

Christmas at Bridge Pool

So much water, so little time

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Carl stopped the car in the middle of the snow-covered wooden bridge, shifted into neutral and pulled the hand brake. In front of the car, the fresh snow was trackless. It looked like a Christmas card.

Stopping smack in the middle of the wooden bridge was a ritual that he and Paul always performed whenever they came up to fish trout here, and fishing trout here had indeed been a large portion of their lives. This was home water. Carl rolled down the window and the winter air flowed into the warm car, cold as the water below. He breathed through his nose and stared upstream.

Cover Story

Paul had always said that next to being in the water, this was the best spot from which to get what he called "a good soaking look" at the stream. From here, you could almost foretell what the fishing would be like that day. Carl could almost tell. Paul always could. On this afternoon of Christmas Eve, much of the stream was hidden by drifted snow on the shelf ice, and a forlorn feeling stirred in Carl. Part of it, of course, was that the trout season was closed here until spring.

But part of it was the fact that everything seemed diminished. The colors had drained from the landscape, leaving only charcoal trunks and gray branches peeking through their snow covers. The landscape seemed lifeless, although he knew that wasn't true. The stream, too, was diminished. It was far narrower than normal, squeezed thin in the sheath of its snow-covered banks. Not unlike a hardening artery, a doctor might say.

Ever since they were classmates in med school back in the '60s, Paul had preached that this was the way you had to look at something if you wanted to absorb it forever. They always took that "good soaking look" at the stream and then took a celebratory nip from Paul's pewter trout flask, toasting the glorious hours that awaited them on the sacred water.

"A trout knows all about a good soaking look," Paul always said as they shared Paul's flask. He said that was what being a good trout was all about. You had to get a good, soaking look to make sense of your place. He said that was also what being a good doctor was all about.

"A lot of stuff is always going down, coming down on you," Paul laughed, "whether you're a fish or a physician. You have to learn exactly what stuff has a needle-sharp hook in it."

Underneath their surgeons' masks, Carl knew they were both still seventh-grade boys. They had spent an inordinate part of their lives on trout streams—indeed, an inordinate time on this particular trout stream. Paul had once said that trout streams were "bright, silver strings by which our sanity hangs."

In the bright, warm seasons, they had fished this little stream every Wednesday for years. Most doctors golfed on their Wednesdays off. He and Paul fished. "I prescribe golf for all my patients," Paul said, "no matter what they've got. It keeps them the hell off the trout streams."

Paul had discovered the stream by pure chance when they were poking around after grouse one October day. Paul had seen the trout flashing deep down in the clear pool

where the bridge now stood.

"Brookies!" he yelled. "My God! Brookies!"

There was no bridge here in those days because there was no road here. Following Paul's voice, Carl had fought through tangles of alder and underbrush that guarded the stream like barbed wire. He was sweaty and scratched and breathing hard when he saw Paul pointing down at the water.

"Look! Down there!"

My God! What trout. He and Paul had sat with their shotguns and their dead birds and stared and shook their heads.

The next week they were back without the shotguns, carrying their fly rods butt-first through the tangle of brush. Carl insisted Paul fish the pool first because it was Paul who found it. Carl always thought of it as Paul's Pool even after everyone else called it Bridge Pool, including Paul.

They caught big wild trout there, in the pool and in the stream. Natives. Wild as hares. "My God," Paul shrieked. "We must have died! This must be Heaven!"

Paul always started out by fishing the Bridge Pool, lingering there, not really in a hurry to leave. "If I was fishing from up above or down below," he confided, "I couldn't wait to reach this pool. This pool is home."

The routine was to drop Paul off at Bridge Pool and then Carl would drive the car down to the next county road which crossed another bridge downstream. He left the car there and fished upstream, to Bridge Pool, meeting Paul who was fishing down to the car.

By the time they encountered each other they had two or three nice fish apiece and the brookies lay gilled and gutted, swaddled in cold, green watercress within the dampened Arctic creels.

It was Paul who had started putting his fish back, and naturally, Carl followed. He told himself it was like a younger brother following a big brother who knew the ways of the world.

Then they stopped carrying creels altogether.

Every now and again, they would keep a few brookies for a meal, but not often.

