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I Never Saw Myself as a ‘Cancer Patient’ — Until I Went Fishing With 10 of Them

As fly fishing became less like a hobby and more like a lifeline, could a retreat help ease my emotional burden?

Listen · 21:39 min

By Jonathan Gluck

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I avoided this trip for years. I don’t know how many people told me about Reel Recovery. Their logic was clear enough: I’m a cancer patient and a fly-fisherman; Reel Recovery hosts fly-fishing retreats for men living with cancer. More than once, I looked into their outings. And, more than once, even began planning one. But I never followed through. Some obligation always got in the way. Sometimes I was just too sick to travel.

I’ve had a form of blood cancer called multiple myeloma for more than 22 years. And I’ve been through dozens of rounds of treatments and gone in and out of remission more times than I care to remember. (While treatable, multiple myeloma is not curable for most patients.) For years I tried to compartmentalize my illness. I didn’t pretend I wasn’t sick or keep my condition a secret, but I didn’t want to identify as a cancer patient. I was wary of everything that that entailed. Shortly after I was diagnosed, I attended a support group in which a man shared a story

about his spine "disintegrating" and a woman talked about the weeks she spent on life support because of septic shock. If their accounts were meant to make me feel better, somehow, they had the opposite effect.

Maybe that's why I was so skeptical of Reel Recovery. I've been a fly-fisher for decades, and after I got sick, the sport became less like a hobby and more like a lifeline. The cast itself, with its metronomic back-and-forth motion, has a meditative quality to it, and when you stare at a tiny imitation fly floating on the surface of the water 30 feet from you, waiting for a fish to rise from the depths and strike, your mind is fully occupied with the task at hand. Your troubles, medical or otherwise, tend to fade away. I didn't want to let my illness corrupt this one escape.

Then in January 2023, a remission that had lasted several years came to an end, and my disease began advancing rapidly. That summer I underwent the most extensive and risky treatment I've had to date: a cutting-edge form of immunotherapy called CAR T-cell therapy that can have serious, sometimes fatal, side effects. In CAR-T therapy, your T-cells, a cornerstone of your immune system, are harvested from your blood, then sent to a laboratory where they are engineered to produce a protein called a chimeric antigen receptor, or CAR, on their surfaces. This programs the T-cells to seek out and kill cancer cells; then the T-cells are reintroduced to your body to do just that. Radiation therapy and chemotherapy essentially carpet bomb healthy and unhealthy cells alike. But CAR-T therapy mainly targets the cancer cells, limiting collateral damage.

My CAR-T treatment induced a remission, but it also changed me. It was so involved, so powerful and so deep — down to the very level of my cells — I felt as if I had been fundamentally altered. I spent two weeks in the hospital. I had to do two rounds of chemotherapy before starting CAR-T therapy. My immune system was all but wiped out as part of the procedure, and for the first time, I lost my hair. At that point, there was no more pretending I didn't have cancer. It had been 22 years of this. I was anxious, depressed, exhausted and suffering from chronic back pain. Talk therapy helped — a little. I tried psych meds, but none of them really worked.

So last fall I began looking into a Reel Recovery trip. I was still worried about being more scared than comforted by what I would hear, but I reasoned I was more battle-hardened than I was in the immediate aftermath of my diagnosis. Maybe this time things would be different. Maybe I was ready to commune with my fellow cancer patients. Besides, Reel Recovery is a nonprofit and its trips are free. All I'd have to do is get myself to one of its outings.

In January I booked a spot, and in May I traveled from my home in New York City to the Madison Valley Ranch, in Ennis, Mont., steps from the Madison River. For three days I would fish world-class trout streams and talk with a group of 10 strangers, day and night, about cancer.

When I walked into the meeting room for our first gathering, most of the other men were already seated. A ring of chairs and couches had been arranged in front of a large picture window looking out to a sprawling expanse of sage-green Montana ranchland framed by the snow-frosted peaks of the Madison Range. I couldn't decide if the setting was a stroke of genius or some kind of cosmic joke.

