

The Retreat

by Denis J. Underwood

Cloaked in hate, Quentin made his way through the shadows of the forest. The hate came from work, from money, from people he would no longer need to trust. His pace quickened with every step, accentuated by the crackling twigs and dry leaves that seemed to scurry away from the soles of his boots. He paused and looked back toward where he had left his vehicle and for a moment, the quiet was fierce.

About him, the forest moved and scrambled. In the distance the river did the same. He focused on the spot he came for, the one he had retreated to so many times before. His approach brought him to a clearing in the trees above the river and when he looked down the sun seared his eyes as if there were ten thousand sheets of tinfoil strewn about the flowing water and up along the banks that guided it.

He stepped off the undercut bank and the clear water wrapped around his pants, stopping just below his knees and was cool against his skin. The sudden change in temperature momentarily relaxed him and he shuffled his feet over the slick stones of the riverbed. As he progressed, the water deepened to his waist. He stood behind a boulder to break the current and went to work, hands darting in and out of his vest pockets producing tippet material, flies, split shots, strike indicator and clippers. In no time he had tied a bead-head pheasant tail fly to his line. Quentin removed the rod that was sandwiched between his arm and ribcage and began his casting motion. Though the water had momentarily calmed him, an unshakable underlying impatience returned. No matter how fast he moved he couldn't satisfy himself.

Once he got his casting rhythm going, his motions became less mechanical, he slowed down and the impatience seemed to fade. The one thing in life he was good at and actually enjoyed was fly-fishing. He'd grown up in a 'normal' family, with 'normal' values and a 'normal' head of household. He had been neither scorned nor

abused. To this point, he'd been successful in life, at least in his definition of 'success'—material possessions and money—but a feeling of insecurity was always there, welling up, coursing through his muscles, squeezing his bones. When the pain came, he did his best to scratch mentally, appeasing and, more importantly, suppressing it. This time, though, the pain had overwhelmed him.

Watching the strike indicator make its way towards him through shifting liquid craters, he imagined the fly trailing underneath, dragged by the noose tied through the hook's eye. He thought about himself and how he drifted through life as aimlessly as a mindless nymph caught up in a raging current, struggling to find something to which to cling. Quentin had found someone to cling to for a few years. But she was gone for good now.

The first strike came quickly. Quentin lifted the rod tip, dragging the small brown trout toward him in one sweeping motion. Firmly in his hand, the fish was stranded above the water. The deep reddish-brown spots along its flanks were brilliant in the sun. Quentin knew the fish would be damaged from the exposure to the air and light, but he didn't care. The fish's delicate skin and protective slime thickened in his hand as time passed. Finally, he brought the fish to his lips, kissed it between the eyes and threw it upon the bank where it flopped lethargically on the rocks.

"There's better than you here," Quentin said.

At some point, the clouds had moved in and settled down. Quentin stopped and looked ahead to his immediate destination. Although moth-like caddis flies hatched sporadically earlier, he hadn't noticed any interest to them from the trout. Quentin spotted a pod of fish taking flies off the surface of a calm pool just above the fast moving water he stood in. Instantaneously, caddis saturated the air and flew about his face. Quentin ran an index finger and thumb through his thick hair until he had one of the insects pinched between them and then transferred it to his palm for examination. He blew on the back of the insect and it flew off. From a fly box, he acquired an elk-haired caddis pattern matching the natural's size and color. Soon the fly was dangling at the end of his delicate line.

Quentin walked stealthily through the riffles and started false casting. There were some stragglers working the tail of the pool. He laid out a perfect cast and had another fish on. This one was much larger than the first and Quentin thought about how well trout move through their environment, sleek and powerful. The drag whined and the rod bounced up and down as the fish pulled line from the reel, heading upstream. Once the fish was tired, Quentin brutishly brought it to hand. This time, he didn't admire the fish for very long. He was close to shore and tossed it up on the rocks. Before the fish could flop its way back to the water, Quentin lobbed a broad stone at its head. The fish quivered under the rock and sweat flowed from Quentin's brow into his eyes, joining the tears that strayed down his cheeks.

Quentin continued to cast. The looping line unfurled with grace, deftly placing the fly up against the bank. A fish was enticed to rise and then the fly vanished with a splash. Quentin hesitated and lowered the rod tip into the water. A great current seemed to wash over him and his hand fell open. Water engulfed the rod and it came to rest against the pebbles on the river bottom. He could no longer do it.

