

Fishing With Ernest

“What’ll we drink to?” Nick asked holding up the glass.

“Let’s drink to fishing,” Bill said.

“All right,” Nick said. “Gentlemen, I give you fishing.”

“All fishing,” Bill said. “Everywhere.”

– The Three Day Blow

I’VE BEEN FORTUNATE IN HAVING FISHED and journeyed with many partners, but a special few stand alone as true masters, pushing their talents to a higher level. Techniques refined by years of experience are like the finely honed edges of their knives, and secret tools can be found stashed away in well-traveled tackle boxes. The outside surfaces of the boxes are worn and show scars of traveling many bumpy roads, while the insides contain valuable treasures amassed through time, devotion, and desire. They seem bottomless, and are filled with meticulously organized tools of the craft, including wide assortments of hooks, true and sharp, with points that penetrate deep into the toughest of tissue; long stringers, durable and strong, capable of holding innumerable amounts of catch.

I first met Ernest about fifteen years ago—he was said to be one of these special few, and I was anxious to travel with him and gain some new experiences. I immediately enjoyed his perspective and style as he kept his words to a minimum, his direction clear, his ideas powerful. Underneath a minimal exterior, deeper thoughts swam below the surface, and I knew I would learn a lot from him.

“To me heaven would be a big bull ring with me holding two barrera seats and a trout stream outside that no one else was allowed to fish in...”

Our first fishing trip took us to Havana where we met a man named Harry Morgan. Harry owned a fishing boat and was having a hard time making a living, always struggling along that fine line of “have” and “have nots.” Through his toughness and attitude however, he always found a way to bring money home to his family, even if that sometimes meant working for people he didn’t really care for. One of those individuals was Mr. Johnson, who had chartered Harry’s boat for a day of fishing. That day didn’t go very well, and Johnson ended up losing a large fish after a long and strenuous fight. I listened to Harry as he told the story.

“I can still feel him pull,” Johnson said.

“That’s the weight of the line.”

“I can hardly reel it. Maybe he’s dead.”

“Look at him,” I said. “He’s still jumping.”

You could see him out a half mile, still throwing spouts of water. I felt his drag. He had it screwed down tight. You couldn’t pull out any line. It had to break.

“Didn’t I tell you to keep your drag light?”

“But he kept taking out line.”

“So what?”

“So I tightened it.”

“Listen,” I told him. “If you don’t give them line when they hook up like that they break it. There isn’t any line that will hold them.”

Later on, Harry became involved in running contraband from Key West to Cuba. Rebels were at war against the established Cuban government, and hired him to help their cause. At first, he didn’t have loyalty to either political group and was interested only in the money, but as he became more involved, mounting pressure and aggression by the Cuban loyalists caused him to side with the rebels. As the loyalists pulled tighter on Harry’s freedom, he finally snapped and ended up offering all his help to the rebels. This included rejecting a large sum of money offered by the opposing group.

I remembered back to when I was first introduced to Harry, and the story about the lost fish. I thought of how the line ‘had’ to break, and the relationship of the pressure Harry felt while working for the rebels. I asked Ernest about the symmetry of events, but he didn’t offer any insight. All in all, it was quite an adventure, and I thought it would make a good movie if you had the right actor to play Harry Morgan.

After leaving Havana, we journeyed up north where I was introduced to Nick Adams, who was very much like Ernest himself, and enjoyed the outdoors and fishing. On my first trip with Nick, we went to Horton’s Bay, near an old lumber mill. Horton’s Bay used to be a thriving town, but over time it had died out, diminished to an aging memory. The wide array of machinery that had been necessary for the mill to function was long gone. Accompanying Nick was his girlfriend, Marjorie, who also held many memories of these waters. Nick and Marjorie trolled along the edge of the bay fishing for rainbow trout, and I was to find out that this was the last time they would be together.

“There’s our old ruin, Nick,” Marjorie said.

Nick, rowing, looked at the white stone in the green trees.

“There it is,” he said.

“Can you remember when it was a mill?” Marjorie asked.

“I can just remember,” Nick said.

“It seems more like a castle,” Marjorie said.

Nick said nothing.

I asked Ernest if they were talking about Horton’s Bay or their failing relationship, but he only gave me a sneer. I never knew for certain what he was thinking—and he wasn’t going to tell me.

A few years later, we caught up with Nick at a place called Big Two Hearted River. Nick was a lot different then, and seemed to be trying to get over some tough times. Although Ernest never mentioned it, Nick appeared to have just gotten back from the war. Hiking to camp, his military training was obvious as he kept his position with the river, walking parallel to it and always keeping it in sight.

Near the fishing spot was a town in ruins, a massive fire having burned all the buildings to the ground. The entire countryside was darkened and Nick noticed small grasshoppers living amongst the burnt terrain, black from living in the dark soot, victims of their environment. I wondered what it was like where Nick fought in the war—if the terrain was similar. Getting ready

“Guy loves a couple or three streams all his life and loves ‘em better than anything in the world—falls in love with a girl and the goddamn streams can dry up for all he cares. Only the hell of it is that all that country has as bad a hold on me as ever—there’s as much of a pull this spring as there ever was—and you know how it’s always been—just don’t think about it at all times, but at night it comes and ruins me—and I can’t go.”

to fish, Nick's actions seemed to be part of a ritual, his meticulous arrangement of tackle allowing him to be fully prepared before he confronted the river. While he fished, I had the opportunity to experience him catching and releasing a small trout.

