

The thing about Jake

By Justin C. Witt

The whole thing started innocently enough over a campfire after one of those all too rare successful days of steelheading. It had been snowing and blowing the whole time which is par for the course, but everyone had also landed at least one fish, which is not. Then right at dusk the front blew over and the skies cleared, exposing more stars than any of us had seen in a very long time from our miserably light polluted dwellings back in town. We made a huge dinner of the grouse breasts Dave had brought from his freezer along with potatoes, carrots, and asparagus all fried

in copious quantities of butter, Russell being sure to keep all our glasses full of his favorite Speyside single-malt throughout that process. If you're lucky and you've put your time in you know these nights. Everybody is still a bit high on the results of the day, and after dinner the

conversation around the fire makes its inevitable transition from revelry into philosophical debate.



It was Jake who first brought it up. He was always the one. Kind of a thing with him. We'd been telling stories about our day on the river and he'd been kind of quiet for a while; then all of a sudden he posed a question in that slow and carefully thought out voice of his.

“What, is the difference,” he asked, staring deep into the coals and with a finger raised for effect at each pregnant pause, “between catch and release fly fishing, and *sadism*.”

There was a moment of silence and perplexed facial expressions as we searched through the whiskey fog and connected the dots, but then we all roared with laughter and tried to just pass it off as a good joke and move on. Jake wasn't having any of that though.

Bill said hunting was more like sadism than fishing but Jake countered that the exact opposite was true. Hunting was like fishing for your dinner. You catch the fish then kill it and eat it; what could be more natural than that? But what we had just done, according to him, was to trick these innocent and beautiful creatures into thinking they had encountered a healthy meal, then proceed to torture them for our own fun and amusement, putting them through a horrifying experience and at significant risk of dying in the process, only to release them after the fact so that they could swim back off into the river thinking whatever must be the fish-consciousness version of "what the fuck?". And that's just the ones who made it. We also knew damn well that between the lactic acid build up and the risk of gill bleeds there was a significant percentage of them that didn't.

And for what? Jake asked. For us to have a few moments of triumphantly torturous enjoyment?

The group was kind of quiet for a while then, the fire dominating the space with its crackling and sparks while what was left of the wind played ominous rhythms through the trees, all of us wishing he hadn't dropped this philosophical bomb into the middle of our otherwise jovial evening. But of course Jake wasn't done.

"What if they weren't fish?" he asked. "Morally speaking, what is the difference between the fish we caught today and the grouse we ate for dinner, or a rabbit, or a deer? Why is it acceptable to torture fish while putting them at risk of death yet we have laws in most states that would brand you as cruel and put you in a position to be prosecuted if you did the same thing to another species?" We had to chew on that one for a while too. But Jake still wasn't done.

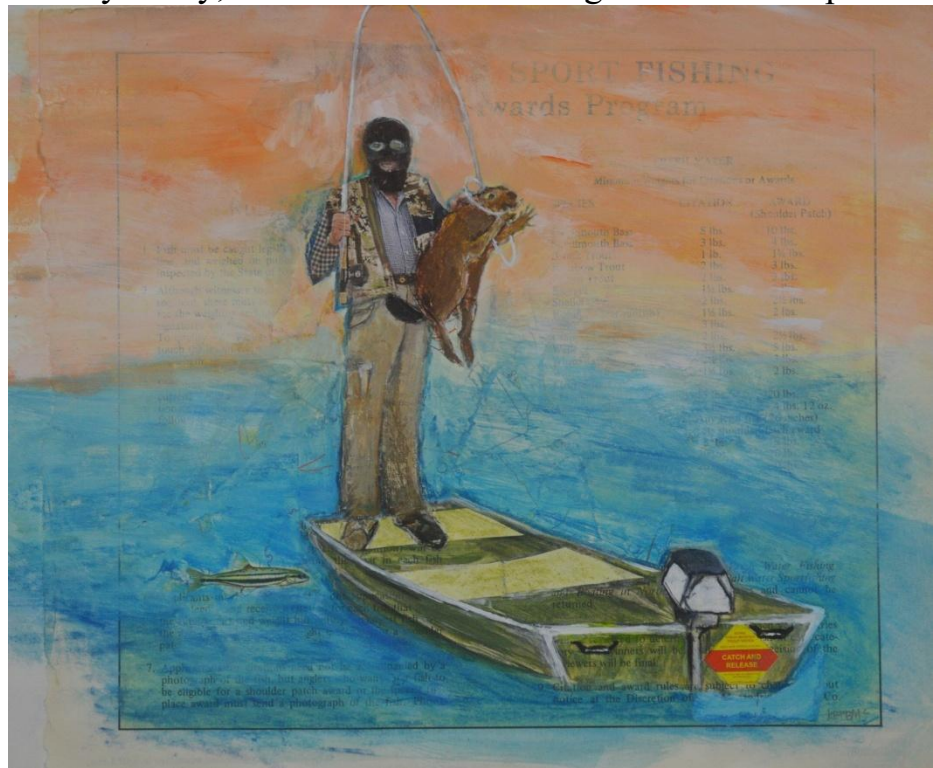
"I'm going to conduct an experiment." he said. "I'm going to go back home and head up to the beaver pond where we used to fish for brookies when we were kids, and I'm going to hook and land a beaver on a fly rod. Then I'm going to hold

