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## *The Same River Twice*

I'VE BEEN READING Heraclitus this week, so naturally my brain is full of river water.

Heraclitus, you'll recall, was the Greek philosopher of the sixth century B.C. who gets credit for having said: "You cannot step twice into the same river." Heraclitus was a loner, according to the sketchy accounts of him, and rather a crank. He lived in the town of Ephesus, near the coast of Asia Minor opposite mainland Greece, not far from a great river that in those days was called the Meander. He never founded a philosophic school, as Plato and Pythagoras did. He didn't want followers. He simply wrote his one book and deposited the scroll in a certain sacred building, the temple of Artemis, where the general public couldn't get hold of it. The book itself was eventually lost, and all that survives of it today are about a hundred fragments, which have come down secondhand in the works of other ancient writers. So his ideas are known only by hearsay. He seems to have said a lot of interesting things, some of them cryptic, some of them downright ornery, but his river comment is the one for which Heraclitus is widely remembered. The full translation is: "You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing on." To most people it

comes across as a nice resonant metaphor, a bit of philosophic poetry. To me it is that and more.

Once, for a stretch of years, I lived in a very small town on the bank of a famous Montana river. It was famous mainly for its trout, for its clear water and its abundance of chemical nutrients, and for the seasonal blizzards of emerging insects that made it one of the most rewarding pieces of habitat in North America, arguably in the world, if you happened to be a trout- or fly-fisherman. I happened to be a fly-fisherman.

One species of insect in particular — one “hatch,” to use the slightly misleading term that fishermen apply to these impressive entomological events, when a few billion members of some May fly or Stone fly or Caddis fly species all emerge simultaneously into adulthood and take a flight over a river — one insect hatch in particular gave this river an unmatched renown. The species was *Pteronarcys californica*, a monstrous but benign stone fly that grew more than two inches long, and carried a pinkish-orange underbelly for which it had gotten the common name “salmon fly.” These insects, during their three years of development as aquatic larvæ, could only survive in a river that was cold, pure, fast-flowing, rich in dissolved oxygen, and covered across its bed with boulders the size of bowling balls, among which the larvæ would live and graze. The famous river offered all those conditions extravagantly, and so *P. californica* flourished there, like nowhere else. Trout flourished in turn.

When the clouds of *P. californica* took flight, and mated in air, and then began dropping back onto the water, the fish fed upon them voraciously, recklessly. Wary old brown trout the size of a person's thigh, granddaddy animals that would never otherwise condescend to feed by daylight upon floating insects, came off the bottom for this banquet. Each gulp of *P. californica* was a major nutritional windfall. The trout filled their bellies and their mouths and still continued gorging. Consequently the so-called salmon fly so-called hatch on this river, occurring annually during two weeks in June, triggered by small changes in water temperature, became a wild and garish national festival

in the fly-fishing year. Stockbrokers in New York, corporate lawyers in San Francisco, federal judges and star-quality surgeons and foundation presidents – the sort of folk who own antique bamboo fly rods and field jackets of Irish tweed – planned their vacations around this event. They packed their gear and then waited for the telephone signal from a guide in a shop on Main Street of the little town where I lived.

The signal would say: *It's started.* Or, in more detail: *Yeah, the hatch is on. Passed through town yesterday. Bugs everywhere. By now the head end of it must be halfway to Varney Bridge. Get here as soon as you can.* They got there. Cabdrivers and schoolteachers came, too. People who couldn't afford to hire a guide and be chauffeured comfortably in a Mackenzie boat, or who didn't want to, arrived with dinghies and johnboats lashed to the roofs of old yellow buses. And if the weather held, and you got yourself to the right stretch of the river at the right time, it could indeed be very damn good fishing.

But that wasn't why I lived in the town. Truth be known, when *P. californica* filled the sky and a flotilla of boats filled the river, I usually headed in the opposite direction. I didn't care for the crowds. It was almost as bad as the Fourth-of-July rodeo, when the town suddenly became clogged with college kids from a nearby city, and Main Street was ankle-deep in beer cans on the morning of the fifth, and I would find people I didn't know sleeping it off in my front yard, under the scraggly elm. The salmon fly hatch was like that, only with stockbrokers and flying hooks. Besides, there were other places and other ways to catch fish. I would take my rod and my waders and disappear to a small spring creek that ran through a stock ranch on the bottomland east of the river.

It was private property. There was no room for guided boats on this little creek, and there was no room for tweed. Instead of tweed there were sheep – usually about 30 head, bleating in halfhearted annoyance but shuffling out of my way as I hiked from the barn out to the water. There was an old swayback horse named Buck, a buckskin; also a younger one, a hot white-

stockinged mare that had once been a queen of the barrel-racing circuit and hadn't forgotten her previous station in life. There was a graveyard of rusty car bodies, a string of them, DeSotos and Fords from the Truman years, dumped into the spring creek along one bend to hold the bank in place and save the sheep pasture from turning into an island. Locally this sort of thing is referred to as the "Detroit riprap" mode of soil conservation; after a while, the derelict cars come to seem a harmonious part of the scenery. There was also an old two-story ranch house of stucco, with yellow trim. Inside lived two people, a man and a woman, married then.

Now we have come to the reason I did live in that town. Actually there wasn't one reason but three: the spring creek, the man, and the woman. At the time, for a stretch of years, those were three of the closest friends I'd ever had.

This spring creek was not one of the most eminent Montana spring creeks, not Nelson Spring Creek and not Armstrong, not the sort of place where you could plunk down \$25 per rod per day for the privilege of casting your fly over large savvy trout along an exclusive and well-manicured section of water. On this creek you fished free or not at all. I fished free, because I knew the two people inside the house and, through them, the wonderful, surly old rancher who owned the place.