Over the years, the brookie population waned from overfishing—overkeeping, Paul insisted—and then the water warmed up because the stream cover got chewed away by cows and by cultivation and by the runoff from the fields that were now full of pesticides and fertilizers. The brook trout vanished.

"Brookies are canaries in the mine," Paul said. "They absolutely need cold water, clean water. They just can't live here anymore—



—illustration by Rob Franks

thing happened, only this time he was doing a simple gall bladder, but he couldn't finish and had to leave the OR.

Nobody knew it then, but the very next day Paul had flown up to have one of his friends at Mayo check him over. When he came back from Rochester, Paul told Carl that they had found a tumor in his brain. It was inoperable. "Thank God it's not arthritis," Paul said. "I can fish with a tumor."

They didn't say how much time, but Paul knew. He wanted to fish more than ever. Every day. Rain or shine. Hot or cold. Carl just plain took a month off, which would take them to the end of the trout season. Of course, he did that because he was afraid for Paul and what could happen. He didn't want Paul driving

and one day we won't be able to live here, either."

Yes, Carl remembered, it had been a ritual, stopping in the middle of the wooden bridge. How many times had they done that?

They would roll down the windows and Carl would look upstream and Paul would look downstream, and they both sat quietly so that they could hear the water gurgling below as it sang over the upstream rocks and then whooshed into that first deep hole on Paul's side. Bridge Pool.

Paul was an artist with that fly rod, and it was such pleasure to just watch him cast. Carl fancied that Paul and the trout were mirror images of each other, dancing apart, yet dancing as one. He sensed that something indeed connected fish and fisherman long before the singing fly line ever joined them together. Carl would stand for a few moments, hidden by the car, just watching.

Invariably, Paul would land—and release—at least one trout from Bridge Pool. Then he would move into the tail water and wave as he went around the bend and out of sight. Carl would wave, shake his head and drive down to the second bridge to begin his own fishing.

Carl had always thought that he knew Paul pretty well. But he never knew about the headaches at all until one morning Paul was scrubbing for surgery and then had to cancel out. Another doctor who was scrubbing told Carl that Paul could have been sick. Paul also could have been hung over. When Carl came out of the OR, Paul had gone home. When Carl called, Paul was in bed. Weak, he said. Maybe flu. Something. Hospitals were always full of bugs. When Carl went to see him, Paul said it was really probably just one of his migraines. He'd had them off and on since medical school, and some of them just put him in bed. No big deal.

"That's why we fish," he smiled. "Isn't it?" When Paul went back to work, the same

alone or fishing alone. No way. When the season was over, well, Carl would do what had to be done then.

So they still came to their beloved trout stream.

But Paul spent most of his time around Bridge Pool, not moving too much. Then he began to fish in his street shoes, standing on the bank because he couldn't pull his waders on anymore. From the bridge Carl had seen Paul sitting on the bank, his legs sprawled like immobile clock hands. It was awful. Finally, Paul just lay on his back, immobile. Carl almost cried when he saw that. He didn't even think about fishing himself anymore.

One night at Paul's house, they were drinking brandy when Paul suddenly offered Carl all his fly rods, including his beloved Orvis three-weights. He also wanted to give Carl his Hardy fly reels, the whole collection, and there must have been over two dozen. "Take them," Paul had cajoled. "It'll be an early Christmas present."

Immediately, the warning bells rang in Carl's head and without pussyfooting around, he plain out asked Paul if he was thinking of suicide. For a moment, it was the old Paul. "Isn't everybody?" he asked.

Before he left, Carl got Paul to promise he wouldn't do anything without talking to Carl first. Paul promised. They drank to it.

"You want the shotguns," Paul teased, "instead of the fly rods?"

Over the next three weeks, the fishing trips became joyless. Paul's coordination was deserting him by the day. Then came the moment when Paul's line fell in a tangle at his shoes. From the bridge, it looked like he was trying to kill a snake. He beat the ground, and the rod snapped. Paul was crying, sobbing.

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Carl ran down from the bridge. The look in Paul's eyes was awful. Patients get that look when they have seen into the abyss.

The second-to-last time they drove to the stream they never got out of the car. The last time, Paul said he really thought it was a waste of time now and he didn't want to impose on Carl anymore. Paul began to sound slow, sometimes slurred. Carl called him at home every day, every night. The very last night he checked, the phone rang three times and then Paul's recorded voice came on. It wasn't the old recording. Paul had made a new one. He sounded tired, slow, but also playful.

