

## ***VII: growth***

As a final romance with the aquatic world before six weeks of confinement care of hip surgery, I scaled up all by my lonesome to conduct a little freshwater predation in the Lake Almanor area, to sleep outside in the montane breeze and under shimmering stars, to feel the warmth outside and inside gifted by a snug little campfire and an icy beer, to immerse my body and my mind in the water and woods that hold such a sway over me. Despite being the fourth time I'd visited Almanor, it was, like every other time I get even the tiniest bit away from the bump and grind of daily, civilized life, a mind trip. While the previous episodes taught me lessons in fish, this one was unique: it was an anthropology class.

The campground I pitched my little tent at was about as close to bringing home to the Wild as you could get: all parking spaces and roads paved with pothole-free asphalt; potable water available at every other campsite; and bathrooms abundant and, for being in a campground, frighteningly clean. Located right off the main highway, the campground's easily accessible, which, given my damaged hip, was why I chose it - and part of the reason why my fellow vacationers chose it, too.

Although we shared common ground by temporarily living in the same space, my vacationing neighbors and I - we differed. Nearly all of 'em had this...*look* to 'em. Most chicks and dudes displayed either tramp stamps on the lower-middle back or cheesy bicep tats, respectively. Me? Tattoo-less. Most guys hoisted fat beer bellies below which hung, precariously, trendy polyester athletic shorts, while I was unusual by being trim. The women were frequently scorched with tanning-salon orange skin and with platinum-blond highlights in brunette or black hair. Nearly all, both sexes, puffed and huffed one cig after another. Nearly all arrived not with a little tent, a sleeping bag, and a small stove, but a giant fucking RV toled by a huge fuck-me truck with a lift kit and garish, custom rims. All chugged one brew after another, Coors and Budweiser and Miller and every other shitty American beer that's cheap and comes in cans and in suitcases.

The contrast extended to the water. At the mouth of Hamilton Branch, piles of big, lovely put-and-grow and wild 'bows in the 18- to 24-inch range basked in the highly oxygenated, clear, cold water pouring in from the tributary. Fittingly given the balmy summer weather and the nearby road, the banks were crawling with Ugly Stick-outfitted vacationing weekend-warrior fishermen bombing huge Roostertails, gobs of PowerBait, and softballs of worms suspended under mammoth red-and-white bobbers. Blend in with the pines and firs and rocks they did not: fluorescent chartreuse caps shrouded fatty heads, dayglow-orange baseball jerseys didn't quite hang low enough to shield furry beer guts, and sky-blue athletic shorts threatened to shimmy down cottage-cheese asses. Not surprisingly, their fishing success stunk like a skunk - in fact, until a generous fly guy kicked down some small nymphs (the 'bows only wanted mayfly nymphs in size 16 swam very slowly ether across the current or downstream) to an Ugly Sticker, I was the only gear guy to have landed a nice fish. With at least one other gear guy now besides me with the right lure, I still easily outfished all the spinning-rod-toting dudes, so much so that one came over to me and politely asked, "Man, you're doing really well - mind if I ask how you're catching 'em?" I gave this guy the alchemy: 4-lbs fluorocarbon tippet at least 18 inches long; #16 pheasant tail or hare's ear nymph in dark brown or olive; and very slow retrieve with or perpendicular to the current. But I stopped short of giving the guy these tools, of which I had extras of all.

The experience recurred when I ran into a husband-wife team with a baby up at Mountain Meadows Reservoir. They were, consistent with my campground brethren, obese, ugly people, rippling waves of adipose flesh paining each monumental step they took. The guy, kind of a cheery, Kris Kringle look-a-like, asked courteously if it was okay if he and his wife fished beside me; unlike what I probably would've said 15 years ago, I replied in the affirmative, saying that yes, of course it's fine for 'em to fish next to me. They peppered me with questions about the reservoir's fishery, and, Christ, they needed some answers: they were totally unequipped for the situation, lugging giant Ugly Sticks spooled with sturgeon-sized monofilament that terminated at tuna-sized Kastmasters. So I gave 'em the general pattern - lots of smallish biggies running all over the rock from eight to two feet deep and willing to eat a red-colored plastic worm, a nightcrawler fished close to the lake bed, a small crankbait bounced off the rock, and NOT a 1-oz Kastmaster burned across the surface. The guy thanked me for the info and began fishing, but I noticed out of the corner of my eye that he was bombing out the giant Kastmaster - it at least registered in my subconscious that the guy had no appropriate gear in his tackle box. Meanwhile, I kept bangin' little biggies with every cast of the drop-shotted worm, looking for some fish big enough to kill. I finally realized Kringle lacked any of the correct fishing gear, but I didn't hook him up with one of my plastic worms and associated terminal tackle.

