



ROBERT SEAMAN ILLUSTRATION

Suspended Time

NICK LYONS

FEBRUARY AND MARCH are not cruel months for fly fishermen. Though the season is not yet open in most places, there are all manner of detailed, textured chores to be done—from tying new leaders and a few more of that new parachute Sulphur you saw, to replacing a tip-top and changing a fly line and rearranging your 23 boxes of flies, to oiling a reel. And in back of your brain all the while—prompted, perhaps, by forsythia buds, then blooms—there are the first faint songs of spring.

One such hint of spring is a call, soon after the year turns, from Len Wright, who says, “Seventy-nine days.” So locked in the cold numbness of winter am I that for a moment I’m puzzled. Is he speaking about

some talk I’ve promised to give, a business date, or the tax deadline? No, it’s fly fishing again—asleep for a while but now rising like a vapor in my brain, for the days until it can be practiced in my part of the world are numbered now.

Len is safe. He’s going south, for bonefish, next week. Another friend is headed for New Zealand, for the first time, and I ask him to promise he’ll give me a full report; still another flies to Argentina in ten days. Not for me; not yet and again not this year; but someday, perhaps.

I begin to think back to the past season, one too spare for much dreaming, though it will have to do,

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Seasonable . . .

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and I pick over the few memories with nicest care. There was a sharply cold day in late April when I stood on a sandbar with Len and Bill Kelly, hoping for some fish to move; they didn't, and all I can remember is the cold, and hour after hour of casting a large streamer, and the two small fish Bill got and Len's small brookie, and the trouble, too difficult to describe, I had trying to raise my waders up over a paunch that had mushroomed.

I also remember a day when a friend and I scoured the Catskills, trying one favorite hole of mine and then another, trying to find some kind of action with which to start the new year. At the first we saw exactly seven flies and no fish rising, and could pound up nothing in three hours of hard fishing. At the second I found some Hendrickson spinners in the air about 4 P.M. and put my friend—whom I wanted to take a few fish—on a lovely run downstream of where I wanted to fish. It was good to see the deliberate tipping up of the fish taking spinners, and I dropped to a 6X leader, put on a sparsely hackled hackle-wing spinner, and nailed the first four fish I cast to. They were the first fish of the season I'd seen rising, the first I'd caught; and this was a spot I knew well. The fish were all better than a foot long; one was 15 inches. It was all very satisfying.

Downstream, my friend did not seem to be having much success, which felt worse for me because the guy a hundred yards below him had a bent rod every time I looked. Worrying about my friend, I cast poorly and only raised one more fish—which was properly humbling after the four in a row; then, about 5:15 P.M., I saw my friend's rod arc and his stance shift and a good fish come straight up and fall back, and then jump twice as it took line, a marlin in miniature, going away. A few minutes later I watched the man's arm go up, the rod bend fully, the net dip down from his left hand, and the fish come up out of the water, wriggling in the meshes.

There is time to read a few more books before the new season starts, and I do—hoping some of it will make sense, rub off, make me a bit more skillful. Perhaps. There's always that chance. Anyway, the best of the books have rivers running through them.

There is time to go to one of the new fishing expositions that have proliferated these past years, and to wander past booth after booth of irresistible goodies. I feel like a kid in a crowded candy shop and want to touch and taste everything. Especially in March. Especially when there is row upon row of new rods to flex, new flies to study, feathers from the East and outfitters from the West, old books to thumb through, and—in the midst of the great throng of brothers of the angle, many of whom aren't any kin to me at all—more of the pulse and more of the song that is growing inside.

There is hunger for the thing itself, the fly fishing itself, as winter wanes, a desire to be closer to the rivers and lakes and their denizens, even through books and magazines, certainly through memories, even through crowded expositions. For too long, to paraphrase S.J. Perelman, I have been “two with nature.”

In February and March, suspended, seeking to find ways to join up with fly fishing again, I strike up old correspondences, for I am a compulsive letter writer when the fever is upon me, and they too speak of the year past, or the year before that, or of some book, or

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of some new leader formula that “will change my life,” or how the West Branch wintered, or of planned trips or faint hopes or great expectations for the new season. And the letters, too, one to the other, ripple with the pulse of enthusiasm and dream and waiting.

The fly-fishing clubs have their Annual Days and Annual Dinners in this suspended time. They know what we need and when we need it. I go to one sponsored by The Theodore Gordon Flyfishers, and it is always a joy to see friends I haven't seen in months, listen to panel discussions and talks, see slide shows about exotic or esoteric matters, talk Fly-fishing Talk again, watch the tiers at their cunning craft, buy this or that, which I really don't need, collect travel brochures on which to fashion dreams of what might or even will be, perhaps even cast a line on the grass—still spotted with snow—near the gray parking lot, the tug of the line and play of the rhythm like an old remembered pleasure come back.

It is not a cruel time but a suspended time—a time between the solid cold of winter and the warmth and energy of a new season; now it is a time that holds a bit of both. It is a time, too, of melt—a time of bloated rivers and of dreams cut loose and racehorsing downstream. It is a time less of doing than of thinking about doing, a time not of “is” but of “was” and “perhaps” and “will be.”

“Only eight days,” Len Wright, a.k.a., “The Clock,” tells me.

It is a time cut from the textured life of the thing itself, with the past year now fully gone and the new year still absolutely crammed with possibility, and I, anxious to meet it, wait, and then wait a few more days, another week—the season open but the flies not yet here—breathless, suspended.



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