Shortly after I took my seat, Jeremy Alcoke, a 43-year-old social worker from nearby Bozeman, introduced himself and began the meeting by establishing some simple ground rules — no politics, no proselytizing, no cross talk — then led us through a few icebreakers. When several of the men started to relate their cancer stories, Alcoke gently redirected them. We would get to that, he said. For now, he wanted us to stick to the prompts at hand. His intent was to ease us into the deeper waters. But what was unsaid was as powerful as what we discussed. Waiting to talk about our diseases felt like watching a horror movie, knowing a monster is about to appear. A sense of anticipation filled the room. Then it was time for the monster.

Alcoke invited us to talk about our illnesses, as much or as little as we liked. The men's stories called to mind Tolstoy: All healthy people are alike; all unhealthy people are unhealthy in their own way. At the same time, cancer narratives tend to share some unwelcome similarities. Virtually all of the stories began with a

seemingly innocent symptom — a slightly elevated PSA score or even just a stomachache — that resulted in a life-altering diagnosis. Virtually all involved grueling treatments.

Because Reel Recovery welcomes anyone who has ever had cancer at any time, some of the accounts were uplifting (one man talked about surviving a diagnosis from childhood), but most weren't. Larry, a 71-year-old retired nurse from Utah, was diagnosed with prostate cancer, exactly as his father and uncle had been before him; his brother was diagnosed around the same time. "For me," he said, "cancer was a matter of *when*, not *if*." Ed, a 63-year-old retired contractor from South Carolina, was diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma that had spread to his lungs, ribs and legs. He had to have a metal rod put in one femur to stabilize it. Steve, a 75-year-old pastor from Montana, went to the emergency room with stomach pain only to learn that his intestines were lined with neuroendocrine tumors. He still has a number of them, but his condition was stable. "It's a good thing, because my doctor says they can't take out any more of my intestines," he said. "I wouldn't survive it."

The stories went on and on like that. Dave, a 68-year-old prostate cancer patient from Montana, who also had a concurrent illness, spent months in a rehabilitation facility to relearn how to walk. Tony, a 64-year-old construction professional from Utah, had surgery to remove his bladder and prostate and underwent eight rounds of chemotherapy. Jeremy, a 50-year-old small-business owner from Colorado with acute myeloid leukemia, was only there with us thanks to an emergency stem-cell transplant he underwent after finding himself "at death's door."

As I listened, I was overwhelmed with anxious thoughts. Some of these guys were out of treatment options. How lucky was I that I still had more therapies available to me? Why did I have that good fortune and not them? I took deep breaths to calm myself — but something was indeed different this time. I was ready to hear the others' stories, no matter how uneasy they made me feel. I could admit to myself that I was connected to these men in a way that I was to no one else.

When it was my turn to speak, I shared that I was a blood cancer patient. When I was diagnosed, I said, I was 38 years old. Initially I was told I might have as little as 18 months to live. My daughter — my first child — was 7 months old. But thanks to breakthroughs in the treatment of my illness — many of them approved, improbably enough, only in the time since I learned I was sick — I had been living with my disease for more than two decades. I talked about the physical challenges of living with cancer for such a long time, like bone pain (multiple myeloma causes lesions in the bones) and the constant anxiety of wondering when my illness is going to resurface. “It’s like a hibernating bear,” I said. “It may be sleeping now, but you know it’s eventually going to wake up.” Several men nodded.

Before Alcoke ended the session, he gave us a few moments to sit in silence. The atmosphere was solemn, almost holy. I had the sense that we all felt the presence of a powerful force with which we had a deep and meaningful relationship — not a god, in this case, but a disease. With astonishing speed, a bond had formed between us. We were fellow parishioners in the Church of the Ill. It wasn’t a congregation any of us wanted to be a part of, but here we were.

