

David Joy

Breaking in the Cork

Her hands, scattered with age spots, veins raised like roots running under thin skin, each wrinkle holding a story, stitched tight curves through the colored fabric of a Wagon Wheel quilt. Granny told me a tale about working for Union Carbide during the “last great American war,” but all I could focus on were her hands. Hands that had picked cotton, cleaned fish, mixed cobblers, and held youngins, now showcased brittle bones and fragile skin as delicate as tissue paper. The story of her life was spelled out across her palms, each line a narrative of her eighty years.

When I was around twelve years old, Granny gave me one of her old spinning rods. The steel rod was chocolate brown with tan and gold thread wrapped around every guide. That rod was as flimsy as the hickory switches she used to spank my legs with, and would double over every time a fish was on the line. A small Mitchell spinning reel was fastened tightly to the seat, but a broken screw meant to hold the arm on the reel made it impossible to cast. I dreaded taking off the old Mitchell, separating the partnership of rod and reel, but that rod begged to be fished. Saving every dime I could find, I bought a new reel and continued the tradition she had started — catching fish.

Thirteen years from the moment I first held the rod, I rocked back and forth in a tattered recliner and stared at her rod resting in the corner of my living room. The limber tip curved into convergence with the wall, the tarnished guides pressed against the painted sheetrock. I walked over to the rod, eased it away from the wall, and carried it back to the chair. I sat back down, caressed the smoothed grip, and looked at every nick in the aged cork. My mind flashed back to images of her hands. The same hands that offered me corn bread had softened the layers of cork with years of attention.

I held that rod many times over the years and I’d caught thousands of fish with it, but I couldn’t take credit for such a masterpiece. The cork grip of that rod defines what it means to be a fisherman. That handle is not aged from sitting in a garage, from becoming a support for cobwebs or forgotten in an attic and begging to be cast. Gorgeous color never

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comes from gathering dust. That handle was worn, smoothed, and perfected by the hands of an artisan. Holding that grip, I grasp a piece of history, continue her tradition, and, in a way, become what she was.

I never saw her fish that specific rod, but my memory is chockfull of scenes of her and I casting saltwater rigs into breakers at low tide. She held the worn grip of a nine-foot fiberglass rod and waited for the repetitive ticks of a whiting nibbling shrimp from her hooks. Her tanned arms yanked hard as she backed up the beach, her gray hair blown sideways in the wind. The cork of that rod also told stories. Sand and salt were embedded into the seams, and the dried slime of fish taken coated the cork. Buried into that grip was a piece of her self, a piece that I cherished, the fingerprints of a master.

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If there is ever a doubt whether a person truly fishes or whether they simply say that they do, just ask to hold their rod. It's easy to tell how consumed a person is to their craft by examining their tools of the trade. Paintbrushes speckled with acrylics, shotgun barrels blued from open seasons, knife blades tarnished but sharp, cork grips worn dark and smooth—these are the signs of artisans.

I can tell a lot about a person by holding the grip of their fishing rod. Unblemished handles, the cork still as tan as a freshly plucked top on a cheap bottle of wine, tell the story of someone who's rarely touched water. Fish stories remain tales until I see the rod. A virgin rod will call out the lies of a "fisherman" faster than shifty eyes give away guilty children. Cork grips are my polygraph. Show me a rod with a cork grip lacquered with fish slime, scales and sand deep in the crevices of the cork, and I'll know that that person has devoted time to mastery.

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An author and friend of mine, Ron Rash, had been asking me to take him fishing for years. I knew of his love for Appalachia, fly fishing, and native trout from reading his words. His descriptions are alive, so I never doubted that he'd been there, and that he shared my passion. The only reason that I'd yet to take him on the water was because I knew he had

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bad knees and a stiff back. I also knew that if anything happened to him while we were on the water, every bigwig at Western Carolina University would be ready to tan my hide. Through time, our friendship grew past a master apprentice relationship in a creative writing classroom and blossomed into a mutual respect of places wild. There was no longer any doubt; it was time to take him fishing.

One afternoon in late spring, we met in his office and headed for a hole on the Tuckasegee where I'd hammered fish a week before. He understood the significance of saying he was a fly fisherman to a man like me. His descriptions of speckled brook trout were too deliberate to be faked. I knew that he probably dreamed of twenty-inch trout just as I did and I couldn't wait to see him on the water.

Earlier that week, when I'd asked Ron what he was fishing with, he had explained to me that he'd broken his bamboo rod the previous weekend. That wasn't a problem, considering I had six fly rods waiting for water, but the fact that he fished bamboo said it all. People who fish bamboo do so for one reason, *tradition*. Tradition comes from respect, respect from trial and error, so there was no doubt that he'd spent time waist deep in a stream. I knew he was a fisherman.

