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Fisherman's Fiend: Caddis Hatch on Bergen

I GOT A NEW FLY ROD AND WANTED TO TEST it out immediately. Casting is to fly fishing what wine is to dining, and an early spring had whetted my appetite. On a quiet Brooklyn street, I started laying out large green furls of line that set up a beguiling whirl through the air.

Were I equipped with a can of corn, maybe some sand worms, a sturdy surf "pole," a sit-down bucket, some fluke rigs and a six of Bud nips, my neighbor probably would have recognized the setup and figured I was heading down to the Belt Parkway sea wall. He'd smile, wink and say, "Goin' fer some doormats, guy?"

Instead, my neighbor shambles down the steps of a brownstone, watches me roll out a cast and says, "Hey, pal. I hear they're biting over on Bergen St."

Instead of conviviality I get wisecracks. I'm an urban fly fisherman, seemingly destined to be at odds with my environs.

I get wanked in the sticks too. Out on the Delaware, I drive a mile along some railroad tracks and park my Escort next to a bunch of four-by-fours. I get within eyeshot of the truck owners on the river, see them spin casting worms and spinners, maybe one with a fly rod. But there's generally mutual respect among trouters, and we nod in passing. Later, I head back and find them all having a beer and staring at my car.

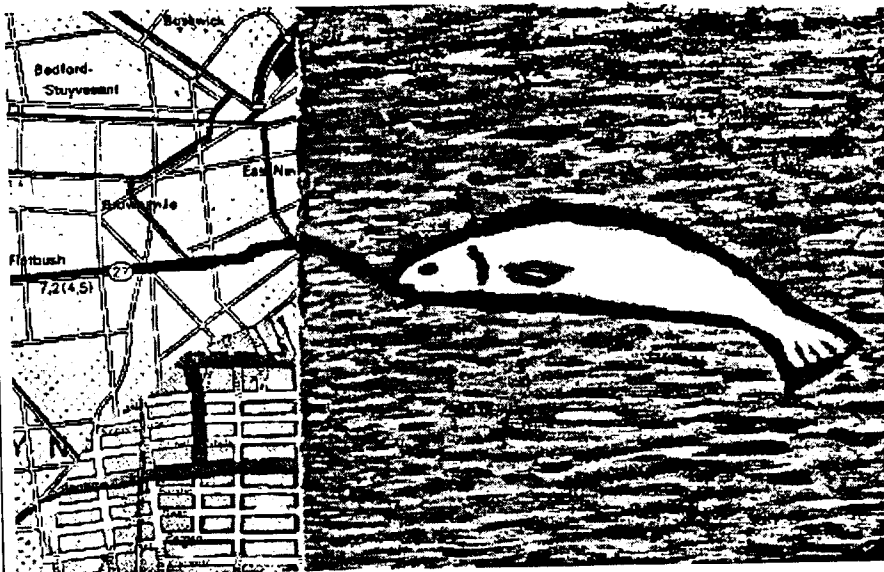
"Where you from?" follows brief greetings and fish talk.

I reply.

"Brooklyn?" They nod at each other. "Figures. A car like that, in here, with The Club on the steering wheel?"

Hey, it's not like someone hasn't tried to steal my car. Not to mention rubber waders from my trunk. Right this very second there's some son-of-a-bitch strutting around Sunset Park in my leaky chest waders.

Of course, car hassles are a big part of fly fishing when you live in Crooklyn. Get up before dawn, drive two or three hours, stand in a river until dark, drive two or three hours, get home around midnight. If I ever find a space in front of my building when I really need it I'll FTD the Pope. So I park the car two blocks away. I lug a heapin' helpin' of rods, wet waders, net, cooler and tackle back to my building, up a couple flights of stairs. Doubtless most anglers bust their rod tips in car doors and trunk lids in their driveways. My rods have graduated to maiming themselves on passing livery cars, China Garden delivery bikes and double spring-loaded foyer doors. And the



DOWN BY THE RIVER.

annoyance of having a zinc freak boost your battery is magnified tenfold at 4:30 a.m. when you've staggered the two blocks to the car with a hangover and a mountain of gear.

