

Inmate trout

By Patrick Dobson

Fishing the North Platte River under crystalline sky, I cast a Royal Coachman on a number-eighteen hook behind a large rock midstream. Immediately, a big trout pulled my rod over, silencing the wind on the sagebrush hills and rocky outcrops where the night before I had heard mountain lions. The trout fought up and back downstream, narrowing my vision to the width of the line as the fish telegraphed messages to my hands. Reading code, I could tell when its fear turned into determination, and I lowered my rod tip to keep the fish from jumping and getting a good look at me.

I played that trout several minutes before it tired and moved in fits toward me. It was a healthy rainbow, twelve inches long, not fat but not skinny. It was picture book. The silver of its belly blended like sunset into blue and red on its sides. Black flecks started at the pectoral fins, gathered momentum along the sides and melted into themselves along its back. Had the trout been human, I would have just caught the perfect physical specimen, ideally proportioned, with wiry arms and shoulders to gather fruit and carry babies, and legs made to walk.

I held the trout up from the water, and in the clear depth of its black eye, I saw a couple I met three years before. Standing there with a trout inches from my nose, the sun stopped and the North Platte turned into a flowing mirror of memory.

The couple seemed old beyond their years as they moved around the gourmet coffee and cheese shop. They lightly touched packages of chocolate covered espresso beans and tiny packets of saffron with their callused fingers. The racks of wines packed between shelves of ceramic cups and specialty mustards intrigued them for a moment. Then, they shook their heads and moved on. As they walked the narrow aisles, they stopped now and then before bins of tea

leaves. They whispered to each other, shifting in their worn shoes and adjusting their dusty spectacles.

Years of work bowed the backs of the man and the woman. His tall frame dropped like a waterfall about to dry up in a curve from beneath his ball cap into his loose jeans. She wore a fading pink button-up sweater and a translucent polyester scarf over her gray mane. In their eyes flashed dreams like rays of sun through pines reflected off dark, blue trout pools.

The other store clerks ignored them, and customers for the boutique restaurant and coffee bar in the back of the crowded shop shuffled past them as if they did not exist. After packaging up some Stilton cheese and a jar of Devonshire cream for a blustery and parsimonious real estate agent, I came from behind the counter of glass bins full of coffee beans.

“Can I help you find something?” I asked the old people.

“We’d like something special for our son,” the man said quietly, his wife nodding as she stood close to him, love of decades binding them into one. “He is far away. We need something nice.”

“Any idea what he would like?”

“We think he might like some sausage,” he said, “the kind you have in the case there, and some cheese. He would probably like some crackers to go with it. We will have to send it to him, so it can’t be anything that spoils easy.”

The three of us walked over to the deli case. Tins of caviar, glass jars of marinated sardines and anchovies lined the shelves. Wheels and odd pieces of cheese were laid out on decorative mats and surrounded with plastic grape leaves. The man pointed to hard salami from Italy, pepperoni, and wheels of Swiss cheese.

I took the things out of the case and sliced a hefty length of sausage from a long moldy link. I gathered some pepperoni and cut and wrapped a piece of aged Swiss cheese. I folded it all among wafts of tissue paper in a box on the counter. The woman placed a small jar of mustard and some expensive crackers gently, but firmly, into the box, like she might assemble a jigsaw puzzle. I closed the box, taped it, began to fill out a form for the parcel delivery service. They handed me their son's name and address on a small piece of paper.

Their son's name was written in tight, neat script. I recognized it. The story of the murder and his trial had appeared on the front-pages of the newspaper. The stories recounted his terrible mistake, a murder. But it seemed to me he was not the murderous maniac the news made him out to be. His lawyer was a drunken, dottering sot. His parents attended court every day of the trial. They were in pictures in the papers, holding each other as they did in the food shop.

They thanked me quietly after paying their bill for \$29.46 and \$7 post. At the time, I had no idea what prison regulations were for packages to inmates. The couple disappeared through the door, still holding on to each other, as I finished the form and attached it to the box. I never saw them again—until I looked into that trout's eye.

I think about that couple frequently now. I know the sausage and cheese never made it past the door of the Kansas State Maximum Security Correctional Facility in Lansing, Kansas. I have friends who are incarcerated. Prisons don't take food delivered in the mail. Their son never knew the moment his mother placed the mustard and crackers into that box.

Sometimes, that couple comes to me late at night, when I am not sleeping well, and I dream I deliver that package to their son. I swim past wires and bars, walls and guards on rays of light flowing from his cell window. I see him open the box while he sits on his bunk staring into forty years-to-life. He pulls one of the carton flaps back, and the ice-blue sky over the North

Platte streams from the folds of tissue paper and fills his cell. The river itself flows through the holes in the Swiss cheese, spilling over riffles of crackers and falls of salami. He peers into the pool behind the mustard jar and finds his parents with their arms open to him.

And there are trout. Lots of trout.