They lived there themselves, those two, in large part because of the creek. The male half of the partnership was at that time a raving and insatiable fly-fisherman, like me, for whom the luxury of having this particular spring creek just a three-minute stroll from his back door was worth any number of professional and personal sacrifices. He had found a place he loved dearly, and he wanted to stay. During previous incarnations he had been a wire-service reporter in Africa, a bar owner in Chicago, a magazine editor in New York, a reform-school guard in Idaho, and a timber-faller in the winter woods of Montana. He had decided to quit the last before he cut off a leg with his chainsaw, or worse; he was later kind enough to offer me his saw and his expert coaching and then to dissuade me deftly from making

use of either, during the period when I was so desperate and foolhardy as to consider trying to earn a living that way. All we both wanted, really, was to write novels and fly-fish for trout. We fished the spring creek, together and individually, more than a hundred days each year. We memorized that water. The female half of the partnership, on the other hand, was a vegetarian by principle who lived chiefly on grapefruit and considered that anyone who tormented innocent fish — either for food or, worse, for the sport of catching them and then gently releasing them, as we did — showed the most inexcusable symptoms of arrested development and demented adolescent cruelty, but she tolerated us. All she wanted was to write novels and read Jane Austen and ride the hot mare. None of us had any money.

None of us was being published. Nothing happened in that town between October and May. The man and I played chess. We endangered our lives hilariously cutting and hauling firewood. We skied into the backcountry carrying tents and cast-iron skillets and bottles of wine, then argued drunkenly about whether it was proper to litter the woods with eggshells, if the magpies and crows did it, too. We watched Willie Stargell win a World Series. Sometimes on cold, clear days we put on wool gloves with no fingertips and went out to fish. Meanwhile the woman sequestered herself in a rickety backyard shed, with a small wood stove and a cot and a manual typewriter, surrounded by black widow spiders that she chose to view as pets. Or the three of us stood in their kitchen, until the late hours on winter nights, while the woman peeled and ate uncountable grapefruits and the man and I drank whiskey, and we screamed at each other about literature.

The spring creek ran cool in summer. It ran warm in winter. This is what spring creeks do; this is their special felicity. It steamed and it rippled with fluid life when the main river was frozen over solid. Anchor ice never formed on the rocks of its riffles, killing insect larvæ where they lived, and frazil ice never made the water slushy — as occurred on the main river. During

spring runoff, this creek didn't flood; therefore the bottom wasn't scoured and disrupted, and the eggs of the rainbow trout, which spawned around that time, weren't swept out of the nests or buried lethally in silt. The creek did go brown with turbidity, during runoff, from the discharge of several small tributaries that carried meltwater out of the mountains through an erosional zone, but the color would clear again soon.

Insects continued hatching on this creek through the coldest months of the winter. In October and November, large brown trout came upstream from the main river and scooped out their spawning nests on a bend that curved around the sheep pasture, just downstream from the car bodies. In August, grasshoppers blundered onto the water from the brushy banks, and fish exploded out of nowhere to take them. Occasionally I or the other fellow would cast a tiny fly and pull in a grayling, that gorgeous and delicate cousin of trout, an Arctic species left behind by the last glaciation, that fared poorly in the warm summer temperatures of sun-heated meltwater rivers. In this creek a grayling could be comfortable, because most of the water came from deep underground. That water ran cool in summer, relatively, and warm in winter, relatively — relative in each case to the surrounding air temperature, as well as the temperature of the main river. In absolute terms the creek's temperature tended to be stable year-round, holding steady in a hospitable middle range close to the constant temperature of the groundwater from which it was fed. This is what spring creeks, by definition, do. The scientific jargon for such a balanced condition is *stenothermal*: temperatures in a narrow range. The ecological result is a stable habitat and a 12-month growing season. Free from extremes of cold or heat, free from flooding, free from ice and heavy siltation and scouring, the particular spring creek in question seemed always to me a thing of sublime and succoring constancy. In that regard it was no different from other spring creeks; but it was the one I knew and cared about.

The stretch of years came to an end. The marriage came to an end. There were reasons, but the reasons were private, and

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are certainly none of our business here. Books were pulled down off shelves and sorted into two piles. Fine oaken furniture, too heavy to be hauled into uncertain futures, was sold off for the price of a sad song. The white-stockinged mare was sold also, to a family with a couple of young barrel-racers, and the herd of trap-lame and half-feral cats was divided up. The man and the woman left town individually, in separate trucks, at separate times, each headed back toward New York City. I helped load the second truck, the man's, but my voice wasn't functioning well on that occasion. I was afflicted with a charley horse of the throat. It had all been hard to witness, not simply because a marriage had ended but even more so because, in my unsolicited judgment, a great love affair had. This partnership of theirs had been a vivid and imposing thing.

Or maybe it was hard because two love affairs had ended — if you count mine with the pair of them. I should say here that a friendship remains between me and each of them. Friendship with such folk is a lot. But it's not the same.

Now I live in the city from which college students flock off to the Fourth-of-July rodeo in that little town, where they raise hell for a day and litter Main Street with beer cans and then sleep it off under the scraggly elm in what is now someone else's front yard — the compensation being that July Fourth is quieter up here. It is only an hour's drive. Not too long ago I was down there myself.

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I parked, as always, in the yard by the burn barrel outside the stucco house. The house was empty; I avoided it. With my waders and my fly rod I walked out to the spring creek. Of course it was all a mistake.

I stepped into the creek and began fishing my way upstream, casting a grasshopper imitation into patches of shade along the overhung banks. There were a few strikes. There was a fish caught and released. But after less than an hour I quit. I climbed out of the water. I left. I had imagined that a spring creek was a thing of sublime and succoring constancy. I was wrong. Heraclitus was right.