it up by the scruff of the neck and one of you is going to take a picture and we'll put the thing up on Instagram and see what people have to say about it.” Now we were back to laughing. This was starting to get interesting, if still a bit ridiculous. “I'm serious,” he said. “Who's going to help me?”

Well, we were all in. After more than twenty years of growing up together and following each other down countless rabbit trails of silliness and obsession, how could we not be in? I got saddled with the first assist. What I didn't know was that this was only the beginning.

The beaver went fairly easily, at least in terms of being an executable plan.

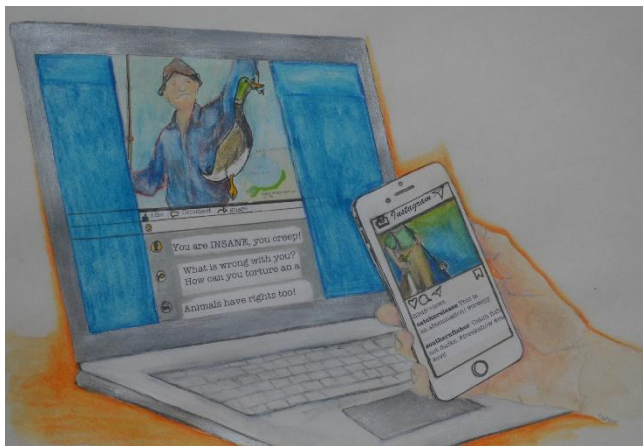
Jake pulled it off with an eight weight and a barbless 1/0 hook, casting from the platform on the front of my johnboat. We laughed as I poled him around the pond trying to land the thing between tail-slaps and dives. The dusk sky had become a messy pallet of blues and pinks and grays, quite tranquil from



a visual perspective; but it must have seemed to the bats like we'd hooked a demon amongst the cedar stumps. We still had to get ahold of the damn thing after we had it in the musky net though, which at first proved to be a significant challenge. Who knew beavers could *scream*? Somehow we eventually managed to pin the clearly pissed off and decidedly toothy critter down on the front deck, and Jake pulled a black ski mask out of the cargo pocket of his pants, his unexpected stylistic touch. Then he grabbed the poor squalling beaver by the scruff of its neck, lifted it out of the net, and I snapped the shot. There it was for all the world to see: Jake, dressed like a bank robber and holding a twenty pound screaming beaver in one hand, fly rod in the other, and grinning through the mask like a kid who'd just made off with the cookie jar.

He posted the photo and then sent links to all the major blogs and chat rooms he could find. The comments poured in.

"How cruel!" "Stupid dumb asses". "THIS, is an ABOMINATION!" By the time a week had gone by there were literally hundreds of them since the people who were all torqued out of shape were the same ones who kept forwarding it on, and for the most part all of the comments came from fly fishermen who had their own Instagram id's with countless photos of themselves online holding up beautiful fish which were not only captured by basically the same means, but which weren't even mammals, and as such were gasping for oxygen and effectively dying even as the photos were taken. It was hard to argue rationally with Jake's point.



