

from "A River Runs Through It"
Norman Maclean
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5 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
10 fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.

[I]n a typical week of our childhood, Paul and I probably received as many
hours of instruction in fly fishing as we did in religion.

15 We also held in common the knowledge that we were tough. 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
20 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
25 burned out.

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

30 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. She
would occasionally look down at the dock, wondering nervously if her metronome
could float. When she became so upset that she couldn't wait, she would stomp down
to rescue her precious metronome—and Father would clap out the four-beat with
35 his hands.

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

40 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.

45 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 rubs, 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."

50 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.

55 Paul had decided early that he had two purposes in life: to fish and not to
work, or at least to not allow work to stop his fishing. When it came to choosing a
profession, he became a reporter. On a Montana paper, which gave him lots of time
to pursue his real work, fishing.

60 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 they were.

65 "I would like," Paul said, "to get him for a day's fishing on the Big
Blackfoot—with a bet on the side."

70 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 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
75 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
80 dollars when has having real money problems.

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

Below him was the multitudinous river, and, where the rock had parted it
85 around him, big-grained vapor rose. The mini-molecules of water left in the wake of
his line made momentary loops of gossamer, disappearing so rapidly in the rising
big-grained vapor that they had to be retained in memory to be visualized as loops.
The spray emanating from him was finer-grained still and enclosed him in a halo of
90 himself. The halo of himself was always there and always disappearing, as if he were
candlelight flickering about three inches from himself. The images of himself and
his line kept disappearing into the rising vapors of the river, which continually
circles to the tops of the cliffs where, after becoming a wreath in the wind, they
became rays of the sun.

95 It is a strange and wonderful and embarrassing feeling to hold someone in
your arms who is trying to detach you from the earth and you aren't good enough to
follow her.

One reason Paul caught more fish than anyone else was that he had his flies
100 in the water more than anyone else. "Brother," he would say, "there are no flying
fish in Montana. Out here, you can't catch fish with your flies in the air."

Something within fishermen tries to make fishing into a world perfect and
apart—I don't know what it is or where, because sometimes it is in my arms and
105 sometimes in my throat and sometimes nowhere in particular except somewhere
deep. Many of us probably would be better fishermen if we did not spend so much
time watching and waiting for the world to become perfect.

I called her Mo-nah-se-tah, the name of the beautiful daughter of the
110 Cheyenne chief, Little Rock. At first, she didn't particularly care for the name,
which means, "the young grass that shoots in the spring", but after I explained to
her that Mo-nah-se-tah was supposed to have had an illegitimate son by General
George Armstrong Custer she took to the name like a duck to water.

115 The hardest thing usually to leave behind can loosely be called the
conscience.

One of life's quiet excitements is to stand somewhat apart from yourself and watch yourself softly becoming the author of something beautiful, even if it is only a floating ash.

Poets talk about "spots of time," but it is really fishermen who experience eternity compressed into a moment. No one can tell what a spot of time is until suddenly the whole world is a fish and the fish is gone. I shall remember that son of a bitch forever.

Although the Elkhorn (a small river) was our favorite small stream, Paul said, after paying for our second drink at 10:30 in the morning, "I don't have to work until tomorrow evening, so why don't we take the day off and go fish the big river?" Paul and I both knew that "the big river" referred to the Big Blackfoot, which was the most powerful river we fished—and so were its fish.

I sat there and forgot and forgot, until what remained was the river that went by and I who watched. On the river the heat mirages danced with each other and then they danced through each other and then they joined hands and danced around each other. Eventually the watcher joined the river, and there was only one of us. I believe it was the river.

As the heat mirages on the river in front of me danced with and through each other, I could feel patterns from my own life joining with them. It was here, while waiting for my brother, that I started this story, although, of course, at the time I did not know that stories of life are often more like rivers than books. But I knew a story had begun, perhaps long ago near the sound of water. And I sensed that ahead I would meet something that would never erode so there would be a sharp turn, deep circles, a deposit, and quietness.

I said, "I know he doesn't like to fish. He just likes to tell women he likes to fish. It does something for him and the women. And for the fish too," I added. "It makes them all feel better."

You have never really seen an ass until you have seen two sunburned asses on a sandbar in the middle of a river. Nearly all the rest of the body seems to have evaporated. The body is a large red ass about to blister, with hair on one end of it for a head and feet attached to the other end for legs. By tonight, it will run a fever.

"She's got a tattoo on her ass," I told him.

"No kidding," he said. "Well, she has LO tattooed on one cheek of her ass and VE on the other."

I told him, "LOVE spells love, with a hash-mark between."

160 "I'll be damned." Paul said.

165 Two or three more times Paul worked the fish close to shore, only to have him swirl and return to the deep, but even at that distance my father and I could feel the ebbing of the underwater power. The rod went high in the air, and the man moved backwards swiftly but evenly, motions which when translated into events meant the fish had tried to rest for a moment on top of the water and the man had quickly raised the rod high and skidded him to shore before the fish thought of getting under water again. He skidded him across the rocks clear back to a sandbar before the shocked fish gasped and discovered he could not live in oxygen. In
170 belated despair, he rose in the sand and consumed the rest of momentary life dancing the Dance of Death on his tail.

175 This was the last fish we were ever to see Paul catch. My father and I talked about this moment several times later, and whatever our other feelings, we always felt it fitting that, when we saw him catch his last fish, we never saw the fish but only the artistry of the fisherman.

"Just give me three more years," Paul said, "and I'll be able to think like a fish."

180 A river, though, has so many things to say... I realized that the river somewhere, sometime, must have told me, too, that he would receive no such gift. When the police officer awakened me before daybreak, I rose and asked no questions. Later I would tell my father and mother that my brother had been beaten to death by the butt of a revolver and his body dumped in an alley.

185 Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

190 I am haunted by waters.