

The Professor



When he was a little boy he'd pile the covers up on his bed in the twilight of a summer evening and pretend he was in the mountains. If he got the angles just right ... not too steep and not too flat ... and stared long and hard enough ... the blankets would soon turn black against a dark blue sky. The smell of creosote from the nearby railroad would ebb, taken over in his mind by the sweet aroma of pitch pine drifting over him. The noise of passing cars on the new Interstate became the sound of a babbling brook. He would then rise in the forest's early morning mist and fish the stream for his breakfast.

At 8 years of age he had not yet fished seriously, but his young heart anticipated the love of wading in a stream, letting the water's current nudge his legs forward while he side-armed the cast of a fly called "The Professor" straight in, only inches off the water, beneath an overhanging hemlock. He let it drop into the creek and swam it around just below the surface.

The Professor is a wet fly on its way to adulthood. It swims through the murky creek water on its way to the surface where it will transform into a lordly Mayfly.

In the dream the boy hooked the fish but let it go rather than land it. He realized he wasn't sure what to do with it. He could have hauled it in and held it up to inspect its rainbow skin of beauty, but beyond that he wasn't sure why he wanted it. There was a sense of desire, a need to devour it, but no particular method came to mind. He wondered if he was old enough to catch a fish. There followed an interlude of canvas smells as the boy drifted off to deeper sleep.

in the tent of his imagination. And later there was the smell of toast and his mother calling for her boys to get up and meet the day.

A summer day in the small city neighborhood lying near the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western rail tracks was a contest between high contrast bright images fighting each other to see which could hurt the eyes more. There was no trout stream, no peaceful forest, not even much shade.

But the boy and his brothers were lucky children. Not a chore was asked of them on summer days when school was out. So the boy would get on his bike and ride. West toward the mountains, which he calculated he'd never visit if he needed to be home for supper. But each summer day he'd do it again, hoping to discover some way to make the dream come true. To cast for his first fish, hook it and devour it. And obey the rule to be home for supper.

When he was ten years old he noticed he could get his bike to the edge of the city without stopping to rest his aching legs. By age 12 he could ride outside the city and still get back in time for supper.

Like The Professor, the boy swam through muddy waters seeking an opportunity to emerge above the surface

At 14 he made it to the next town, just before the mountains rose off the plain. They would cast their long shadow on his back that evening as he rode home, missing supper by two hours.

At 16 years of age, he left home at mid morning on July 4th and never returned.

Somewhere past the next town, just east of where the mountains rose from the plain, he met a girl and her dog walking by the side of the road.

"Where are you going?" he asked her.

"To the mountains," she said.

"So am I," he answered. "To catch a fish."

"And so am I," she said. "My fish will be tall and strong and brave."

"Mine," said the boy, "will be cool and colorful and sweet to the taste."

They stared at each other for a long moment.

Finally, she looked down at the ground between them and back up into his eyes.

"Do you have to be home for supper?" she asked.

"Not anymore," he said.

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The Professor was a favorite of Mary Orvis Marbury, who built a legacy of fly fishing knowledge while her family built a giant retail company