"You have reached," Paul was saying slowly, carefully, "the former home of me. That is to say, you have reached the former home of the former me. If that's you, Carl—and who else would it be at this hour, dear friend?—I left a note. It should explain everything. Then again, maybe not. Good-bye, dear doctor, dear friend. The only prescription for what ails us all is this one: So much water, so little time. Go fish."

Carl popped the trunk latch, slid himself out into the cold and went back to the trunk. He took out Paul's old creel, slung it over his shoulder, closed the trunk and walked to the railing.

In another season, Carl thought, there would be Mayflies swirling just like that above the water and fish would be slurping

in the surface film below. A day like that made you feel you wanted to be here forever. Carl slipped the book out of the creel, cradling it in his parka against the flakes. Paul's favorite writing was a single paragraph by John Voelker, the former Michigan Supreme Court judge who fished brook trout at his beloved Frenchman's Pond until he died one winter day in the Upper Peninsula. He wrote books under the name Robert Traver.

The paragraph was titled "Testament of a Fisherman." Carl began to read as Paul had requested. It was aloud, but just above a whisper because that's all he could manage.

"I fish," Carl began, "because I love the environs where trout are found, which are invariably beautiful, and hate the environs where crowds of people are found, which are invariably ugly; because of all the television commercials, cocktail parties, and assorted social posturing I thus escape; because, in a world where most men seem to spend their lives doing things they hate, my fishing is at once an endless source of delight and an act of small rebellion; because trout do not lie or cheat and cannot be bought or bribed or impressed by power, but respond only to quietude and humility and endless patience; because I suspect that men are going along this way for the last time, and I for one don't want to waste the trip; because mercifully there are no telephones on trout waters; because only in the woods can I find solitude without loneliness; because bourbon out of

an old tin cup always tastes better out there; because maybe one day I will catch a mermaid; and finally, not because I regard fishing as being so terribly important, but because I suspect that so many of the other concerns of men are equally unimportant—and not nearly so much fun."

Carl closed the book, slipped it back into the creel and took out the new container. He opened it, stared into it. He took off a driving glove and scooped his bare hand into the ashes. They felt grainy, dusty, coarse—like Oxydol. "You always said," Carl said, "the old judge was a hard act to follow. Amen."

Carl opened his hand and Paul's ashes spilled down to the stream. Carl's eyes blurred and the ashes merged, transformed into a shimmer that looked like summer Mayflies. "Go with the flow, doctor," Carl said. "Go. Get a good soaking look." He turned the container upside down, shook it gently and Paul's earthy residue came pouring out, scattering like smoke, unfurling like some graying, weathered prayer flag in the white flakes.

Carl squinted to see through his tears and he knew he was on the verge of losing it. It was then that he felt Paul's strong hand on his shoulder and it was then that he heard Paul's strong voice in his ear: "There, there, doctor. There. There. Come back with the Orvis three-weight."

The ashes floated only seconds and then sank below the surface. Carl saw that specks and particles of ash were tiny planets, tiny

moons, a newborn galaxy. It was elongating, expanding, merging into that timeless universe where hatching insects and watchful trout and eternal, moving waters dance and tumble and are accepting of everything that comes and of everything that goes with the flow. Then the ashes were gone, downstream and around the bend.

In the car, Carl shivered, warmed his bare hand in the hot blast from the heater and looked downstream one last time. The snow was falling more thickly, and that helped. It still looked lonely, desolate, but it also looked like it should look up in the north country in December.

He rolled down the middle of the narrow road, carefully. Between commercials for last-minute shoppers, most of the stations were playing Christmas music. One was playing polkas. He didn't change that station until the young woman read the sign-off and then wished everyone a Merry Christmas "wherever you are." Amen to that, Paul said out loud.

By the time he reached the highway it was dark, and Carl flashed onto the times they had driven home in the dark from trout fishing. Now he could see lighted Christmas trees in the houses along the road, and he knew folks were guarding this night's warmth like gold.

He put in a tape and listened to Pete and Arlo singing. They sang "Precious Friend," all the way home. Carl sang, too.