A River Runs through It

In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing. We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.

It is true that one day a week was given over wholly to religion. On Sunday mornings my brother, Paul, and I went to Sunday school and then to “morning services” to hear our father preach and in the evenings to Christian Endeavor and afterwards to “evening services” to hear our father preach again. In between on Sunday afternoons we had to study The Westminster Shorter Catechism for an hour and then recite before we could walk the hills with him while he unwound between services. But he never asked us more than the first question in the catechism, “What is the chief end of man?” And we answered together so one of us could carry on if the other forgot, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” This always seemed to satisfy him, as indeed such a beautiful answer should have, and besides he was anxious to be on the hills where he could restore his soul and be filled again to overflowing for the evening sermon. His chief way of recharging himself was to recite to us from the sermon
that was coming, enriched here and there with selections from the most successful passages of his morning sermon.

Even so, in a typical week of our childhood Paul and I probably received as many hours of instruction in fly fishing as we did in all other spiritual matters.

After my brother and I became good fishermen, we realized that our father was not a great fly caster, but he was accurate and stylish and wore a glove on his casting hand. As he buttoned his glove in preparation to giving us a lesson, he would say, “It is an art that is performed on a four-count rhythm between ten and two o’clock.”

As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace. Somehow, I early developed the notion that he had done this by falling from a tree. As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God’s rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty. Unlike many Presbyterians, he often used the word “beautiful.”

After he buttoned his glove, he would hold his rod straight out in front of him, where it trembled with the beating of his heart. Although it was eight and a half feet long, it weighed only four and a half ounces. It was made of split bamboo cane from the far-off Bay of Tonkin. It was wrapped with red and blue silk thread, and the wrappings were carefully spaced to make the delicate rod powerful but not so stiff it could not tremble.

Always it was to be called a rod. If someone called it a pole, my father looked at him as a sergeant in the United States Marines would look at a recruit who had just called a rifle a gun.

My brother and I would have preferred to start learning how to fish by going out and catching a few, omitting entirely anything difficult or technical in the way of preparation that would take away from the fun. But it wasn’t by way of fun that we were introduced to our father’s art. If our father had had
his say, nobody who did not know how to fish would be allowed to disgrace a fish by catching him. So you too will have to approach the art Marine- and Presbyterian-style, and, if you have never picked up a fly rod before, you will soon find it factually and theologically true that man by nature is a damn mess. The four-and-a-half-ounce thing in silk wrappings that trembles with the underskin motions of the flesh becomes a stick without brains, refusing anything simple that is wanted of it. All that a rod has to do is lift the line, the leader, and the fly off the water, give them a good toss over the head, and then shoot them forward so they will land in the water without a splash in the following order: fly, transparent leader, and then the line—otherwise the fish will see the fly is a fake and be gone. Of course, there are special casts that anyone could predict would be difficult, and they require artistry—casts where the line can’t go over the fisherman’s head because cliffs or trees are immediately behind, sideways casts to get the fly under overhanging willows, and so on. But what’s remarkable about just a straight cast—just picking up a rod with line on it and tossing the line across the river?

Well, until man is redeemed he will always take a fly rod too far back, just as natural man always overswings with an ax or golf club and loses all his power somewhere in the air; only with a rod it’s worse, because the fly often comes so far back it gets caught behind in a bush or rock. When my father said it was an art that ended at two o’clock, he often added, “closer to twelve than to two,” meaning that the rod should be taken back only slightly farther than overhead (straight overhead being twelve o’clock).

Then, since it is natural for man to try to attain power without recovering grace, he whips the line back and forth making it whistle each way, and sometimes even snapping off the fly from the leader, but the power that was going to transport the little fly across the river somehow gets diverted into building a bird’s nest of line, leader, and fly that falls out of the air into the water about ten feet in front of the fisherman. If, though, he pictures the round trip of the line, transparent
leader, and fly from the time they leave the water until their
return, they are easier to cast. They naturally come off the
water heavy line first and in front, and light transparent
leader and fly trailing behind. But, as they pass overhead,
they have to have a little beat of time so the light, transparent
leader and fly can catch up to the heavy line now starting
forward and again fall behind it; otherwise, the line starting
on its return trip will collide with the leader and fly still on
their way up, and the mess will be the bird's nest that splashes
into the water ten feet in front of the fisherman.

