

Carl Bernicker

*Zen and the Art of Fly Fishing is taken but if it weren't that would be my title*

The same night they met he swore to his friends, packed tightly in a huddle, with words drowned out by the crickets singing around him, and of having a cadence strikingly reminiscent of a nervous child's first public acknowledgement of a crush, that her hair was the sun and her eyelids were the stars and their eye contact was music and that she was the point; the definitive period to end his messy-brained sticky-fingered hot-cheeked sweaty-palmed yell when he shouldn't run-on sentence. Now, he was a long way from the hill country he sometimes called home, instead stuck on the far side of this spinning rock hurtling through space, and he was just in the middle of figuring how really, everyone is stuck on this spinning rock hurtling through space anyway, so being stuck is relative, and that he should just focus on the task at hand, and that he's waist deep in water like he always is and things aren't really that different just cause its cold now and everything is getting better and that he can damn well focus on doing his favorite thing just like always when suddenly, with a squirm and a whoosh and a splash, his consciousness definitively leapt into the present and snapped, tightly, around a rising cutthroat trout; its glorious, full body exposed to a sliver of cold sun.

He had come back out to the mountains because it's the only place he felt like he could even breathe at all. It had been like that for longer than he was comfortable admitting. Sometimes, when you feel like you've been running so long you don't notice how bloody your feet are, breathing starts to shift from freedom to obligation.

His legs finally exhaled as he emerged from the cold water. Leaning forward to redistribute his weight through his sliding rubber soles on the wet reeds covering the bank, he shimmied forward, his Orvis and his Sage jutting up in the air like lightning rods. His hat and sunglasses obscured most of his vision, and his eyes traced the reaching reeds until his

boots met the edge of the distinctive orange-red road that hugged the 14-mile bank of the legendary river. Over his shoulder he saw a non-Instagrammed, still-sepia-tinted vision of frothing breaks hugged by clear water, revealing multi-colored rock piles that might hold a layperson's attention for too long while the golden, brown, rainbow, and red-bellied creatures that coalesce in crescendo from current to current go unnoticed. His favorite part had always been the smell. The trees were so thick they blocked the smell of the exhaust and rental-car-parking-garage that the jeeps leave, from all those rich Aspen-my-dog-is-a-pure-bread-and-I-got-my-toe-wrinkles-botoxed-and-they-are-to-die-for ladies. Like an allergy-prone pre-teen trying Claritin for the first time, he felt his nostrils finally allow access to the peaks of his sinuses; cold pine, mulch, water, and the scent of scale from his hands touched between his eyes and reached up to cleanse the inside of his forehead.

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White River National Forest had become Finn's home after he drove up from Texas in a Jeep full of his past. He insisted on driving up separately from his father. He didn't want to make two trips. The water that flowed through his legs turned from the deeply green Barton Creek to the pristine Roaring Fork. Nowadays, he noticed the difference in smells less and less. His rod started to feel lighter, his knots stronger, and quicker. More decisive. He liked to think it wasn't that he forgot, he was just good at not remembering.

"Total fucking avoidance of the past" Ginny called it.

"It's really not. I promise. It's in the opposite direction- just this struggle to be present. I just think if you're always living somewhere else mentally your frame of reference is fucked, y'know? Like this entire medium which you translate experience into self is f--"

"FINN."

"Sorry sorry, fuck, sorry." Finn hoped he wasn't doing it again.

“Look,” he consciously inserted a pause. “How about you finally come visit me. Visit me and I’ll take you and I’ll show you what I mean. We’ll be so close to each other and to it all and you’ll understand. I promise. It’s just how it works.” Ginny couldn’t help but think about hollow Finn’s voice sounded. Finn could barely discern her mumble before he heard those telling three beeps:

“Must be such shitty reception in the mountains, huh.”

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Finn and Bernard’s drive through Independence Pass was a smoky conversation about the benefits of euro-nymphing versus dry flies. Bernard serenaded Finn with a brutal version of hot-cross buns on a truck-stop harmonica. Finn swore that it was the best view he ever looked at when he peed. They saved their money by stringing up hammocks off the cold trailhead, where a poorly started fire led to a different smoky conversation on the benefits of pheasant tails versus midges, and a thick, friendly group of trees helped insulate the friends from the society they purported to be so unenthused by. With morning came a dew scent that the sharp air helped propel far up their runny nostrils, and backed by a curtain of unfamiliar birdcalls, Finn and Bernard were ushered out onto the unrivaled Colorado Gold Medal Water of the Frying Pan River; shimmering, alive with hidden life under the sun, light winking with the promise of what Finn referred to as ‘all the deep breaths they could help themselves to.’

