

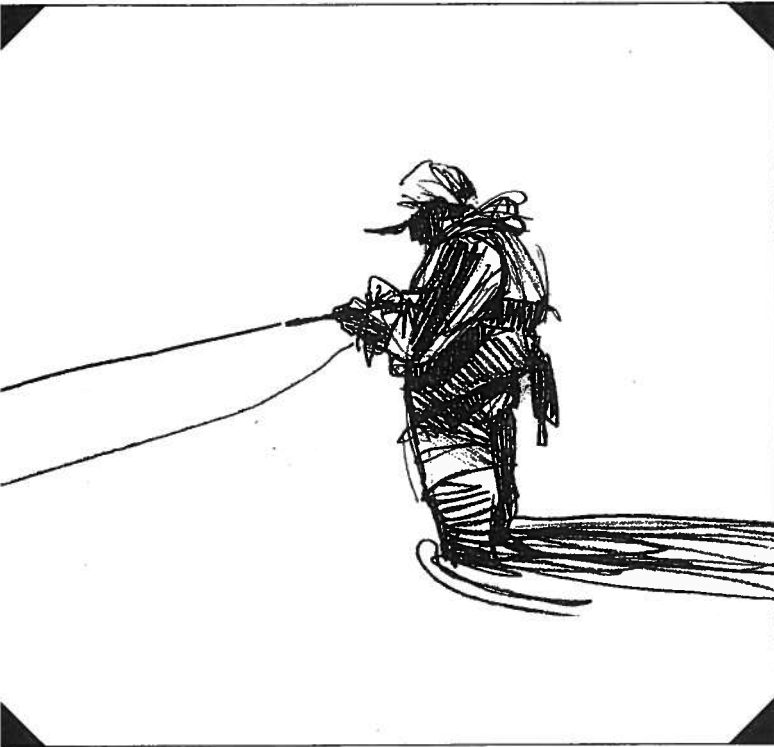


## THE PIOUS ANGLER

When one of our foursome canceled it didn't occur to me that the outfitter would stick in a sub. You don't expect a replacement for an ill bridegroom, and the ritual that is our annual fishing trip is no less sacramental.

I can't remember how it started. The four of us used to hang out as kids, and ages ago we decided to begin again. We've grown too old to camp, so we skip the food tasting of ash and the sleeping bags, and instead pick a spot with proper beds, good cuisine, and ample whiskey. Kevin abandons his trading desk deep in the Manhattan bowels—does Manhattan have any other body parts? Jake declares a week's vacation; at close of summer break I'm often researching some minor event in Colonial history, so I give up the least. Ed's our fourth. We meet in the west—Kevin is flush, he can afford the travel, and the rest of us are here—and we find a Rocky Mountain river that has been coursing through our dreams.

This year it was wonderful tail water in southeastern Idaho, trickling off the backside of the Tetons. It was Ed who went on the Net



BLOOD KNOT MASTER

and found a farmhouse that two guides had converted into a B&B. Two guides, four fisherman, three days of superior fishing during the brown drake hatch. And it was Ed who cancelled.

Kevin and Jake flew into Jackson Hole, I drove out to meet their planes, and we raced our rental car over Fox Creek Pass into Idaho.

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It was just what you would hope—a simple farmhouse set in a long, easy hayfield that had turned golden in the summer heat. Inside no antimacassars or ruby glass swans, just sensible stuff—four bedrooms, breakfast and dinner in the expanded kitchen, everything geared to the fishermen. A gray, pudgy woman ran the place. Mrs. Henders had a goiter the size of grapefruit and a fussy way, but she scurried out as soon as she'd shown us around upstairs. Shown us our rooms and remarked to the closed door on the second floor,

"That'll be the fourth gentleman."

"Fourth? There's no fourth."

"Oh yes. The boys reserve the right to fill the boats, you know. We got a single just this past week."

We looked at each other. Ed wasn't one for fine print.

"He's very quiet." This to explain him. "From the East, like one of you." Here she looked about and, not wanting to be mistaken, we pointed to Kevin. "He'll be no bother. Eats in his room."

"In his room?"

"Brought his own food. Quiet and I have to say a little . . . strange. Well," she said turning her back to us. "Dinner at eight. Breakfast at seven. The boys will be here to pick you up."

The news tripped me up. The prospect of an interloper in our midst was disheartening. This was our week to act silly, share that nostalgia for adolescence male friends seem never to abandon. It comes from swallowing our secrets and failings, and the nostalgia passes for

intimacy. An extra presence promised a different mix. A lot depended on who the fourth fisherman was.

We didn't find out at dinner. True to our housekeeper's word, the mystery man stayed in his room. "He brought his own food," she told us again in a whisper, her eyes darting up the staircase as if reading for Jane Eyre.