Nick took the line in his left hand and pulled the trout, thumping tiredly against the current, to the surface. His back was mottled the clear, water-over gravel color, his side flashing in the sun. The rod under his right arm, Nick stooped, dipping his right hand into the current. He held the trout, never still, with his moist right hand, while he unhooked the barb from his mouth, then dropped him back into the stream.

He hung unsteadily in the current, then settled to the bottom beside a stone. Nick reached down his hand to touch him, his arm to the elbow under water. The trout was steady in the moving stream, resting on the gravel, beside a stone. As Nick's fingers touched him, touched his smooth, cool, underwater feeling he was gone, gone in a shadow across the bottom of the stream.

He's all right, Nick thought. He was only tired.

He had wet his hand before he touched the trout, so he would not disturb the delicate mucus that covered him. If a trout was touched with a dry hand, a white fungus attacked the unprotected spot. Years before when he had fished crowded streams, with fly fisherman ahead of him and behind him, Nick had again and again come on dead trout, furry with white fungus, drifted against a rock, or floating belly up in some pool. Nick did not like to fish with other men on the river. Unless they were of your party, they spoiled it.

While watching Nick, I thought of him dressed in a camouflaged uniform—a mottled, water-over gravel color. He had survived the war much like the trout had survived its fight; tired, but alive. Nick, like Pontius Pilot washing himself before sentencing, had wet his hands before handling the fish, then released it back into the river where it steadied itself in the shadows of the moving stream. It appeared as though Nick was also trying to steady himself, struggling through his own darkness, while the images of dead fish, furry and white, made me think of all the soldiers that did not make it back—mounds of bodies covered with lye. I asked Ernest what he thought of the spiritual aspects of fishing with Nick, but as expected, I received no comment. Ernest never talked specifically about spirituality or religious beliefs, and this was especially true on our last fishing trip.

I found myself back at the sea, and Ernest introduced me to an old man named Santiago. The old man referred to Christian beliefs many times while he was fishing, but failed to practice those beliefs with great faith.

"I am not religious," he said. "But I will say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys that I should catch this fish, and I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre if I catch him. That is a promise."

He commenced to say his prayers mechanically. Sometimes he would be so tired that he could not remember the prayer and then would say them fast so that they would come automatically. Hail Marys are easier to say than Our Fathers, he thought.

"I have decided that all that mental conversation in the long fishing story is the shit and have cut it all out. The last nine pages. The story was interrupted you know just when I was going good and I could never get back into it and finish it. I got a hell of a shock when I realized how bad it was and that shocked me back into the river again and I've finished it off the way it ought to have been all along. Just the straight fishing."

There were several instances of Santiago's shallow Christian devotion, but one theme seemed to stand out on this trip. I found myself thinking about the concept of immortality throughout this old man's adventure, and his desire to have lived his life to the fullest. Doing something great would always be remembered; whether a momentous event, or overcoming daily obstacles, strong acts of perseverance live forever. It may require immense devotion, will, sacrifice, or suffering, qualities best illustrated when the old man fought a huge marlin while fishing alone in deep waters, the fish testing the strength of his physical and mental stamina.

"Fish," the old man said. "Fish, you are going to have to die anyway. Do you have to kill me too?"

Unyielding agony during the battle continued even after the old man finally pulled the fish in, tying it to the side of the boat. Sailing back to shore, he found himself fighting off a relentless barrage of sharks, their sharp teeth digging deep into the fish, shredding its flesh. He ended up losing the fish to the sharks, and the resulting physical pain from the fight would last for quite some time. He did, however, bring the carcass all the way to shore, completing the trip—a great feat in itself and a story that many of the local fishermen would repeat amongst themselves. Most importantly, he experienced the glory of personal triumph, and the knowledge that he never succumbed to the pressure of the fight.

I didn't ask Ernest about all the fishing trips and what he thought was to be learned. I didn't need to. By this time, I was able to peer into the waters and sense the deepness on my own—Ernest had subtly been teaching me all along. I thought of Harry Morgan, and his financial struggle to provide for his family while wrestling with his own moral standards; of Nick Adams, his personal wounds and deep scars from the war, resulting in a life of healing; of the old man, Santiago, and his momentous battle against the strength of the fish, a story that would live forever in the minds of many fisherman. Through the experiences of these individuals, Ernest had succeeded in sharing his own personal battles and the challenges that many people often face.

Ernest was the consummate fishing partner. In his own distinctive style and technique, he taught me that a quiet voice is often the most powerful. With a wealth of experience and insight, he shared his ideas by providing events that allowed me to learn for myself, the strongest lessons being the ones that are found, not given, with revelation and discovery providing a sense of enlightenment. Although Ernest is no longer alive, these experiences remain immortal, enabling many generations of fishermen to study his work and enjoy his well-charted waters.

Authors Note:

This story was inspired by a class I took that focused on the life and writings of Ernest Hemingway. Although I had read Hemingway years before, I had never studied his earlier work, nor discussed it in depth with other students. Michael O'Laughlin was the instructor, and much like Ernest himself, is a master of his craft.

Starting out as a final paper for the class, this piece evolved into a personal essay that was influenced by my fiction writing. Ernest became my 'fishing partner', helping me develop a great appreciation for the art of fiction.