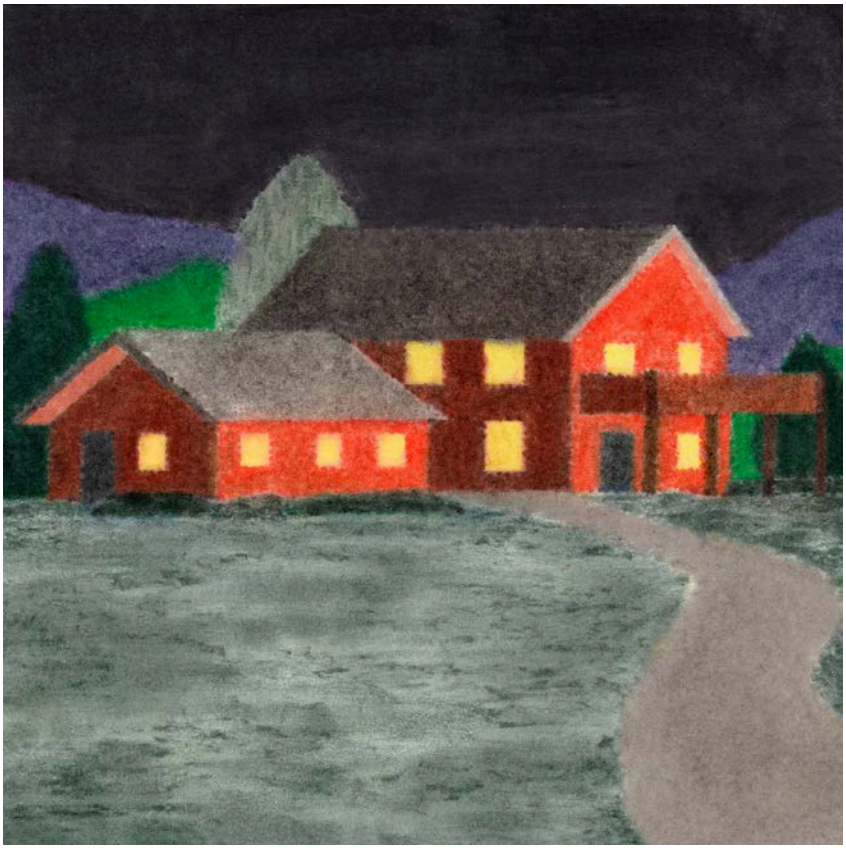


Illustration by Ciara Quilty-Harper

Dinner that night was a testament to fly-fishers' obsession with their sport: We barely said a word about cancer. Instead, Zach Hoylman, one of the volunteer guides — or buddies, as Reel Recovery calls them — talked about his favorite fishing spot near his home in Missoula, Mont. Another buddy showed us a picture of a 28-inch German brown trout he once caught. Heath, a 51-year-old emergency room doctor who was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2023, regaled us with tales of a trip he took to Kamchatka, in Russia's Far East, with his father (who later died of prostate cancer himself), and shared pictures of several big rainbow trout they landed there. David, the childhood cancer survivor, who is now 36 and a neuropsychologist, talked about fishing in the Eastern Sierras, in California, with his father and grandfather; he named two of his children after streams there. And I offered a story about The One That Got Away — a 24-inch brown trout I had brought to within a foot of my net, before losing him, in Patagonia. That story may have elicited more sympathy than anything I said about my disease. I liked that. *Priorities.*

After dinner we had another group conversation. The topic this time was "How has cancer affected your masculinity?" Several men talked about the damage their illness had done to their sex lives. Others talked about their inability to have children. Some lamented the loss of their ability to help around the house or provide financially for their families. Heath cracked a joke about needles being placed in sensitive places.

But it was a story told by Rex, a 74-year-old Air Force veteran, that shook us. In 2023, Rex began experiencing pain while urinating, but had trouble finding good medical care in his rural Wyoming town. After initially being misdiagnosed with an enlarged prostate, he learned in 2024 that he had prostate cancer. "By then it had spread," he said. Rex was stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam War and believes he got sick from exposure to Agent Orange. Now, he said, he felt a responsibility for managing his loved ones' experience of his illness. He said he hadn't yet told his grandchildren he was sick — he was still trying to figure out how

to do that. "Since they told me I was terminal," he said, "I've been trying to learn, I guess you could say, how to die well." It was the first time anyone had used the words "terminal" or "die."

