. Over the next few weeks I returned to my new home waters several times, almost always with success. As the months heated up, I began to stay away. Without rain the river would be too low, and besides, the summer promised to be hectic, as Betsy busied herself with friends, work and preparations for college. Careless of our days and hours, she and I didn't worry when we couldn't fit a little fishing into any particular afternoon. And then, inevitably, all of our days to come became days that used to be and she was gone. I knew that May afternoon would not be the last time we fished, but I knew it marked the end of something I thought would never end.

September was hot, and I did not return to my home water that month. Only in October, with the arrival of the first cool days and nights of autumn, did I find the desire and the need to fish



the river again. Home water, or really any stretch of water, is a good place when you're weary of considerations and need to let your thoughts flow like floodwaters hunting the dry back reaches of creeks. I don't know where that's likely to go better. Only one person

knew I was fishing, and that seemed enough.

The day that I waded the river again had turned hot, into the mid-80s. I had dressed in a long-sleeved khaki shirt to hold back the early morning chill, but by 10 o'clock, I was wiping sweat from my forehead and my eyes, and my shirt was dark and wet in places and sticking to my chest. The fishing was good, and I landed a redbreast on my third cast. My next cast brought another to my feet. Soon I felt a harder, more determined strike and reeled in a small largemouth. I had crimped the barb on the popping bug's hook, so I had no need to lift the bass from the water to release it. A quick flick of my wrist and the green-and-white fish darted for the darker, swifter current of the far bank, where the water foams against crumbling red clay.

Later, I climbed on a large gray rock at the river's edge to answer my cell phone. Normally I don't carry that impediment to solitude when I'm fishing, but today, after several dark, difficult days, I needed this call, needed the peace it might bring. Afterward, I sat watching the river glide past and the minnows swirl. I resisted the urge to fish, afraid to disturb the intimate universe I had fashioned between these banks.

STREAMSIDE MUSINGS

A crow cawed and landed in the very top of a slender pine, its weight bending the tip of the tree to such a point that I doubted the bird could maintain its tenuous perch. Resting on its side in the farther pool lay the tub of an ancient washing machine, carried over the dam by heavy September rains. Many years ago, perhaps, a country housewife had folded her arms and

smiled as she proudly watched her children march off to school in clothes washed clean by her modern machine purchased at a dear price. She had saved her money carefully to make her family's life better. Now her dream had come to this, a battered piece of junk, used up and thrown away. I trust she got all the good out of it.

I had let my fly line and bug drift in the still pool and suddenly felt a quiver in my rod. Another redbreast had eaten the untended fly on the dead drift. I began to think of fishing and, instead of popping the bug, let it float as it would. The fish responded more vigorously, nearly every other cast bringing to hand a redbreast or the occasional bluegill.

I fished down the river, through the next series of riffles and into the far pool, beyond which a long, flat stretch of slow-moving water begins. The lower pool proved empty. I longed to fish that deeper, darker reach, where lay-downs and snags provide a haven for fish. The unfamiliar water seemed to whisper to me, promising that I might land the catch of my life if only I would try. Broken lines and lost flies would be the price for bigger, better fish. I was willing to pay that price. The dark water was my future, uncertain and tantalizing. For now, the bite was over. I was done. It was time to move on.

I walked along the bank, except when forced to wade because of shrubs and trees that grow thick and close to the river. The sun gleamed on the water, and it was hot on my face as I turned to take the day's last look at my home waters. I could still see Betsy fishing from the riffles as she had that day in May. I'm sure I can find her there still, laughing and talking and pulling fish from the clear water.

I climbed the steep slope through the trees and onto the shoulder of the road. An old man in a green pickup truck freckled with rust smiled when he saw me and raised two fingers to the bill of his cap as I carried my gear to the car. I grinned and raised my rod in a salute.

I'd like to think that when he returned home, he might tell his wife of having seen some younger fellow fishing his spot on the river, the very place he had taken her one bright Saturday afternoon before wrinkles and heartaches eroded their faces. "That was so long ago," she might say, but still smile at the memory and tug at her housedress to straighten it. "We did have fun there." More likely, he was just a man who, in the manner of old country men, waved at everybody and thought nothing special of seeing me walking from the river.

I leaned against the hood of my car for a few minutes, studying the calm surface of the little lake and considering, in the single-minded manner of anglers, how I might fish those waters. Leaves still held to trees, but they were surrendering the tired, worn-out green of summer and turning yellow, red and orange, a final salute to a season of life that presaged the drawn-out death of another year. Despite the heat of the day, when the wind freshened and I lifted my eyes toward the sky, I could smell winter. Change was coming. Dark, cold days were on the way, and I was not yet ready. I shivered at what lay ahead.

I wanted to linger in the autumn sun, soak up its warmth and let the breeze dry the sweat on my face, but life apart from water and fish was waiting. Practical matters demanded attention, and I had postponed them long enough. I had learned something in the river that morning, a couple of things I guess, and it all had been as simple as closing one door and opening another, the way you might as you drift through an empty house one final time before locking up and leaving the key on the kitchen counter for the new owner.

I reached in my pocket for my car keys and found a small stone I had picked up from the river, a souvenir that in weeks to come I would take from a shelf and touch to recall this day, this one good time in the dying of the year when I had found fish and answers in the water. As I drove away, I realized, too, that I had forgotten to count my fish. ♦

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