Actually, getting up early isn't enough in this town. You have to try to outwit the Port Authority. Now you'd think that at five or so in the morning, any morning, traffic to Jersey would be a breeze. How is it that the Holland Tunnel has pre-dawn traffic jams? A guard sits in the booth on the NY/NJ border, doing what I'm not sure since video covers every inch of the tunnel. Get this: they completely close the tunnel for 15 minutes so they can send a truck in to pick him up at the end of his shift. God forbid he walks out, or a truck just slows down, stops traffic in that lane, and lets the guard hop aboard. Ah, union rules.

And as if that isn't enough, you have to try to outsmart DOT. Pick any freeway around these parts, and they're sure to be futzing with it at night. Don't kid yourself with those clips in the paper about when and where construction is supposed to be. Contrary to reports and advanced signage, I was once detoured from the FDR Dr. onto York Ave. at 5:30 a.m., which, as it happened, was also under construction. That ate an hour.

You'd think that to find camaraderie, as well as commiseration, I'd have only to stop in at my local fly shop. Consider Orvis, around Madison and 45th. Customers are strictly suits, ad execs wondering whether they should spend 700 or 800 bucks on a plastic rod sprinkled with graphite and technical epithets like "high-modulus." Hey, if you're headed for Christmas Island for bonefish and

you show up with any old catalogue rod and a pair of \$20 sunglasses, people will talk.

Trout know quality gear too. The Beaverkill, a "blue-ribbon" trout stream that's purportedly two hours away (by jet), is a goddamn fashion show, and not just for tackle. Believe me, I'm realistic. I know that "the stuff" is a big part of any sport, and I indulge in tackle splurges myself. But the money these pud-knockers throw at the label is astronomical. Their Range Rovers are garaged.

Sometimes I even get a hard time when I play World Angler, a persona respected in most fly shops because it means you spend serious money on the sport. To be fair, I've encountered reasonable folk at Urban Angler, and I shop there when in traveling mode. Now, I haven't been to Christmas Island or Biff's Bahamas Bonefish Club. And I'm sorry for not having frequented the trout meccas of Patagonia, New Zealand or Tasmania. But I have been around Central America a bit, and when I told a UA staffer I was headed for Honduras, he was downright peevish, ridiculing both the destination and me, the guy who'd just purchased 35 bucks in feathers. See ya.

For the most part I buy from catalogues, and when you get serious about fly fishing, you find yourself manufacturing your own tackle. When I tie up my own flies or wrap a custom rod, I get the features I want, exactly as they suit my needs. In this way, I also manage to fritter away at least part of the icy months in a wholesome, extra-barroom activity.

Of course, the problem is finding space in

an apartment to set up shop. I use a closet once touted as a second bedroom, the one in which I also keep my office, PC, file cabinet, stereo, tool table, chest of drawers, clothes rack and stray taxidermy. The solution is to go vertical. I stow my rod wrapper and fly-tying desk in slings that hang from the ceiling. My "studio" is so limited in size I cannot own or manufacture one-piece rods, so the 14 break-down rods, reels attached, are pegboarded to one wall. Collapsible nets make life simpler, too.

Naturally, I've yielded to the lure of mega-Tupperware, which I have stacked to the ceiling with waders, boots, rain gear, creels, bags, nets and

feathers. Somewhere along the line, the various components of my workshop get bollocksed, so that there are feathers in my shoes, hooks in my shorts, fly line looped over the PC, rod components glued to the phone and monofilament where the cat will eat it by the spool.

Wet stuff is stored elsewhere. When I get home in the middle of the night, I have to grapple with soggy, slippery waders out on the dark fire escape. One night I clamber in bleary-eyed from the fire escape and answer a fist pounding at my front door. Two cops with drawn guns tell me a concerned neighbor (doubtless the myopic Mussolini-era matron across the canyon) witnessed a man being trounced on my fire escape. I show them it's my waders, not Benito, hanging by bootstraps out back.

So why doesn't this fly-fisher leave New York, get himself a garage, wide-open parking and a nearby tackle shop with a pot-bellied stove? I guess I want it both ways—meaning of course that I need to be gainfully employed so I can buy tackle and food. As far as lifestyles go, it ain't Walden Pond, Maclean's Montana or Izaak Walton's ideal. But in deference to the literary tradition, I opt for the poetic fallback position: "Contrasted against New York's artificial and cynical splendor, the natural beauty embodied by the cold rush of a river and the amber flash of trout are all the more magnificent."

Anybody got a cabin in Vermont?

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