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Gravel crunched underfoot just loud enough to grant a welcomed reprieve from forced conversation, as a discrepancy in fish netted was plaguing the air with awkward urgency. Fishing etiquette would dictate that Bernard relax – maybe grab a beer from the Jeep. Finn, to put it lightly, was getting skunked. A disaster-ridden morning full of tangled lines and faulty knots left Finn short on both flies and temper. Finn would curse and throw

his rods when he missed setting a hook alone, and Bernard's consistent success at pulling fish out of the water, made known to Finn by Bernard's vocal method of retrieval, caused Finn to gradually expand the gap between their portions of the river. The idealized image Finn had become so attached to in the weeks leading up the expedition, the one of Finn becoming a smaller and smaller figure, rhythmically and quietly pulling out fish in between those beautiful, indulgent-smelling, every-shade-of-green trees; platoons leading separate assaults up the rock faces to the clouds; those clouds, the ones that had always promised to provide perspective- slowly, and then all at once, was shattered by the awful onslaught of reality. The magic gurgle of the river lost in the deafening noise of all those songs stuck in his head that hurt too badly to listen to.

"This is fucking unbelievable. Gold Medal Water is bullshit it's so overfished, these fish are so far from wild they've been caught a million times. The only way to catch them is to throw the wrong shit – only chance you have is to catch them by surprise, by something they *might* randomly eat." Finn was intent on focusing on keeping this rant going. He didn't want to latch on to one of the voices in his crowded mind trying to drag him away. Finn was so zoned in on keeping this up that he barely noticed it starting to rain, the once calm, crystal-clear river rippling with millions of disruptions cast down from the sky.

Bernard's obliviousness faded as the cold feel of the rain on the back of his neck jolted him to action. Cautiously, Bernard extended a "Finn. You know I've always been jealous of your mentality. On the way up here, a million times, you told me, man, you said it. You said 'B. It's called fishing, not catching. Its about the knots and the shit around you.' All that shit, man, you remember? Yeah, man. You got it. You know I love you, man, we're gonna catch plenty of fish." Finn hoped he hadn't sounded anything like that when he gave color to his passion on the drive up.

“Fuck it, man, we had a solid day. You were casting like a machine just dropping flat all over water. Talking *tight* curls. We’ll go fish wild tomorrow and you’ll get so much breath your lungs’ll burst. Don’t exactly have an oxygen tank for tonight but we got resources no doubt. We’ll just bounce now. Get drunk and listen to 48 Phish albums. Let Trey facemelt your troubles away.”

The trade off between drinking whiskey and untying the 100<sup>th</sup> knot of the day made the decision easier than usual for Finn to give up fishing so early, and the duo made the drive back up the pass, the smell of soggy wading boots and floatant forcing them to roll the windows down, the thin, cold air whipping their ears back and forth, granting reprieve from conversation once again.

While Finn and Bernard re-set up camp, the soft ground giving off a smell of soggy, full wood, they listened to a raucous group of bugs have a shouting match and found comfort in the burn of whiskey and the feeling of physically securing a shelter for the evening. The sun had a few hours left above the mountains while the boys sat in the front seats of Bernard’s Jeep. Bernard was a total fish bum; the stitching of the tan, starter material of his seats were seemingly held in place by pink, green, white, yellow, big, little, small, you-name-it-type flies for every condition from Iceland to Russia, hook deep in the lining of the entire vehicle. When Finn drew it in his notebook it came out like Dr. Seuss’s Truffula Tree Forest.

Bernard’s whiskey was smiling through him, calling up a type of nostalgia only accessible under a select few conditions, pretty much all of which involved old friends he’d fished with and alcohol without access to a chaser. He reached forward to turn up the battle between reception and static that was taking place on air. “Can you believe this song came out when we were in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, dog? Bar mitzvah season. A girl’s arms on your shoulders was the 24 inch high-alpine cutbow trout of your existence. I was dating that girl Channing –

you remember?” Finn exhaled before he took another sip, looking out the window to fake instantaneous inspiration.

“I think the only thing more beautiful than fishing is climbing. Fishing is quiet and you get out there but I think rock climbing is really the best because you just can’t justify it, like, people have always needed to catch fish but no one needs to climb a fucking rock, y’know?”

“Dude. What are you saying” Bernard fake-heismaning the bottle away from Finn. “Maybe you’ve had enough of the thinky-juice for this evening, huh?”

“Dude I just think the value system in fishing is upside-downer than fuck. You have one good day of fishing, which is essentially dictated by how many fish you catch- yeah, I know I said all that shit early but if I needed to eat a fish tonight and if I was on my own I’d be hungry and fucked, so- yeah, and then every other day of fishing that isn’t that *best* day of fishing can’t live up to it until you get that one new best one. Then it fucking sucks again.”

The silence that fell was not as welcome this time around. Finn told himself that his cheeks were hot because they had been blasting the hot air for too long. Bernard could’a swore it was the whiskey.

“Sorry,” Finn said. “I didn’t mean half that... just. Yeah.”

Bernard softened. “Man don’t worry for a second. Do you wanna tell me one of those riddles you were talking about earlier or something?”

