

Tommy Typical looks at death from a different perspective. Along his "way", he gets help from St. Peter, Papa Hemingway, and his own anecdotes, poems, and simple images of a good life as he makes his soulful passage.

My Way or the Hemingway

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My Own Fishy Demise

"Many men fish all of their lives without realizing that it's not the fish they are after." Henry David Thoreau

Trout, as is their God-given nature, can act in mystifying ways and anyone who has tried to catch one knows it full well. The rare Brook Trout, known affectionately as "specs" by the locals, reside in the upper elevations. Brown Trout thrive in warmer, lower environments. And finally due to mass stocking, the non-native and colorful Rainbow Trout are quite plentiful. The three species of my favorite fish can be found in the streams nearby or within a reasonable drive from my hometown in East Tennessee. Some in larger numbers than others just like people. The world of people and fish keeps changing.

As an inexperienced boy, I lived a fairly short distance from the regal Great Smokies. The native Cherokee called the misty mountains the "place of the blue smoke". Those foothills, I figure, were called "great" because they were so ascetically majestic. Throughout all of the surrounding counties, including Anderson County where I lived, the streaming waters sustained the hallowed fish I came to pursue in my youth. But like Little Jackie Paper, who lost his magical dragon, Puff, for a season, I too temporarily lost my childhood and my innocent pursuit of Mr. Trout, the mysterious one who got away. Like all things, that, too comes full circle. And as they say, "Once a fisherman, always a fisherman," and I don't know who *they* are, but *they* do seem to know. Don't *they*?

For you see, the Lord too, as is His Divine prerogative, also works in mysterious ways. To proof my point, I have chosen to tell you about the most bamboozling ways from my own limited perspective right here in the detail of my stories that I know will sound a little odd but as Papa Hemingway used to say and still does I reckon, "My aim is to put down on paper what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way." Fish tales and human tales are simultaneously fictitious and factual.

Now that doesn't mean that it's not a little tricky to explain from a human point of view for the weirdest series of fishy events recently

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occurred to me. Frankly I'm not sure how I'm even in this uncertain position to write about it, but apparently I am, so here goes lest my opportunity gets away and if you fish you know how quickly that can happen. I remember the first stringer of fish I took home and how quickly the flapping stopped after I removed them from their life source, the precious water. I wondered where their energy went. I was still wondering that same thing forty years later until I had this dream one summer night, a premonition of what would someday unfold.

While I lay sleeping, my time it seemed had officially come. I had kicked the old minnow bucket. It's a regrettable moment from a mortal perspective that we all know is approaching but usually choose to place somewhere in the back of our minds as we obliviously deal with the hubbub of life on earth. I'm almost convinced that it is a methodology that keeps us functional in this realm of perceived mortality. Admittedly, I was somewhat taken aback when I discovered that it was unfortunately my turn at bat and I arrived at the symbolic Pearly Gates that turned out to be quite real after all. Reality, it seems, is a tricky thing, like hooking the aforementioned crafty trout.

I was right on schedule, I do believe, a rarity for me. So, I wasn't late for my own funeral as I was told repeatedly by others for many years that I most certainly would be. The joke was on them. But I was here nonetheless at that appointed place we all long for and fear simultaneously and in that regard the joke was on me. As is usually the case, it all balances out in the long run. That's something I learned in my life and times and on my trips to Las Vegas. The circumstances surrounding my big event are a tad unclear. Life can be like that when the pace gets frantic and circumstances seem a bit out of the ordinary. It's a little like the murk that gets stirred up when you disturb the bottom of a clear stream.

In fact, the very last thing I truly remember was going to sleep in a comfortable room in the tower at the Ramada Inn near O'Hare Airport after consuming a *Steak Diane* of momentous dimensions and a goodly portion of a bottle of red wine, a Merlot I believe, that was so tasty I tipped the wine steward twenty extra bucks even though the wine was already overpriced and just perhaps, no definitely, I was under the dreamy influence of the juice. I knew the chap was on a

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commission and I felt generous in it's a business deduction anyway frame of mind. Timing is a big part of making money. At least it had been for me up until that point in time. Unfortunately, now what would all the money in the world get me? Jesus, as usual, was 100% correct when he said that your soul had more value than all those worldly goods anyhow. In the end, if I may get a tad philosophical, just what was the big deal about making deals? That shook my capitalist timbers.