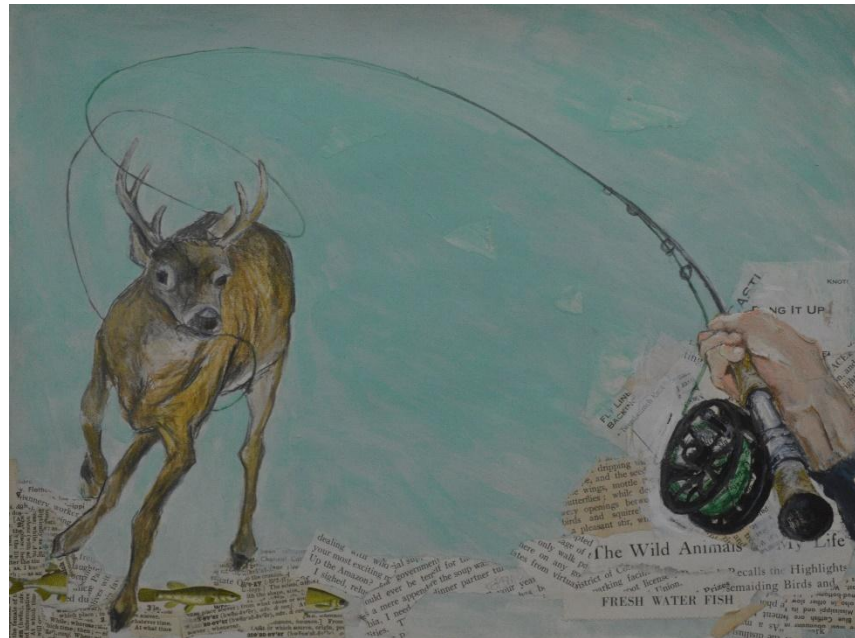
He waited until it looked like it was slowing down a bit and then he dropped the bomb, responding via his own comment with a simple question. "What is the difference between doing this to a beaver, and doing it to a Trout?" That's when the shit really hit the fan. The comment thread became what internet junkies call "viral", and within days he had everything from PETA's opinion on the matter to whole

essays written by professors of philosophy and analysis of the legal question by legislators and the Department of Fish and Game.

It was an alright adventure in the academic sense, but we should have just left it at that. Instead we ran with it, and used the fictitious Instagram ID to start adding new species to the portfolio of our inquiry. Within a month we had photos posted of Jake doing grip and grins with a duck, a squirrel, and a raccoon. Then we posted our first video version and brought it to a whole other level.

Ben was the camera man this time, shooting from the clear cut stand on the rye field down at deer camp. We had dug a pit out in the middle of the field about ninety feet off from a big pile of corn. Jake put a treble hook in the corn and laid out an entire tarpon line on the ground. Then we both got in the pit, covered it up with branches, and waited, watching the line. Ben let us know by text messages when a doe came in and started feeding on the corn, then another one, and then a scrawny little six point buck that was missing a brow tine. Pretty soon the line

moved just a bit and Jake hit the deer with a wicked strip set and it was on. Of course it had to be the buck. We didn't really know if we could land him, and sure as shit didn't know if we could control him once we did, but he had nowhere to go. The field was five hundred yards across and we were right in the middle of it. With



a straight hundred pound leader and a super tight drag on Jake's big Abel the deer went down and did a summersault before he got halfway to the woods, somehow even tangling the line in his antlers which didn't help. Then it was the standard give and take from there on until he was in, all with the video camera running. The young buck was pretty well worn out but still what can only be described as hysterical when we got him to within a couple feet of the leader. I had never been that close to a live deer before, and it seemed quite a lot bigger than it would have had it been bounding off with its tail raised in the distance, or lying dead in the bed of a truck. Steam shot out of his enormous nostrils with each exhalation, and both the line and the muscles in his legs as he strained against Jake's rod looked like they might pop any second. Then as the deer backpedaled in circles around us Jake finally got him to zig when he should have zagged and I made the tackle, grabbing antlers with both hands and wrapping my legs around his abdomen as he flopped wildly and kicked the living shit out of me somehow with his back legs despite the hold. The head and the antlers kept my focus since they represented the potential for an actual goring, but I eventually somehow managed to pin the whole thing to the ground and hold it there. Once the thrashing finally ceased the poor buck just lay there panting with his eyes rolling around and around in his skull like he was searching the depths of his universe for something that could make sense of the situation, and not finding it. Then Jake calmly walked over and pulled the hook from his lower jaw, untangled the leader from his antlers, and paused to look up at the stand where the video camera was still rolling before pulling out his phone for a silly selfy grip and grin. My legs were black and blue for a week. And after that one, the cops got involved.