I don't believe in an afterlife, but I do fear suffering. (Does any cancer patient not?) And I worry about making my wife a widow and leaving my children without a father. One of my first thoughts in the moments after I was diagnosed was, "Please let me see my daughter graduate from high school." I was lucky enough to see her do that, *and* graduate from college. I have also seen my son, who was born five years later, graduate from high school. I still don't want to leave either of them, ever.

But Rex seemed at ease with what lay ahead. Hearing him talk about death with such equanimity was, if it's not insensitive to say so, *comforting*. After the meeting that night, as I walked toward my room with five other men shuffling across the lawn ahead of me, it occurred to me that we looked like a parade of zombies, half-dead and half-alive, wandering in the gloaming.

On the second day, it was time to fish. After breakfast, Stan Golub, Reel Recovery's executive director, asked our group to join him outside in front of two wooden folding tables piled with fishing vests. Golub founded the organization in 2003 with a small team of men led by Stu Brown, a dentist who had Stage 4 brain cancer. At the time, Golub was working for a nonprofit that hosted fly-fishing retreats for women with breast cancer, and Brown reached out to him to inquire about starting a similar program for men.

Golub's most indelible memory of the group's first retreat is of one of the men, with a fish in his net, high-fiving his buddy. "He was bald from treatment, with a big scar down the side of his head," Golub says. "And he was beaming." Brown died before the organization hosted its second retreat, but the group he started has now held more than 500 outings for nearly 5,500 participants.

In front of the tables at the ranch, Golub told us the fishing vests had been a part of every Reel Recovery retreat, and virtually every participant had signed one. "We want you to wear the vests with the names of some of the men who have walked in

your footsteps," he said. "Some of them are still with us, some of them not." As I looked for a vest that fit me, I had the sense I was communing with an even larger group of cancer patients — an unseen assemblage of strangers and spirits.

The morning's outing, a wade-fishing session on a stretch of the Madison River known as Valley Garden, was slow, but after lunch we launched an armada of six drift boats down a section of the Madison known as Eight Mile, with two anglers and one buddy in each craft. One of the buddies, Zac Cavaness, brought along his father, Mike, a former Reel Recovery participant and single-leg amputee who uses a wheelchair. Various members of the group had bad backs, balky knees or other ailments related to their illnesses, but if any of us were inclined toward feeling sorry for ourselves, seeing Mike out on the water fixed that. He was inspiring, not least of all for his lack of self-pity. At one point, Heath told a story about a youth minister he knew growing up in Texas who lost a finger in a paper-cutter accident. When people would ask him what happened, the minister would say, "Paper cut."

Mike said when anyone asks about the leg, "I tell people, 'Griz.' "

David and I were paired together, and as we drifted downstream, the two of us and our buddy, Vince Watson, swapped stories about our favorite secret fishing spots (I'll never tell) and told dumb jokes ("What did the Buddhist monk say to the hot dog vendor? Make me one with everything"). From time to time, someone in another boat would catch a fish and we would hear them hollering in celebration, the heaviness of the group discussions from the previous day evaporating into the afternoon sky.

At the boat ramp where we ended our outing, we shared stories of our catch. David and I each landed a 15-inch brown trout. Heath netted a 20-inch brown, a personal best on the Madison. Jeremy, the leukemia patient, caught an 18-inch brown.

But once again it was Rex who commanded the group's attention. Outfitted in waders and a floppy blue bucket hat, he told us that he started out slowly, catching a four-inch brown trout and two suckers, but then landed the fish of the day: a 21-

inch brown. At dinner, he showed me a photo of himself holding the fish. In it, he’s smiling like he just robbed a bank. Getting outfished usually makes me jealous, but in this case I was thrilled. It felt like an act of karmic justice.