Almost the moment, however, that the forward order of
line, leader, and fly is reestablished, it has to be reversed,
because the fly and transparent leader must be ahead of the
heavy line when they settle on the water. If what the fish sees
is highly visible line, what the fisherman will see are departing
black darts, and he might as well start for the next hole. High
overhead, then, on the forward cast (at about ten o'clock) the
fisherman checks again.

The four-count rhythm, of course, is functional. The one
count takes the line, leader, and fly off the water; the two
count tosses them seemingly straight into the sky; the three
count was my father's way of saying that at the top the leader
and fly have to be given a little beat of time to get behind the
line as it is starting forward; the four count means put on the
power and throw the line into the rod until you reach ten
o'clock—then check-cast, let the fly and leader get ahead of
the line, and coast to a soft and perfect landing. Power comes
not from power everywhere, but from knowing where to put
it on. "Remember," as my father kept saying, "it is an art that
is performed on a four-count rhythm between ten and two
o'clock."

My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to
the universe. To him, all good things—trout as well as eternal
salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does
not come easy.

So my brother and I learned to cast Presbyterian-style, on a
metronome. It was mother's metronome, which father had
taken from the top of the piano in town. She would occasionally peer down to the dock from the front porch of the cabin, wondering nervously whether her metronome could float if it had to. When she became so overwrought that she thumped down the dock to reclaim it, my father would clap out the four-count rhythm with his cupped hands.

Eventually, he introduced us to literature on the subject. He tried always to say something stylish as he buttoned the glove on his casting hand. “Izaak Walton,” he told us when my brother was thirteen or fourteen, “is not a respectable writer. He was an Episcopalian and a bait fisherman.” Although Paul was three years younger than I was, he was already far ahead of me in anything relating to fishing and it was he who first found a copy of The Compleat Angler and reported back to me, “The bastard doesn’t even know how to spell ‘complete.’ Besides, he has songs to sing to dairymaids.” I borrowed his copy, and reported back to him, “Some of those songs are pretty good.” He said, “Whoever saw a dairymaid on the Big Blackfoot River?

“I would like,” he said, “to get him for a day’s fishing on the Big Blackfoot—with a bet on the side.”

The boy was very angry, and there has never been a doubt in my mind that the boy would have taken the Episcopalian money.

When you are in your teens—maybe throughout your life—being three years older than your brother often makes you feel he is a boy. However, I knew already that he was going to be a master with a rod. He had those extra things besides fine training—genius, luck, and plenty of self-confidence. Even at this age he liked to bet on himself against anybody who would fish with him, including me, his older brother. It was sometimes funny and sometimes not so funny, to see a boy always wanting to bet on himself and almost sure to win. Although I was three years older, I did not yet feel old enough to bet. Betting, I assumed, was for men who wore straw hats on the backs of their heads. So I was confused and embarrassed the first couple of times he asked
me if I didn’t want “a small bet on the side just to make things interesting.” The third time he asked me must have made me angry because he never again spoke to me about money, not even about borrowing a few dollars when he was having real money problems.

We had to be very careful in dealing with each other. I often thought of him as a boy, but I never could treat him that way. He was never “my kid brother.” He was a master of an art. He did not want any big brother advice or money or help, and, in the end, I could not help him.

Since one of the earliest things brothers try to find out is how they differ from each other, one of the things I remember longest about Paul is this business about his liking to bet. He would go to county fairs to pretend that he was betting on the horses, like the men, except that no betting booths would take his bets because they were too small and he was too young. When his bets were refused, he would say, as he said of Izaak Walton and any other he took as a rival, “I’d like to get that bastard on the Blackfoot for a day, with a bet on the side.”