We'd been careful about how we set up the account so as to conceal our identities but Instagram took it down and deleted all the files. All of us thought the thing was finally done. All of us except Jake that is. Jake wasn't giving up. This "project", as he called it, had become an obsession. It wasn't that he wanted to prove a point really, at least not to the public; and I can't say that at that time he had really even sorted out the question we were posing for himself. The rest of us were still fishing every chance we got and otherwise going on about our business. But Jake just kept amplifying the thread, which by now was actually making news even in the non-fishing media. He was searching for something. An answer. Whether from humanity as a whole or from the universe or just himself, he wanted to arrive at some sort of reason, some justification or distinction that would make it all make sense.

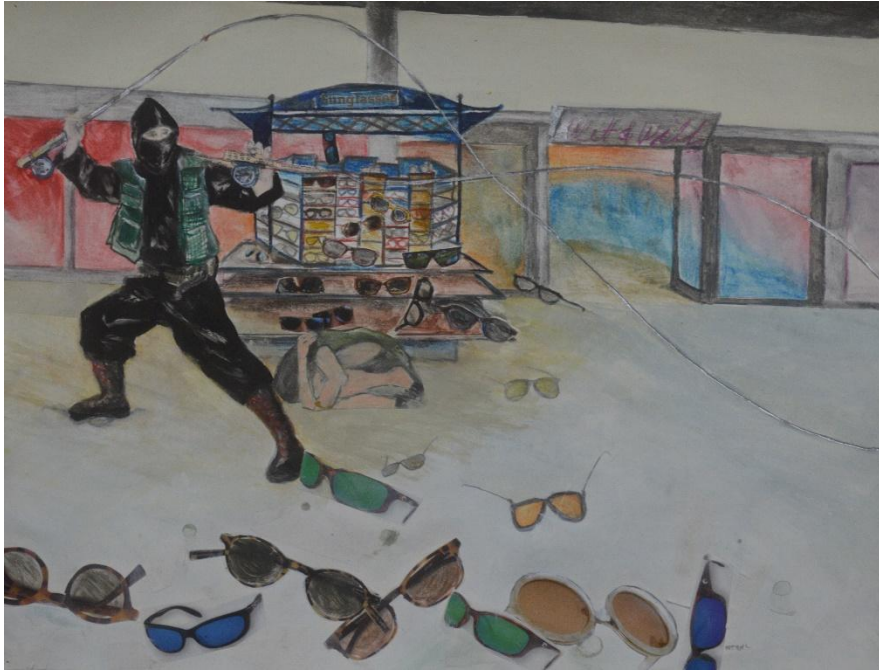
After the deer though things went sideways quickly, and pretty soon he was entirely off the reservation. All the rest of us could do was stand back and watch with looks of total shock and awe on our faces. Jake became a sort of cyber terrorist, always putting up new identities to make his posts, but with enough consistency in the hash tags so that they could still be found by the people who were clinging to the coat tails of his madness. And there were *a lot of them*. I couldn't take it anymore and had a family to worry about which Jake didn't. But he continued the project all on his own and was soon targeting more and more outrageous species, eventually getting to the point of downright dangerous ideas.

Like all fly fishermen who graduate past that stage where trout become passé, it was about bigger, toothier, and more exotic quarry every time. He'd briefly considered porpoises and of course that led to thoughts of a sperm whale, but these ideas thankfully got dismissed fairly quickly because of the creatures' obvious similarity to fish. He got his arm pretty mangled trying to unhook a coyote, was lucky as hell to get spooled by a big bull elk which would likely have killed him if he'd gotten it close, but also somehow managed to actually land and release a nine foot alligator with a fourteen weight on a canal somewhere in the Everglades. He told me he was considering going to Africa to try for a lion. I was speechless.

