

Dreaming of Fish

By

Charles Frode

“The Essence of the mind, which is primordially pure, is emptiness. Its nature is luminous clarity, which is spontaneously self-perfected. Its energy is unobstructed and all—pervading...”

Namkhai Norbu

The Cycle of Day and Night

“One’s efforts are directed only to remove one’s ignorance. Afterwards...the real Self is found to be always there. No effort is needed to remain as the Self.”

Ramana Maharshi

Talks with Ramana Maharshi

“Our sophisticated models of reality and precise maps of the World arranged according to our technologically enforced will, our complex schemes to force our future experience into final submission to the constant and instant demands of our desires, will be unpredictably flooded by the infinitely more powerful tides of love. Faced with the fragility of our intention, we will find within us deeper resources to respond to life: a sense of reverence, a feeling of awe, a contemplative clarity of mind less distorted by fear and desire, a more forgiving humility, an awareness of connectedness beyond gain and loss.”

Hermann Hesse

The Seasons of the Soul

You cross over from sleep into consciousness one more time. There is no effort on your part. You wonder how it happens. Your eyes open slowly without your willing intervention. One morning you are the victim, prey, another target, a casualty of waking. Some other morning you awaken magnificently exactly as you breathe in and out without effort, as you swallowed the last drop of last night’s California Merlot, as you see the wrinkles and dark spots of age and experience on the back of your hands, as you move your pillow into its nocturnal sweet spot.

Last night your sleep was fitful, your legs restless. You asked yourself, *Where is sleep?* The night before you dreamed, but the vividness of the scene slipped straight through the fingers of your mind. Tonight you hope sleep will come again. It may, it may not. You spin the little wheel and click on Gerry Mulligan, “Birth of the Cool” this time, maybe you will snap out of it. You listen, wonder how they made such refined music...*what is it, sixty years ago, yeah, sixty. Man,*

can he blow that tenor! But they're all dead now, and you don't hear yourself wondering *how can they be gone yet their music is so...so cool and alive now as it was when they played it then...*

“Mr. Reid, we found a tumor in your occipital lobe, and that's why you...”

You replay the chorus again and again intermingled with its verses. It's malignant. It's inoperable. Split-brain syndrome. You'll gradually comprehend less and less spoken and written language. It will get worse.

On your way to the hospital you wondered why words are so important anyway. Words you speak to Chance and Lily about their mother, words you hear from your coworkers at Heartland Music about your prognosis, Penny's silly affectionate words you used to hear from across the room, heartfelt words you try to scribble to her while you still have time, hopeful words you try to read on the cards and love letters she wrote to you fifteen years ago, simple words she whispers in your ear hoping you can really hear the sound and somehow unscramble the noise and assemble her love for you, the computerized words on your damn chart that denote your death sentence.

You idled in the left turn lane, a final minute to mentally distance yourself from the prognosis you're driving to, but the light shifts suddenly from the red to the green arrow for the billionth time, and you're in a hospital parking space before you know it. Penny turns off the ignition, takes out the key, unbuckles you, you sit back, listen. You're insulated from the world, wish it could be that way forever. Dusk is falling all around you. You remember how pissed off she got on your first date when you called her Penny Loafer and asked her if she had a pair in her closet with a penny in the little leather slot, and she dragged you up to her room and made you look in her closet to see if you could find a pair of Penny Loafers. You looked everywhere but never found any, and you thought it was so cool she would let you rummage around her things like

that, and it smelled like her woman smell, but you didn't remember until you slept with her the first time and you put two and two together. You remember her smell now, the nape of her neck under her long chestnut hair, the soft perfumed meadow under her clavicle bones, the other secret hiding places where her scent is animal, musk, spicy like fresh pine needles you once rubbed between your palms when you both backpacked up in the White Clouds and camped by Fourth of July Lake your first summer together, or like the warm pungent smoke from the maple leaves you raked up and burned the first autumn in your first house together in Boise.