Not to be cliché, but that's not the conclusion of my memorable "last meal". I knew I shouldn't have had dessert last night, but the table side preparation of my favorite dessert medley, cherries jubilee, peach flambé, and bananas foster that I had previously nicknamed *Suicide*, how apropos, caused me to exceed even the bounds of my own gastronomic limitations, a record that I had previously recorded at some other fine eating establishment in Chicagoland. It was always a glorious way to complete a good meal.

There at the Cafe La Cave, on 2777 Mannheim Rd., in Des Plaines, Illinois, *Continental Cuisine* is served by courteous smartly dressed waiters and my meal like always was exquisite and it proved to be the meal of a lifetime, mine anyways. I usually became hungry thinking about good meals, but here where I now found myself I wasn't the least bit ravenous. I had heard that might be the case. I found that I liked being hungry because like any clear cut problem, there was a logical solution. Just feed yourself and the problem is solved. That's how I got my limits of trout. I knew they were hungry so I solved their problem by providing a solution to their problem and at the same time as an angler I solved mine. It was a win-win situation especially since I was a catch and release fisherman. Until now, I had not fully considered the pain inflicted by the hook.

At any rate sometime during the night as I lay in the king size bed of my spacious hotel room, I transcended the earthly experience and headed for my heavenly reward. I don't really know what happened but I was granted my wish of dying in my sleep. I'm thinking it was probably an old fashioned heart attack. It was exactly the way I had wished to go, in my sleep. Now I wished I hadn't made that wish even jokingly. Still I wondered if during the big event I made a noise and if

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like the tree that falls in the woods, if no one heard it did I really make a sound. Would I ever know the answer? “*Pshaw!*” Grandma would say, “*You need to spend your time worrying about something that matters.*” To which I would now reply, “It matters to me.” Though for the life of me I didn’t know why at that exact moment.

Back to my recent unplanned, at least by me, journey, it was a short trip, time wise, as far as I could determine. Distance wise I had no clue how far I’d traveled, though I was convinced that it was more than a few light years since no scientist had ever set eyes on Heaven with a capital “H” even with the Hubble telescope. Unlike what I had seen in the movies and read in books, the Good Book, excepted, and accepted of course.

Yeah gang, I knew exactly where I was and I didn’t have to ask anyone if I was dead or what was up. I understood in blunt earthly terms I was now *deceased*, though the word did not adequately describe this situation at all. Hence, I will use some popular terms and images that you might understand better. You know the current Westernized images that have been widely employed for Heaven, but don’t for a New York minute confuse the idealism of pop culture with this ultimate reality. Though there are a few similarities, the reality of the situation is as far apart from the perception as the East is from the West. So with the clear understanding that I shall use these familiar representations just to set the stage so to speak concerning unfamiliar and awe-inspiring individuals and places, I shall cautiously proceed on this journey of my soul. But it was one that billions had trod before me in their own unique way.

I suddenly found myself in the presence of a large man whom I believed to be St. Peter, the very one I was expecting according to what I was told as a kid and whom I somehow instinctively knew upon sight. Okay so I may have made a connection with the heavenly backdrop. While utterly inexplicable it strangely seemed logical to me. He appeared younger than I had ever imagined him to be and he spoke my native tongue impeccably though it was apparent he wasn’t from the South. My guess would have been that the accent was Midwestern perhaps Ohio or maybe Indiana. That inflection had a calming All-American effect of comfort to me.