Whatever disappointment we suffered Mrs. Henders erased with a call to the kitchen.

"This is Sherree. She waits tables."

"The farmer's daughter," said Jake breathlessly.

"No, mine," Mrs. Henders answered, an unclipped barb in her voice.

An angel's face, oval and flawless, except for maybe the Gene Tierney overbite. Chestnut hair in a 'Forties pageboy, eyes that were Big-Sky blue, a healthy size twelve crammed enthusiastically into a size ten blouse and jeans. The effort revealed certain attributes that often appeal to superficial males.

"Sherry," Jake said in his game-show host voice. "After the fortified wine from Spain."

"No, two Es."

"Two Es," Jake repeated, captivated. "And two lovely E's if I may say so." No one knew what he meant, but he and Sherree giggled. "Two Es at the end?"

"Yes." This all discussed with the seriousness that attended the choice of dry fly.

"Then three Es if you count the one in the middle. You mustn't forget the one in the middle."

I don't know how growing up in Eastern Idaho affects a pretty twenty-something girl's perception of sophistication and banter. Sherree reacted to these commonplaces as if Jake were the soul of wit, with a delighted squeal.

Jake is something of a swordsman. He cannot meet a woman between six and sixty and not try to forge a secret bond. It doesn't lead anywhere, or at least not when he's in the open, and it is always appreciated. This little tic hasn't interfered with his marriage—his wife either doesn't know or doesn't care. In restaurants, in lines at airports and rental car counters, every year we watch his antics, and later listen to him spin fantasies as we float the rivers.

It's embarrassing, but we're all peculiar. Kevin is obsessed with electronics and I worry over George Washington's military tactics.

"Look at that," Jake breathed as Sherree retreated to the kitchen with the news of how we liked our steaks. "This is going to be a great trip. Rising trout, the Wild West, and dinners served by the ambassador from the Central Hooterville Republic."

We poured ourselves a second round of martinis from the shaker Jake always brings, and uncorked a red wine he wanted us to fuss over. The owners of the place, the website made clear, were LDS—Latter Day Saints, Mormons. They didn't serve alcohol, but they had no objection to guests bringing their own, so long as it was used in moderation. Mrs. Henders' cooking was up to the claret Kevin had supplied.

After dinner we went into the parlor. Randy and Cort—the guides—had set up a vice for the guests' use and I sat down to tie ginger quills for the next day's outing. Jake went back and forth to the kitchen. The way an antsy retriever on the hunt wants to hurry you along. He was sitting with us, reporting on his progress, when the stairs creaked and the fourth fisherman appeared.

Strike me dead. He was a tall man who walked with a stoop. At first you couldn't tell whether he was old or young, white or black, because of his outfit. He wore a white shirt with no tie, a vest buttoned at every chance, and a black jacket down to his knees. Dr. Jekyll would have called it a frock coat. Below the vest hung dirty-looking tassels, like hair that needed a wash. His own hair, long and ropey, hung

out from under the gloom of his hat so you couldn't tell what was hair and what was shadow.

And the hat—mostly he was hat, a man hanging down from a hat. You've seen those jellyfish that are all tentacles, wisps from a giant umbrella. His hat was the umbrella. It was black, more pelt than metallic, with a round, unshaped crown that was overly tall. The brim reached to his shoulders and swallowed the light under it. To find his face you had to stare, you couldn't be sure it hadn't disappeared.

We didn't know what to say. Our eyes were on the hat. Finally Jake came up with something to break the silence.

"I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy."

He smiled. I know because yellow teeth glinted out from the midst of the cloud.

"How do you do?" He spoke with great formality and wiped the palm of a hand on his lapel. "I believe we are fishing together. I sincerely thank you for welcoming me into your circle."

He stuck the hand into space, a bluish-white thing that seemed to be attached to nothing, so I rose and took it. I gave him my name.

"And mine is Chaim Leibovits. I am glad to make your acquaintance."

I shook the frail thing, hoping it wouldn't break off. Jake and Kevin followed suit.

"Hayim," said Jake.

"Chaim," said Chaim, clearing his throat to make the sound.

"Kayim," said Kevin.

"Chaim," said Chaim. "It means life."

"Oh," Kevin said and pointed as if he recognized him. "'To life, to life, l'Kayim.'"

"Precisely." Chaim seemed pleased.

"You know the song? From the movie?"

Chaim pursed his lips. "I don't go to movies."

"Or the play?" Jake asked. "It was on Broadway."

"I don't go to plays."

We were stalemated. Sherree broke it, stepping in to announce her departure. Jake grabbed a jacket and left to walk her home. It turned out she and her mother lived down the block.