It was just your dumb luck to meet her by the wet and dry flies at Cabela's, and you asked her what her favorite fly was and she said marabou streamer and you said grey hackle peacock body, and she said she tied own, and you said you would like to learn, and you spent evenings after work at her studio apartment tying more marabou streamers and grey hackle peacock bodies than you could ever use on any high country stream you or she ever fished in. After those few days at Penny's place, she drove you up to the White Clouds again in her old Jeep, and you both threw those flies and streamers into Fourth of July Lake, Phyllis Lake, Heart Lake, then on another trip to Boulder, Cirque, Cove, Goat, and Little Redfish Lakes.

You showed her how you cooked trout in bacon fat with some sliced potatoes and onions, and you ate those fish heads and tails until you both had so many bones sticking out that you said you couldn't take off your long underwear in the tent, but she helped you, and you made goose bumps love in that tiny two-man tent to the golden light of the campfire. You went out with her several times on her Forest Service crew inventorying sage-grouse, and then after she checked you out on your high country protocol, you went out with just her, and she showed you deer, elk, moose, and bighorn sheep, and the hot springs at Slate Creek and Bowery. It was only after you saw the magnificence of that area that she mentioned how she was devoting her professional life

to getting those over half a million acres designated as the Boulder-White Clouds National Monument so everyone in the country could come and enjoy nature in its back country splendor.

Suddenly you realize that you will never set foot on those trails again, smell the acrid smoke from the campfires she made, taste the rich flesh of trout cooked over wood, see the sun drop behind the jagged peaks of the Sawtooth mountains, sit in silence by the woman you love as the fire crackles and snaps, hold a hot cup of campfire coffee in your shivering hands as you wait for the morning sun to appear, walk the trails with Penny knowing she was going to surprise you with something she knew and wanted you to know and love.

Now you know how much time is left, you decide to take those marabou streamers and grey hackle peacock bodies up to the high country for what might be your last time, this time alone with yourself, to get ready for the inevitable, come to some kind of terms with your mortality, death by tumor in your brain.

“I’ll be gone just the weekend, Baby, you know, just to get my bearings, come to terms with life and all...but I’ll be back...”

“Do you want me to come with you, Honey, you know, help with...”

“Gotta do this alone, Baby, alone...” You hugged Penny for a long time as if you were saying good-bye even though you knew you would be saying good-bye a long time from then. “I’ll just do some fishing at our lake and up into Fourth of July Creek, just take it easy and mellow out, maybe take some Hennessy to take the edge off things. . .”

“Doctor, do you think some backpacking,” you cautiously asked Doctor Heights, “you know, nothing extreme, just hiking back to do some... last minute fishing I guess I would call it...?”

His cautious OK was your go-ahead, and even though Penny was worried, you figured you had the right to make your own decisions now that things were...well, getting final, you might say. You got off work early that second Friday, drove 84 eighty miles an hour to Mountain Home listening to you don't remember what on your iPod, cut onto 20 through those rolling hills and flatlands over to 75 up to Hailey where you stopped for coffee, then up to Ketchum for gas and a piss stop and on up into the Sawtooths where you signed in at the familiar trailhead from the parking lot, climbed into your pack and took off. You brought your father's trusty old bamboo fly rod he used to take up to Salt Springs Reservoir to pull those Rainbows and Browns out of the Mokelumne at the east end of the lake, and where he showed you how to cook 'em in bacon fat, and where you drank your first campfire coffee. You took your sweet Garcia Mitchell spinning setup too, the one that matched your father's, the one you threw into the San Joaquin River and White Slough looking for bass and catfish, and then into how many streams in the Sierra Nevada, you can't begin to remember their names. The two man tent you had always shared with Penny rode high on your pack along with the water filter, rain gear, couple changes of clothes, several socks, first aid kit, coffee, jerky, oatmeal, dry fruit, ramen soup, some chocolate, vitamins, ground cloth, hunting knife, small fishing kit, the .40 cal you never shoot, sleeping bag, and your cell phone.

You remembered how the climb through the forest up to the ridge is gradual at first, then steep as it zig-zags up and over then the stark grey decomposed granite slide down to the relief of the meadow where the lake always welcomed you and Penny all those times. Now you've set up camp on that little meadow ridge above the lake looking west. You texted Penny and it didn't get through as you expected, but you did it anyway because you were thinking of her. You collected whatever downed wood you could find and set up your fire ring. Got your water filtered, boiling

in a small pan, cup of Hennessy poured and sampled, ground cloth down and tent staked up tight, your .40 cal on the log there.