By the time he was in his early twenties he was in the big stud poker games.

Circumstances, too, helped to widen our differences. The draft of World War I immediately left the woods short of men, so at fifteen I started working for the United States Forest Service, and for many summers afterwards I worked in the woods, either with the Forest Service or in logging camps. I liked the woods and I liked work, but for a good many summers I didn’t do much fishing. Paul was too young to swing an ax or pull a saw all day, and besides he had decided this early he had two major purposes in life: to fish and not to work, at least not allow work to interfere with fishing. In his teens, then, he got a summer job as a lifeguard at the municipal swimming pool, so in the early evenings he could go fishing and during the days he could look over girls in bathing suits and date them up for the late evenings.

When it came to choosing a profession, he became a
reporter. On a Montana paper. Early, then, he had come close to realizing life’s purposes, which did not conflict in his mind from those given in answer to the first question in The Westminster Catechism.

Undoubtedly, our differences would not have seemed so great if we had not been such a close family. Painted on one side of our Sunday school wall were the words, God Is Love. We always assumed that these three words were spoken directly to the four of us in our family and had no reference to the world outside, which my brother and I soon discovered was full of bastards, the number increasing rapidly the farther one gets from Missoula, Montana.

We also held in common the knowledge that we were tough. This knowledge increased with age, at least until we were well into our twenties and probably longer, possibly much longer. But our differences showed even in our toughness. I was tough by being the product of tough establishments—the United States Forest Service and logging camps. Paul was tough by thinking he was tougher than any establishment. My mother and I watched horrified morning after morning while the Scottish minister tried to make his small child eat oatmeal. My father was also horrified—at first because a child of his own bowels would not eat God’s oats, and, as the days went by, because his wee child proved tougher than he was. As the minister raged, the child bowed his head over the food and folded his hands as if his father were saying grace. The child gave only one sign of his own great anger. His lips became swollen. The hotter my father got, the colder the porridge, until finally my father burned out.

Each of us, then, not only thought he was tough, he knew the other one had the same opinion of himself. Paul knew that I had already been foreman of forest-fire crews and that, if he worked for me and drank on the job, as he did when he was reporting, I would tell him to go to camp, get his time slip, and keep on down the trail. I knew that there was about as much chance of his fighting fire as of his eating oatmeal.
We held in common one major theory about street fighting—if it looks like a fight is coming, get in the first punch. We both thought that most bastards aren’t so tough as they talk—even bastards who look as well as talk tough. If suddenly they feel a few teeth loose, they will rub their mouths, look at the blood on their hands, and offer to buy a drink for the house. “But even if they still feel like fighting,” as my brother said, “you are one big punch ahead when the fight starts.”

There is just one trouble with this theory—it is only statistically true. Every once in a while you run into some guy who likes to fight as much as you do and is better at it. If you start off by loosening a few of his teeth he may try to kill you.

I suppose it was inevitable that my brother and I would get into one big fight which also would be the last one. When it came, given our theories about street fighting, it was like the Battle Hymn, terrible and swift. There are parts of it I did not see. I did not see our mother walk between us to try to stop us. She was short and wore glasses and, even with them on, did not have good vision. She had never seen a fight before or had any notion of how bad you can get hurt by becoming mixed up in one. Evidently, she just walked between her sons. The first I saw of her was the gray top of her head, the hair tied in a big knot with a big comb in it; but what was most noticeable was that her head was so close to Paul I couldn’t get a good punch at him. Then I didn’t see her anymore.

The fight seemed suddenly to stop itself. She was lying on the floor between us. Then we both began to cry and fight in a rage, each one shouting, “You son of a bitch, you knocked my mother down.”

She got off the floor, and, blind without her glasses, staggered in circles between us, saying without recognizing which one she was addressing, “No, it wasn’t you. I just slipped and fell.”

So this was the only time we ever fought.