The morning of our trip, I threw a five-weight and a two-weight on top of a seven-weight that had been left in the cab of my truck for night-fishing. The plan was to let him fish the five while I chucked dries on the limber two-weight. When we got to the hole and parked in a red clay pull-off beside a bulldozer, I hopped out of the truck and started pulling waders, quick as a ruby throat, over my brown Dickies. Ron methodically drew his Don Bailey waders onto his legs and tightly laced his wading boots.

"There were a couple of people fishing that hole when we drove up," I told Ron. From the road, I'd seen two men in our section of river. One was on the bank, hopefully leaving, and the other was casting thigh-high in the current. "What do you want to do?"

"Well, we could kill them," he spoke with a thick Appalachian accent. There was a certain seriousness in his voice like a character from a

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William Gay story.

“Hopefully, they’ll be gone by the time that we get down there.” The water would have already been touched, but I hoped that the fishermen hadn’t pressured the trout too hard.

“We could kill them,” he repeated, again, with little expression. “There are plenty of places to hide the bodies.”

High in Appalachia, I knew he was right. There were definitely places to dump a body or two where no one would stumble upon the remains, but we were there to fish and a messy cleanup would mean less time on the water.

Ron was tall and lanky like myself. He’d run track in college, and the thirty or so years since hadn’t changed his thin frame. Brownish gray hair parted across his head, and the scruffy, unshaved face held the same color. His cold blue eyes reminded me of the way a hound’s are set, with a certain seriousness and sadness in their stare. Ron’s hands looked like they’d spent time doing work, scratching stories, and holding rods. I would have liked to see the broken bamboo rod, to hold the grip, and see how it had been fished, but today he would add a few lines to my cork and that was fine by me.

I grabbed the olive rod tube out of the cab and unzipped the cover, unveiling my baby: a gorgeous five-weight rod, cork grip aged to perfection in my hands, a tarnished reel held firm against the rosewood seat. I tried to unscrew the reel from the rod so that Ron could put his onto it. I would have rather him just use my reel, but he’s left-handed, making my line and drag setup backwards in his hands.

“Now, Ron, you know this reel ain’t ever come off this rod,” I said half-jokingly as I struggled to loosen the reel away from the reel seat.

“Is that right?”

“Yeah, I think it’s bad juju to take a reel off a rod.” I was kind of kidding with him, but the strain to get the reel off made me wonder. I see the relationship between reel and rod as a marriage that never needs a

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divorce. If something breaks on the reel, then I'd rather retire the whole outfit than separate the two. They are born, live, and die together, a partnership of magnificent utility.

The retaining ring finally broke free and the reel fell into my palm. I handed the eight-and-a-half-foot rod to Ron and began putting the sections of my two-weight together. He tightened the rings on a battered reel he'd had since childhood. We were both pulling our leaders and line through the guides when I heard something really strange. Under his breath, Ron cursed.

I can't remember exactly what word he used, but the reverb of that single syllable echoed through my eardrums. It wasn't that the word bothered me; I had just never heard Ron, a man who commands language, revert to the archaic utterances I was so accustomed to using. I looked up from the tippet I was fastening to my leader, and Ron stared, puzzled, tender-eyed as a beaten dog. In one hand he held my rod and in the other hand the top section from between the last guide and the tip-top.

"I broke your rod." Words were spoken as if someone had died.

"Ah, it's alright." I forced each word from my lips. My heart sat low on my stomach like a fat man sinking into the cushions of a worn out couch. I wasn't mad, not even frustrated, but I was dumbfounded. I stood in disbelief, but sucked it up and didn't let an emotion show. Ron was too good of a friend and I respected him too much to let a fumble ruin our day on the water.

"I don't know what happened. I was just pulling the leader through the guides and it snapped. It wasn't like I was pressing real hard on it." He repeated his motion with his hands. "I don't know what happened."

To this day I don't think that Ron did anything to break that rod. I think that there was probably just a weak spot in the graphite, probably a result of something I did, but he felt awful.

"Don't worry about it. I'll just let you use this two-weight and I'll fish the one I've got in the truck."

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"No. Now, David, I ain't going to let you take me fishing unless you let me buy you another one just like it." He meant every word; I could read it in his steel blue eyes.

"That's fine. You just fish this two-weight and I'll fish my other rod. Don't worry about it." There was no use arguing. I'd have to let him buy the rod.

Bad luck continued when I lost my truck keys, but I stayed content in knowing that I was about to be wrapped in the cool embrace of a trout stream. I don't know for sure that Ron shared the same attitude, but for me it was easy. "Screw it," I thought. "At least I'm going fishing."

On the stream, trout were feeding fairly consistently. The fish weren't coming to the surface, but through polarized lenses I could see their shadowy bodies ascend to take drifting nymphs. I was sure that we were going to get into some fish, and judging from the luck I'd had there the previous week, I thought that one of us might have a shot at a big trout.