The sun is ready to disappear behind the ridge north of Washington Peak, and you turn around to see the peach color washing over Castle Peak and the ridge into Merriam Peak. It's beautiful, and you miss Penny, it's the only time you've been here without her, and you miss her in your guts, you feel alone, you are alone. You take a sip of whisky, throw another log on the fire, watch the sparks jump up and dance for a brief moment then burn out without a sound. Penny always wanted to go to Scotland for the fly fishing, said there are four great salmon rivers there, The Dee, Spey, Tay, can't recall the fourth because you remember it doesn't rhyme with Dee, Spey, and Tay, but you never took her there, and you should have, and maybe it's too late now, no, make plans when you get back, just spend the money and take her.

"I love you, Penny," you eventually call again and then again into the chill night air, "Good night, Baby."

You shiver all night without her warm body, her sweet breath, her body's dark fragrance to warm you. You realize how deeply you miss her, how much you need her, how much you love her. You don't remember when you fall into sleep. You don't remember dreaming of fish depositing your eggs and then your milt in the deep dark stream bed, and the small pebbles of agate and jasper, the garnets and rubies and quartz and amethyst and topaz and beryl are covered with clouds of life, swirling galaxies of male and female cells and fish bodies returning to their origin, disappearing in the chaos of return and manifestation, the cycle of reproduction, the generations of life, and in your dreaming your spent fish body falls to the bottom of the river where it returns to precious molecules and then atoms, and in the time it takes for the sun to rise and fall you are no longer you because you have become everything. You don't know that you are sleeping more

deeply than you have ever slept in your thirty-eight years because you are sleeping more deeply than you have every slept in your thirty-eight years. When you awaken, you see the dawn light, and you want fire and coffee.

“Good morning, Penny, I love you, I hope you slept well,” is the first sound you hear.

An hour later you have coffee, oatmeal, and apricots in your belly, and you are two miles up Fourth of July Creek, throwing a small silver Super Duper into the current of the stream reeling in slowly feeling for that jerk on the end of the line. Throw it out, reel it in, throw it out, reel it in. You get a couple bites, decide to wade into the river over the boulders to reach the other side where the dark water below the riffles should be a hiding place for big trout. You steady yourself as you step across the irregular grey granite rocks jutting out of the water. You find the spot, steady yourself on two round boulders, and cast out into the dark pool.

You hear the plunk of the lure penetrating the surface of the green water and start to reel in slowly slowly, and you smile thinking how Penny reels in with a jerky technique and she says that that’s how fish really swim, and you feel a sudden jerk on the line, a strong one. You lean back instinctively to tighten the line and set the hook, and you don’t realize that in the next second you’re losing your balance as your left foot slips off one of the rocks, you fall backwards, let go of your rod, and you crack the back of your head on a boulder washed smooth by ten million years of flowing water. You black out and slide into the wide river flow. The icy water welcomes your lifeless body into its uncontested jurisdiction, and the currents encircle your body with unspoken authority. Within seconds your drowning self is floating effortlessly down the river towards Fourth of July Lake where your campfire has finally burned down to coals, and the squirrels and chipmunks are ferreting out the oatmeal and apricots in your pack.

The mountain search and rescue team wades out carefully with ropes to peel your rigid body off the mid-stream boulders where the current wedged you half a mile downstream from where you fell in. A sensitive-looking guy with a full beard goes gingerly through your pockets before they zip you into the forest green rubber bag for transport back to the coroner's office in Boise. They collect everything from your camp and seal it all in a large black dry bag. The litter jolts and bumps as they wheel you out up and over the broken precipitous trail to the rocky ridge you climbed down three days before. The guy calls Penny as soon as there is reception on the other side.

The intruder in your brain has given up. There are no words, no thoughts, no ignorance.

What does it matter now?

In the deep dark green pool upriver a fishing rod and reel have settled to the murky bottom. At the end of thirty feet of ten pound test monofilament line a twenty-six inch rainbow trout thrashes in its struggle to free itself from the treble hook that pierced its lower lip and that now holds it captive within its own world.