Perhaps we always wondered which of us was tougher, but, if boyhood questions aren’t answered before a certain point in time, they can’t ever be raised again. So we returned to being
gracious to each other, as the wall suggested that we should be. We also felt that the woods and rivers were gracious to us when we walked together beside them.

It is true that we didn’t often fish together anymore. We were both in our early thirties now, and “now” from here on is the summer of 1937. My father had retired and he and mother were living in Missoula, our old home town, and Paul was a reporter in Helena, the state capital. I had “gone off and got married,” to use my brother’s description of this event in my life. At the moment, I was living with my wife’s family in the little town of Wolf Creek, but, since Wolf Creek is only forty miles from Helena, we still saw each other from time to time, which meant, of course, fishing now and then together. In fact, the reason I had come to Helena now was to see him about fishing.

The fact also is that my mother-in-law had asked me to. I wasn’t happy, but I was fairly sure my brother would finally say yes. He had never said plain no to me, and he loved my mother-in-law and my wife, whom he included in the sign on the wall, even though he could never understand “what had come over me” that would explain why marriage had ever crossed my mind.

I ran into him in front of the Montana Club, which was built by rich gold miners supposedly on the spot where gold was discovered in Last Chance Gulch. Although it was only ten o’clock in the morning, I had a hunch he was about to buy a drink. I had news to give him before I could ask the question.

After I gave him the news, my brother said, “He’ll be just as welcome as a dose of clap.”

I said to my brother, “Go easy on him. He’s my brother-in-law.”

My brother said, “I won’t fish with him. He comes from the West Coast and he fishes with worms.”

I said, “Cut it out. You know he was born and brought up in Montana. He just works on the West Coast. And now he’s coming back for a vacation and writes his mother he wants to fish with us. With you especially.”

My brother said, “Practically everybody on the West Coast
was born in the Rocky Mountains where they failed as fly fishermen, so they migrated to the West Coast and became lawyers, certified public accountants, presidents of airplane companies, gamblers, or Mormon missionaries.”

I wasn’t sure he was about to buy a drink, but he had already had one.

We stood looking at each other, not liking anything that was happening but watching that we didn’t go too far in disagreeing. Actually, though, we weren’t very far apart about my brother-in-law. In some ways, I liked him even less than Paul did, and it’s no pleasure to see your wife’s face on somebody you don’t like.

“Besides,” my brother said, “he’s a bait fisherman. All those Montana boys on the West Coast sit around the bars at night and lie to each other about their frontier childhood when they were hunters, trappers, and fly fishermen. But when they come back home they don’t even kiss their mothers on the front porch before they’re in the back garden with a red Hills Bros. coffee can digging for angleworms.”

My brother and his editor wrote most of the Helena paper. The editor was one of the last small-town editors in the classic school of personal invective. He started drinking early in the morning so he wouldn’t feel sorry for anyone during the day, and he and my brother admired each other greatly. The rest of the town feared them, especially because they wrote well, and in a hostile world both of them needed to be loved by their families and were.

I could tell by now that I was keeping my brother from buying a drink, and, sure enough, he said, “Let’s go in and hoist one.”

I made the mistake of sounding as if I were afraid to come out and criticize his morals. I said, “I’m sorry, Paul, but it’s too early in the morning for me to start drinking.”

Having to say something else quick, I didn’t improve my morals, at least not in my own eyes, by adding, “Florence asked me to ask you.”

I hated to pass the buck to my mother-in-law. One reason
Paul and I loved her was that she looked like our father. Both of them were Scots by way of Canada, both of them had blue eyes and sandy hair which was red when they were younger, and both of them pronounced “about” the way Canadians do, who, if they were poets, would rhyme it with “snoot.”