Eventually though, none of it was enough. Jake dropped off the radar entirely and we didn't hear from him for a month while he prepared for his ultimate trophy. In his backyard he set up targets and taught himself to cast two rods simultaneously, one in each hand like Lefty used to do at the flyfishing shows back in the eighties; and while he wasn't accurate enough to take a lit cigarette out

of the mouth of a man at fifty feet like Lefty, he was damn sure accurate enough to hook the man himself at that range. And yep, you guessed it, that's exactly what he did.

For his final hurrah Jake stormed the local mall dressed as a ninja and wielding two nine weights. He'd put barbless 3/0 trebles that had the hooks bent out to 40 degree angles on each line so he could do long range releases with a follow up roll cast, and he proceeded to begin snatching old ladies out of



wheelchairs and dragging suit wearing businessmen across the polished tile floors as he made his way through the food court, wailing like a banshee and whirling like a dervish. It was a sight to behold. I saw the security video on the news afterward and I'd say his best trophy from that day was a huge bald guy that was coming out of the fitness gym

who ran down the escalator so fast after he was hooked there was too much line off the reel for the roll cast release. That is, until the guy changed his mind about what to do and ran back up the escalator roaring like Mel Gibson doing his final battle climax charge in half a dozen of those old stupid movies. Just pick one, you'll be able to picture what I mean.

Mall security was totally outgunned by Jake's tactics, to say the least, and called in reinforcements right away. Ever notice how approaching police sirens sound just like a pack of howling, hungry wolves? When the SWAT team arrived though things were over pretty quickly. Jake's hooks were just no match for their helmets and bullet proof vests. He held them off as long as he could from behind one of those mid-mall sunglass display stands, the poor clerk curled into a fetal position on the floor at his feet and shrieking like a hysterical monkey all tangled up in Jake's stripping. But when they finally dove straight through the sunglass

stand itself and tackled him the whole thing came crashing to its still somehow grotesquely impressive end. Jake's lucky he didn't get shot; this isn't Canada.

Now he's doing three to five at the state penitentiary for assault. We all wondered how the hell he hadn't been declared insane and sent to the psycho ward instead. Not Jake though. For all that he was obviously nuts there at the end, he declined public council and



defended himself in court, presenting his premise in what anyone would have to admit were logically defensible terms, and defending those to the end while refusing all the while to take a plea deal. Like I said, that's Jake. He's lucky he got off as easy as he did.

Meanwhile the rest of us are still steelheading, and we send him pictures of our fish in the letters that we write to him at the prison. He hasn't replied to a single one though, and I can't help but wonder whether or not he ended up finding the answer to his question after all, and if he will still be going fishing with us when he eventually gets released.

The End

*Illustrations by Atlanta artist Katherine McClure below



SPORT FISHING Awards Program

AWARD PATCH

Minimum Lengths for Catches or Awards

SPECIES	MINIMUM LENGTHS	AWARD (Shoulder Patch)
Striped Bass	24 in.	10 lbs.
Brook Trout	18 in.	4 lbs.
Atlantic Salmon	24 in.	1 1/2 lbs.
Rock Bass	18 in.	3 lbs.
White Perch	24 in.	3 lbs.
Bluegill	10 in.	2 lbs.
Shad	24 in.	2 1/2 lbs.
Crappie	18 in.	2 lbs.
Walleye	24 in.	2 1/2 lbs.
White Bass	24 in.	5 lbs.
Yellow Perch	18 in.	2 lbs.
Smallmouth Bass	18 in.	20 lbs.
Rock Bass	18 in.	4 lbs., 12 oz.
White Perch	24 in.	any length (3.0 inches)
Bluegill	10 in.	any length (3.0 inches)
Shad	24 in.	any length (3.0 inches)
Crappie	18 in.	any length (3.0 inches)
Walleye	24 in.	any length (3.0 inches)
White Bass	24 in.	any length (3.0 inches)
Yellow Perch	18 in.	any length (3.0 inches)
Smallmouth Bass	18 in.	any length (3.0 inches)

1. Fish must be caught legally, measured, weighed on platform scale, and weighed on platform scale by the State or County.

2. Although witnesses are required, these must be the weighing and measuring official.

3. To receive an award, the fish must be weighed and measured by the weighing and measuring official.

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Water Fishing
Salt Water Sports Fishing
and cannot be
returned
CATCH AND
RELEASE
The fish must be weighed and measured by the weighing and measuring official.

notice of the Discretion of
the State or County.

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