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The Pearly Gates was not what I would call a traditional gateway. I had expected something almost grandiose, but a small wooded path beside what I recognized immediately as a trout stream with huge potential. I had an innate sense about such things. The pathway disappeared into a dense forest that was greener than any patch of woods I had ever seen. The shallow clear creek had plenty of strategically placed flat and ridged stones to create the perfect little riffles beyond the deep pools where big old hungry trout were prone to relax and work up their appetites. As Peter Parker would say, "My spider senses were tingling." I almost said a dirty word but caught myself prior to the faux pas.

The setting looked vaguely familiar and extremely promising from an angler's perspective. While I inspected it admiringly, my greeter told me that the entry appeared differently to each person. As *mi amigo* explained this to me, he cited that first impressions were important here. I was quite impressed by my first impression and told him so. He graciously said he would pass the praise along. I had no doubt that he would. Scoring brownie points here couldn't hurt one's case. I was still trying to work the crowd as my business partner would say.

I asked the obvious questions about loved ones and friends who had gone before me and the old saint assured me they were waiting patiently along with the Big Guy who was preparing my coming out party. That revelation elated me and in fact I felt I had never been so happy in all my life. It was sort of like my first skydiving experience. For the moment nothing seemed to matter but getting through this experience successfully. Then actuality set in yet again and I asked about my family that I had left behind. *Were they okay? Would they be well cared for? Could I see them from here?* Questions like that swelled up from the depths of my former self or my new self or both. I didn't know. I couldn't distinguish.

Peter touched me on the arm and said the living would get along fine without me and that response and the way he said it both soothed me and I'll have to admit troubled me because as hard as I tried I still had feelings that I was indispensable to those left behind. Apparently I wasn't. That old saying that everyone is replaceable popped into my mind. Peter read my thoughts and told me that while I would be sorely

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missed I wasn't indispensable at all. "In fact," he started to say something more and then caught himself and stopped putting a finger to his lips. I finished the sentence in my head... "The world would keep on spinning. The show must go on."

My elation was squelched temporarily and that led to a new nonstop barrage of deep questions. The age old *whys and hows*. I didn't even allow my ethereal friend time to reply before I reeled off another question that I felt I had to have the answer to and eventually the patient Peter raised his hand as a gesture of cessation and said calmly, "There'll be plenty of time for that. Right now I want to give you a gift."

"A gift! I exclaimed in disbelief as my mood turned cheerful again. "Just being here is a gift." It sounded so trite. What was wrong with me? Was I trying to score brownie points again? My wife had always told me I was a big ham. As usual she was right. But I was excited. Would it be wrapped in pretty paper?

Old St. Pete didn't notice or if he did, he didn't let on. Instead he said, "Well, the Boss insists on it. Since humans all live at different times in different places, He thought it would be nice if you and everyone else who shows up here could spend a little time, a two week holiday, with someone that you admired or were simply interested in while you lived on Earth. Then after that we link up with some old friends for a little more fishing before you move on. Tommy, we get all kinds of requests. So don't be shy or feel that you have to hold back. Go for it as you say. The only guideline is that the person is departed like you and not a close relative since most of your time will be spent with your family for the next couple of centuries."

"You're kidding," I retorted before I thought about whether kidding or humor of any kind was allowed here. Anyway knowing that a future family reunion was in the mix, I felt better. I had a lot to say to my bloodline.

"No, not about this," Peter responded unperturbedly interrupting my rambling, "What *do* you think?"

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I sat down on a tuft of soft grass, the kind I had used as a kid for chewing on as I watched and named white puffy clouds. I took my sweet time and he waited good-naturedly. In fact he sat down too and hummed softly. I believe it was an old hymn I recognized from my childhood, one my grandpa hummed but I couldn't name at that moment. I thought extensively about my dreams and aspirations and what it was I truly wanted right now.

Have you ever noticed that when you try to focus on something big, it's at that exact instant that little bizarre things creep in? It's at those times you might laugh nervously for some unknown reason. I thought that aspect of my nature would change when I was made *perfect*. It hadn't, but I'll have to admit that here, in this place, priorities were different and I couldn't yet fully explain how, but I knew I was inexplicably changed, to boot, in some fundamental way and yet I felt wholly in tact. That was never what I expected but it felt so natural.

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