

Of chasing orange peels

by JAMES MATTHEWS

Pretty certain it isn't supposed to be like this.

Then again, I've often seen how certainty comes out soft. A sure thing withers.

We're supposed to have flying cars and be living in tree-top cities. Revelling in utopian bliss, free to chase pursuits of interest as opposed to necessity in order to wrestle the ends so they meet. Was a time I thought life by now would be of the coolest bits from any one of the first Star Wars movies, episodes Four, Five, and Six.

I'm many years removed from those thoughts. Ideas stoked by river-talk during the old days, my buddies and I slapped summer mosquitos and wet the lines of Dukes of Hazzard fishing rods in a narrow flow called Bell's Brook, where I grew up. A ribbon of water that meandered through so much of my life in ways I've only recently seen through lenses of time, trauma, success, and the geographic distances afforded by moves through provinces and territories. Seen too late, but such is life.

That cold water was a respite from the summer humidity stoked by the bay down the hill. Anything in the way of a cool breeze off the water and from the Gulf of St. Lawrence was stopped by the hills and the evergreens. And those mosquitos. The Bell's Brook wading was cautious when we'd have to rescue a hook from a streambed rock. Maybe a sunken tree branch or a piece of a car long ago dumped. We were just wee slips of boys, but it was a time and place safe enough that we could tell our parents not to worry when we left our houses, each with barbed hooks and a pocketknife. Maybe a peanut sandwich.

We'd use orange peels as bait because somebody told somebody else at some point that fish went foolish for an orange peel. Something about the citrus, the smell registered despite the water. Maybe that's true of some fish, but not the trout in Bell's Brook.

Orange peels.

It could be that a Newfoundland brook trout is smarter in its goals than us lads who chased them with hook and line and orange peel. We watched the brook trout mosey along by the rocks on which we stood. Oblivious, they were. It was as if I could thrust a hand into the brook and grab one. Impossible, of course. Just try to grab a fish in water. The trout were so close, attainable, I should've been able to hand-pluck them from the flow.

Perhaps we were the ones who chased the orange peel. Not the fishies at all. And I'm still chasing in the manner by which lads believe in ideas and possibilities and promises of years ahead.

Now into life's second half with a recurring limp, arthritic feet, and a daily prayer for at least one solid bowel movement to save a day, I'm still reaching for the hooked orange peel. We all are. It's how everything is set up.

My son-in-law recently turned 22.

Twenty-two.

Feels as if I was that age last month. I must've blinked away the years. The years are much like the brook trout that flitted by the rock on which I stood. Slipped from grasp.

?Take some time to look around, Liam,? I said when the flames were blown out and the candles smoked. ?Next month you'll be 51 and have prescriptions for pills to mind your blood pressure and cholesterol.?

And regular bowel movements will be a deciding factor in a day's quality.

Bell's Brook was a ribbon that connected my important places in days more important to me now. It's come to that now because I didn't look around enough then. Maybe in our second halves, we're convinced we hadn't taken that time to look around.

?Liam, would you fancy a walk, son? Maybe we put a hook into a stream and see what we catch. Or walk, see where the stream goes.?

The things he'll look back on afterwards.