On this trip, perhaps for the first time in my life, my tackle intransigence felt misplaced: every single overweight, tawdry, tobacco-huffin', drunk American that I spoke to was pleasant and polite and totally lacking in pretense. The fat, ugly motherfucker in the campsite across from me, whose name I never got, always woke early in the morning like myself and always said hello to me with genuine kindness. The innocent vulnerability with which the fisherman at Hamilton Branch approached me. The sensitive, sweet manner in which Kris Kringle and his cute little family engaged me at Mountain Meadows. All these people, their openness, their warmth, caused my knee-jerk reaction to degrade these people, these sloppy, gross fuckers, to abate and mutate into more of a contemplative state, more of a seeking-to-understand thought process, because, and believe you me, I did - do - find these people somewhat...*alien*.

The truth, of course, was that *I* was the alien, an iconoclast in an ordinary American social milieu. Therein lies the answer - these were typical, working and lower-middle-class *Americans*. They're creatures of the television, of billboards and urbanized landscapes, of fast-food joints and air conditioning, of smart phones and the visual allure of *stuff* - big fuck-me trucks, overpowered ski boats, big houses (read: RVs) - that signify affluence in this materialistic nation.

The giant RVs are especially startling. When I go camping, I aspire to atavism, to shed as much of the urbanized, domesticated world as I can, so these big fucking RVs, what with their fully equipped kitchens and bathrooms and bedrooms and televisions, just seem to smother the point of camping. I mean, if you're going to bring home with you, then why leave home? Part of it, I can't help but think, is that to these people, camping *IS* the RV - the pretty pictures in Sunset and the glossy, clean images beamed from the TV set and the computer screen are their main sources of what camping, of what the outdoors, actually is. They have no other reference point; they honestly don't know any better. Part of it, too, is that many of them, given their middle-to-lower social tier, are trying to keep up with the Joneses, and few things more ostentatiously boast of money spent than a giant RV. I also wonder how much of this glut of overdeveloped camping is an expression of Western Civilization's theme that man is to conquer Nature, not assimilate into Her.

Nevertheless, the major reason why these bloated fuckers bring home with 'em to go camping is this: it's the only way they know how to get into the Wild to free themselves from the shackles of daily, civilized life. Here, with their big ol' RV, they can at least crack a brew at noon and not be accused of being alcoholic; they can piss in the water and not be hauled in for indecent exposure; they can zoom around on their ridiculously expensive ski boats without having to worry about seatbelts or carpool lanes or stoplights. And that, that *freedom* they get from the experience, may very well be why these ugly, disgusting fuckers threw me for such a loop by being so sweetly and unexpectedly *humane*.

Yet I didn't reciprocate the generosity these Americans kicked down to me. My stinginess was partially because I didn't soften towards people in the freedom given by Wild, I remained closed, insensitive, while these typical Americans - they did soften. It was also due to the bucks - my bank account has hemorrhaged damn hard for tackle that I've often given to people unappreciative of my generosity. But the nice man at Hamilton, the honey-sweet family at Mountain Meadows, they weren't the parasites that'd latched onto me in the past, but just warm people that I'd likely never see again, people that warmed me with *their* warmth, people that I could've and should've repaid by kicking down just one each of my myriad plastic worms and nymphs. These people, these Americans, in the context of what they perceive as Wild - they were better than me, and y'know - they deserved better of me. Next time in the Wild, better they'll get.