I couldn’t feel too sorry, though, because it really was she who had put me up to asking, and she had begun confusing me by mixing a certain amount of truth with her flattery. “Although I know nothing about fishing,” she said, “I know Paul is the best fisherman anywhere.” This was a complicated statement. She knew how to clean fish when the men forgot to, and she knew how to cook them, and, most important, she knew always to peer into the fisherman’s basket and exclaim “My, my!” so she knew all that any woman of her time knew about fishing, although it is also true that she knew absolutely nothing about fishing.

“I would like very much to think of Neal with him and you,” she concluded, no doubt hoping that we would improve his morals even more than his casting. In our town, Paul and I were known as “the preacher’s kids,” and most mothers refrained from pointing us out to their children, but to this Scottish woman we were “the pastor’s sons,” and besides as fly fishermen we would be waist deep in cold water all day, where immorality is faced with some real but, as it turned out, not insurmountable problems.

“Poor boy,” she said, adding as many Scottish r’s as she could to “poor.” More than most mothers, Scottish mothers have had to accustom themselves to migration and sin, and to them all sons are prodigal and welcome home. Scotsmen, however, are much more reserved about welcoming returning male relatives, and do so largely under the powerful influence of their women.

“Sure I will,” Paul said, “if Florence wants me to.” And I knew that, having been given his word, I would never get another kick from him.

“Let’s have a drink,” I said, and at 10:15 A.M. I paid for it. Just before 10:15 I told him Neal was coming to Wolf Creek
day after tomorrow and that the day following we were to go fishing on the Elkhorn. “It’s to be a family picnic,” I told him.

“That’s fine,” he said. The Elkhorn is a small stream running into the Missouri and Paul and I were big-fish fishermen, looking with contempt upon the husbands of wives who have to say, “We like the little ones—they make the best eating.” But the Elkhorn has many special features, including some giant Brown Trout that work their way up from the Missouri.

Although the Elkhorn was our favorite small stream, Paul said, after paying for our second drink, “I don’t have to be on the beat tomorrow until evening, so what about just you and me taking the day off and fishing the big river before we have to go on the picnic?”

Paul and I fished a good many big rivers, but when one of us referred to “the big river” the other knew it was the Big Blackfoot. It isn’t the biggest river we fished, but it is the most powerful, and per pound, so are its fish. It runs straight and hard—on a map or from an airplane it is almost a straight line running due west from its headwaters at Rogers Pass on the Continental Divide to Bonner, Montana, where it empties into the South Fork of the Clark Fork of the Columbia. It runs hard all the way.

Near its headwaters on the Continental Divide there is a mine with a thermometer that stopped at 69.7 degrees below zero, the lowest temperature ever officially recorded in the United States (Alaska omitted). From its headwaters to its mouth it was manufactured by glaciers. The first sixty-five miles of it are smashed against the southern wall of its valley by glaciers that moved in from the north, scarifying the earth; its lower twenty-five miles were made overnight when the great glacial lake covering northwestern Montana and northern Idaho broke its ice dam and spread the remains of Montana and Idaho mountains over hundreds of miles of the plains of eastern Washington. It was the biggest flood in the world for which there is geological evidence; it was so vast a geological event that the mind of man could only conceive of
it but could not prove it until photographs could be taken from earth satellites.

The straight line on the map also suggests its glacial origins; it has no meandering valley, and its few farms are mostly on its southern tributaries which were not ripped up by glaciers; instead of opening into a wide flood plain near its mouth, the valley, which was cut overnight by a disappearing lake when the great ice dam melted, gets narrower and narrower until the only way a river, an old logging railroad, and an automobile road can fit into it is for two of them to take to the mountainsides.

It is a tough place for a trout to live—the river roars and the water is too fast to let algae grow on the rocks for feed, so there is no fat on the fish, which must hold most trout records for high jumping.

Besides, it is the river we knew best. My brother and I had fished the Big Blackfoot since nearly the beginning of the century—my father before then. We regarded it as a family river, as a part of us, and I surrender it now only with great reluctance to dude ranches, the unselected inhabitants of Great Falls, and the Moorish invaders from California.