That afternoon, after we returned from the river, the prompt for the meeting was, “After all you’ve been through, what’s something you’d like to let go of?” As quickly as the collective mood had brightened on the river, it grew dark again. Larry told the group that he has a stepson, whom he loves very much, but he always wanted a biological child as well. He wanted to let go of that longing. “I’ve been carrying that around for a long time,” he said. Ed talked about letting go of anxiety, and Jeremy wanted to release fear. I said, “Waiting for the other shoe to drop.” Trevor, who was diagnosed with Stage 4 prostate cancer in 2024 when he was in his late 40s, chose not to answer. “There’s something I could say,” he said, “but I’d just start sobbing.”

That night a cold front came in and rain pounded the roof of my room. As I was getting ready for bed, my back locked up. I wasn’t sure I would be able to walk the next day. After the retreat, I was planning to drive to Idaho to fish with my friend Tim for a few days. I called him to tell him I was worried I couldn’t make the trip. But then more spilled out of me. I wound up telling him about the struggles I was having recently — the anxiety, depression, fatigue, back pain. I’ve known Tim for years and he’s one of my closest friends, but I hadn’t told anyone except my wife and doctors about any of that.

Tim said he was sorry. He said he wished he’d known sooner and that he hoped I’d feel better. He said it would be too bad if I couldn’t fish with him but not to worry about it. It was all kind and helpful of him, but just the same I started spiraling again. Why did I come here? Had I taken on more than I could handle? How badly had I hurt myself? Would I be able to fish the next day? Would I ever fish again? Had my cancer come back?



Illustration by Ciara Quilty-Harper

The final morning of the retreat was windy and wet, and the planned fishing outing was canceled. Instead we had a choice of staying at the lodge or fishing some of the nearby waters on foot. My back had loosened up, so I decided to venture out.

I’m no one’s idea of a great angler, but I have a habit of catching memorable fish just before the end of a trip. Tim calls me the Closer. Within 10 minutes of wading in a small creek, I caught a 16-inch brown trout, my best of the trip, and within 10 minutes of our time on the river being up, I netted a small but pretty rainbow trout. Fly-fishing, maybe by virtue of being so difficult and so chancy, has a way of serving up life lessons. One, things don’t always go as planned. Two, as quickly as life can turn bad, it can turn good. For the millionth time, I tried to let those ideas sink in. For a moment, I may have even succeeded.

Back at the lodge, Rex was talking to a woman I hadn’t seen before. He introduced her as his daughter, Rachel. The two of them were going to do some more fishing on the way home, Rex told me. I’m not sure why, but I found myself telling Rachel what a pleasure it had been to meet her father and how much I enjoyed listening to

his stories about his life and career. I also told her how nice it was to listen to him talk about how much he loves his family. I guess I wanted to be sure she knew. Or maybe it was a wish: that someday, if — when — I was in Rex’s situation, someone might tell my kids something similar about me.

For the closing ceremony, we were given a final prompt: What will you take away from this retreat? Two universal themes emerged: We all wanted to continue to open up more about our illness, and we all wanted to spend more time in the company of other cancer patients. I agreed with all of that, though perhaps the biggest lesson didn’t sink in until the retreat was over. Spending time with other people like me — people who understood what I was going through before any of us had even spoken a word — eased my emotional burden. It felt like I’d been carrying a backpack full of bricks for 22 years, and in less than 72 hours, I had offloaded at least some of them. In any case, I told the group that I had learned plenty of lessons in the past three days: live for the moment; appreciate your loved ones; and if you want to do something, like take a fishing trip, do it now.

Which is exactly what I did. Later that afternoon, I made the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Idaho and fished with Tim for the next three days. I caught two of the best fish of my life.

Jonathan Gluck is an editor at Fast Company and the author of “An Exercise in Uncertainty,” a memoir chronicling the twenty-plus years he’s been living with cancer.