My assumptions were right as far as Ron being a fisherman. His overhead cast was nice, but side-armed, he was an artist. His side-arm casts swept line under low oak branches overhanging the bank, his mends were marvelous, and his instinctive ability to read water was the final answer. One thing I wasn't right about, however, was that we would catch fish.

Two hours on the stream and neither of us had gotten bit. Finally, I hooked one small, stocked brookie, but besides that we were skunked. The fish that I caught is hardly worth mentioning, a young trout dumb to man, but I've got to try and find one bright spot in the story. Ron got a decent bite, but by the time he raised the rod, the fish was gone. His hand was quick on the draw, but the fish was a runner, rising and disappearing in an instant, what pheasant hunters would call a cock that flushed wild.

With the April sun slowly vanishing behind the ridge, we headed to the truck with our tails between our legs. The fish were there, but they wanted nothing to do with our feathered hooks. Trout: 1; Us: 0. We left it

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at that.

On the way back, I found my truck keys stashed in the back of my vest. We said our goodbyes, tried to come up with a decent excuse, and vowed to fish again. Then, as if things couldn't get any worse, Ron drove off towards Clemson, a solid hour and a half away, with my reels safely in his trunk. When I couldn't find my keys, I had stashed my valuables (a Fly Logic two-weight reel and a Ross #7) in his trunk. His car was winding around curves toward South Carolina by the time I realized it. One of us (and I don't know which), or maybe both was karma's bitch for the day.

Driving home, I began thinking about that broken rod. I hadn't let it show when Ron was around, but I was devastated, heartbroken, depressed. With time to think about what had happened, I felt sick, close to vomiting, when I thought about that rod, broken and unfishable.

It wasn't so much the rod in its entirety, but the cork grip that I held so close. That cork, originally manilla colored and dusty from sanding, had been worn to a beautiful brownish green. It had been smoothed to a slick and shiny finish. More than that, my hands had held that grip when I reeled in the biggest trout of my life. It was more than a grip; it had become an extension of my hands, a symbol of my devotion to fly fishing. I hadn't told Ron, but that model rod had been discontinued and there was no way that I'd find another one. That rod would never fight a fish again.

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Ron emailed me shortly after that trip to let me know that he had my reels. I don't remember exactly what he wrote, but he jokingly said that there was no way that I'd take him fishing again. Despite our previous bad luck, we went again, and on that trip Ron, his son, and I all caught native brookies out of a tiny mountain creek. The fish were gorgeous, but more importantly we enjoyed seeing each other in our element. Bad days come with the territory, but we are, after all, fishermen.

I knew that my favorite rod was history, but after a couple of days calling around, I found one in the back stock of a fly shop. Things have a way of

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evening out. When I got that rod, I took the top section off of the new one and fitted the fresh ferrule onto my baby. The five-weight—and its gorgeous cork grip—was back in business.

With the cork grip back in my hand, I fully understood why I'd been so disappointed. That grip had taken years to perfect. The Portuguese cork had slowly been stained to a deep olive brown. Every nick in the handle told a story. My hands had massaged trout slime deep into the grain, giving the grip a smooth luster. I'd held that fly rod when I caught my first trout on the fly; I'd held that grip when I hooked my first native; I'd held that handle as I disappeared into the rhododendron on my way to a forgotten creek. That cork grip defined me as a fisherman.

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Some folks are into buying the nicest rod on the market. They'll spend thousands of dollars on a Hardy, Scott, or Sage, all the time believing that the most expensive equipment will make you a fisherman. As for me, I want a rod worn with age, a rod that has seen water, a rod that has held strong while bowing to the weight of fish, and the cork grip better be right.

I'm addicted to rods. I find them in yard sales, on Ebay, or in antique stores. I see them tilted against a back wall like my Granny's, begging to be fished. Something in me can't resist and I buy them. I don't have a use for all of them, but I can't stand to see the legacy of a fisherman waste away amidst cobwebs and dust. I imagine those rods being given to some unappreciative family member after the owner has died. I imagine the inheritor having no understanding of what that rod means, being blind to the stories hidden in the cracks of the grip. When I see them, I know, and I will not let them die.

Those bought fishermen can have their thousand dollar rods. They can believe that expensive equipment will catch them more fish—or if nothing else—make them look like they know what they're doing. As for me, give me a grip worn slick with slime, a handle with teeth marks embedded from when I climbed a waterfall without a hand to spare. Give me a cork grip with mica pushed deep in the crevices from the times I laid the rod on the ground to admire a native brookie. I want a

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rod that changes just as I do. The cork slowly molded into hand, finally fitting perfectly, as man and grip fuse in partnership. The cork holds the imprint of hands. Imprints only left by time spent casting. Imprints that define the time invested by an artisan, and they are beautiful.