Early next morning Paul picked me up in Wolf Creek, and we drove across Rogers Pass where the thermometer is that stuck at three-tenths of a degree short of seventy below. As usual, especially if it were early in the morning, we sat silently respectful until we passed the big Divide, but started talking the moment we thought we were draining into another ocean. Paul nearly always had a story to tell in which he was the leading character but not the hero.

He told his Continental Divide stories in a seemingly light-hearted, slightly poetical mood such as reporters often use in writing “human-interest” stories, but, if the mood were removed, his stories would appear as something about him that would not meet the approval of his family and that I would probably find out about in time anyway. He also must have felt honor-bound to tell me that he lived other lives, even if he presented them to me as puzzles in the form of funny
stories. Often I did not know what I had been told about him as we crossed the divide between our two worlds.

"You know," he began, "it's been a couple of weeks since I fished the Blackfoot." At the beginning, his stories sounded like factual reporting. He had fished alone and the fishing had not been much good, so he had to fish until evening to get his limit. Since he was returning directly to Helena he was driving up Nevada Creek along an old dirt road that followed section lines and turned at right angles at section corners. It was moonlight, he was tired and feeling in need of a friend to keep him awake, when suddenly a jackrabbit jumped on to the road and started running with the headlights. "I didn't push him too hard," he said, "because I didn't want to lose a friend." He drove, he said, with his head outside the window so he could feel close to the rabbit. With his head in the moonlight, his account took on poetic touches. The vague world of moonlight was pierced by the intense white triangle from the headlights. In the center of the penetrating isosceles was the jackrabbit, which, except for the length of his jumps, had become a snowshoe rabbit. The phosphorescent jack-rabbit was doing his best to keep in the center of the isosceles but was afraid he was losing ground and, when he looked back to check, his eyes shone with whites and blues gathered up from the universe. My brother said, "I don't know how to explain what happened next, but there was a right-angle turn in this section-line road, and the rabbit saw it, and I didn't."

Later, he happened to mention that it cost him $175.00 to have his car fixed, and in 1937 you could almost get a car rebuilt for $175.00. Of course, he never mentioned that, although he did not drink when he fished, he always started drinking when he finished.

I rode part of the way down the Blackfoot wondering whether I had been told a little human-interest story with hard luck turned into humor or whether I had been told he had taken too many drinks and smashed hell out of the front end of his car.
Since it was no great thing either way, I finally decided to forget it, and, as you see, I didn’t. I did, though, start thinking about the canyon where we were going to fish.

The canyon above the old Clearwater bridge is where the Blackfoot roars loudest. The backbone of a mountain would not break, so the mountain compresses the already powerful river into sound and spray before letting it pass. Here, of course, the road leaves the river; there was no place in the canyon for an Indian trail; even in 1806 when Lewis left Clark to come up the Blackfoot, he skirted the canyon by a safe margin. It is no place for small fish or small fishermen. Even the roar adds power to the fish or at least intimidates the fisherman.

When we fished the canyon we fished on the same side of it for the simple reason that there is no place in the canyon to wade across. I could hear Paul start to pass me to get to the hole above, and, when I realized I didn’t hear him anymore, I knew he had stopped to watch me. Although I have never pretended to be a great fisherman, it was always important to me that I was a fisherman and looked like one, especially when fishing with my brother. Even before the silence continued, I knew that I wasn’t looking like much of anything.

Although I have a warm personal feeling for the canyon, it is not an ideal place for me to fish. It puts a premium upon being able to cast for distance, and yet most of the time there are cliffs or trees right behind the fisherman so he has to keep all his line in front of him. It’s like a baseball pitcher being deprived of his windup, and it forces the fly fisherman into what is called a “roll cast,” a hard cast that I have never mastered. The fisherman has to work enough line into his cast to get distance without throwing any line behind him, and then he has to develop enough power from a short arc to shoot it out across the water.

He starts accumulating the extra amount of line for the long cast by retrieving his last cast so slowly that an unusual amount of line stays in the water and what is out of it forms a