Finn said on the back end of a loud gulp: “Not a riddle dog, I was talking about a Zen story. It’s just all that Zen stuff I’ve been obsessed with this lately. Its like, a little verbal meditation pill that just makes you think and realize – it just drops the floor out from under you until you’re like ‘*fuck*’ that’s profound. I found all these old books in my house about mindfulness, being in the present. These things are like a hack or some shit.”

“I’ll bite.”

“Ha. Nice.”

“Hrmh?” Bernard couldn’t enunciate mid-swig of whiskey.

“Nothing. Anyway, so there was this farmer. His farm was on the outskirts of this village, and bordered a big forest. One day, while he was like, tending his sheep near the edge of his land, a tiger came out of the trees, growling.”

“Does the-“

“-shhhhh, it won’t take long. Anyway, so, the tiger ends up coming after the farmer, and the farmer runs into the forest. Just as he thinks he loses the first tiger, right, like, a second tiger comes at him from the opposite direction. He makes a break I guess cause he’s in like ballin’ shape or whatever but busts out the forest and is at the edge of a cliff. He hops over Indiana style –”

“ – Which one? –”

“ – Raiders obviously, and is hanging by this branch and looks down and there are fat tigers below him snapping up at like his feet and shit and he’s just screwed.” Finn pivoted to face Bernard. “And then, when it could not get *any* worse, two rats come out of a hole in the cliff. And they start chewing on the branch... And, just at that very moment, the farmer noticed this solitary little flower on the branch. And it looked so beautiful.”

There was only the sound of the hot air wheezing through the old broken vents in the fuzzy, color-coated interior of the Jeep.

Whiskey propelled by Bernard’s sudden laugh arched gracefully onto a particularly pink wooly booger: “Duuuuuuude. Hahahaha, what the fuck. You know what a story is? Like something happens?? There is a climax, an ending. Falling action. Bro, Miss Costello would be ashamed of you as fuck. Ah, wow. What?”

Finn’s cheeks were as hot as his whiskey-basked stomach lining. Those voices singing those songs started to report for mic check, and the threat of remembering that

fateful night loomed above him; triple stacked speakers with amps turned to 11. He felt it coming in his heart and in his bones and before it got there. Anything but that, anything but that, not her, not now, not while he was out here – because he came out here to not have to deal with that – and not while the sun is going down kind of like it did before, and *fuck* he's been trying so hard.

*"Fuck you,"* he choked, *"you don't –"* but Finn couldn't finish. The thick wave of anxiety had spread from the bottom of his lungs to his lower back and the pressure was too much- he jumped out of the car. Snagging the bottle from Bernard's hand with a nearly hollow ding, and taking one last swig, he scrambled up the rocky path and into the darkness. Finn ran and ran until he made sure he was so fatigued, all that could touch his mind was exhaustion. Eventually the winding roots that interrupted any chance at an even running cadence got the better of him and he suddenly, violently, lost his footing on a particularly slippery foothold.

Finn gingerly brushed his bloody, gravel-dented hands off on his pants. He looked at his hands, and then at the ground, allowing his vision to trace the gravel forward. The rock face his vision encountered was jagged, but in a way that had substantial room and platforms. It was almost welcoming. He ignored the fading pain from his knees and messily swung his arm into eyeshot. The hands on his watch informed him that sunset was in about ninety minutes. Finn, having arrived at a particular type of intersection between pains, anxieties, fatigue, and drunkenness started to think deeply about the possibilities. The way people do sometimes when they're drunk and they think the decision they are about to make is all defining; its so big that they can't see over it or around it: They can only see behind themselves, and this fork. The fork that might bring some semblance of validity to everything that preceded it.



Maybe it was because he stopped paying attention. Or maybe it was the Universe's love of stark transitions. Or maybe it's a combination of confirmation bias and luck, but all those screams finally broke through that bubble-thin layer of silence he had distracted into existence for so long.

Lurching to his knees, Finn was swallowed by the howls of his doubts. Maybe the shitty conversations and the shitty memories and the shitty brokenness that had wound around his lungs for so long had all been brought here to be laid to rest; maybe she'd fade away and her colors wouldn't be so bright that he needed those sunglasses he always wore and maybe that conversation - "Fuck it," he breathed, moisture disrupting the surface of his eyes, inhaling breaths as jagged as the rock face that had so clearly been waiting for him for so long.

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Finn was a body woven around breath and grip. When the rain came, he was high above the tallest aspen trees near him, and the thunder threatened to shake him off the edge. In the distance, he might have heard himself screaming, shrieking – like he might have felt the warm cracks start to form in his throat. The tears and memories beating down on him now indistinguishable from the rain, Finn tried to gasp, trapped in a vacuum of horror and regret and realization. Stuck.

When the rain came it brought the clouds with it. The clouds brought the lightning, and the thunder, and the wind, and the wind and the thunder waged war on those platoons of trees, the darkened clouds watching, waiting expectantly overhead. And it was so beautiful.