"We may never see him again," mused Kevin.

"But he is a married man," said Chaim. "He wears a ring."

"Kevin was making a joke," I explained, though I didn't believe it.

Chaim nodded. He made an awkward bow and excused himself.

"I have studying. They will come for us at seven?"

"Or seven-thirty."

Chaim bowed again and withdrew.

"He doesn't go to movies," Kevin said to me. "He doesn't get jokes. We're in for a long weekend."

I shrugged and went back to the vice. Ginger quills were the fly for mid-September. I wanted a dozen for the next day.

"What are we going to do?"

"We're here for three days. Each of us gets Chaim," I did the gargle thing better than the others, "one day. Unless you want to volunteer?"

"You suppose he fishes in those clothes?"

"I'd bet yes."

"Maybe it's better than khaki. Maybe the fish think he's come to bless them."

I gave Kevin four ginger quills. "We'll see soon enough."

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At breakfast, Jake gave us no clues about the Battle of Sherree Bluffs. He delighted in sharing what defenses had been raised to the initial landing, but so long as the outcome of the invasion was unsure, like any good officer he kept his tactics close to his vest.

The meal was excessive: Colorado cantaloupe, thick-cut bacon, and blueberry pancakes, made with berries from a neighbor's bushes.

We were in the midst of it when Cort and Randy arrived. We introduced ourselves around. Cort called up the stairwell and Chaim soon descended.

"Hayim," Jake announced, "you and I will fish together, if that's OK." For all his appetites, Jake is a kind man who loves to teach people his sport. He assumed, as we all did, that this exotic Jew—I'd explained to my mates that he was a Hasid, though they had no idea what was meant by the word—was a newcomer to the world of casting, bugs, and the strategies of fly fishing.

Kevin and I set off with our guide. Our McKenzie boat was in the water by nine. The Teton River was running fast and clear, and the fishing was so lively that Kevin didn't pull out his cell to check the markets until well into the morning.

"Give it a rest," I said from the stern when he'd come back to us.

"What do you mean?"

"The phone. Leave it home. You're on vacation."

He waved me off. "What do you know? You teach history?"

"Does that disqualify me from recognizing anti-social behavior?" Just about this time my indicator fly, a large Goddard caddis you couldn't miss, disappeared on a tangent. I struck. It was the sixteen-inch rainbow and not my argument that brought Kevin back. He tied on a nymph and began a furious series of casts to catch up.

"No," he came back to the conversation once his line was in the water. "But you don't understand. In my business I have to stay close. Solly called my desk looking for \$100 million in the note. We don't respond they go somewhere else. This is Solly, understand."

"Tell Solly to come out here and bring a rod." Solly is Salomon Brothers, that much I know. Kevin trades treasury bills. When institutions are moving out of the market, the money all goes into T-bills. If one institution is a seller, often they all are. Kevin's job is to quote the highest price possible and not lose the sale, except if the next buyer would pay more. It moves more quickly than U. S. history.

"You don't tell Solly, they tell you. Hey, that gives me an idea . . ."

He stowed his line and got the cell back out. I landed my rainbow, caught a second before he put his phone away.

We renewed the conversation over lunch. Kevin couldn't see my point, nor I suppose I his. It was a vacation; he was supposed to get away. He insisted you couldn't just walk off when people depended on you. I said he was refusing to recognize that the hitch in his cast developed because, indeed, they didn't depend on you.

In any event, until the closing bell rang, as Kevin put it, we had uninterrupted fishing. Except for one call to the man covering for him and a text message or two to see where the thirty-year bond closed. On the whole it was a good day. Floating through that canyon would refresh the soul of a stone.

Back at our rooms, we showered and changed for cocktails. We were at least two up on the other pair when they walked in.

Chaim gave a jerky bow, mostly in the neck, the way a pigeon moves.

"How did you do?" Kevin asked.

"A wonderful day," Chaim said. He was still in the suit, still under the hat. "Everything I expected and more. I will see you gentlemen tomorrow." He bowed again and we wished him goodnight. I had the sinking feeling that something was wrong. Jake headed upstairs to shower. Kevin and I looked at each other ominously, but we would have to wait for the story.

Cleaned and dressed, Jake poured himself a bourbon and water to bring to dinner. When Sherree entered with the soup, he said hello. Warm and courteous, but not the one we expect, the hello that means I can see through your clothes.

Jake has revealed to us several tricks of his trade. A never-miss, he insists, is to compliment a woman on her shoes. So Kevin gave him a little needle.

"Those are wonderful sneakers, Sherree. Where did you find them?"

As she told us of the wonders of the Pocatello WalMart, Kevin caught his eye. But Jake seemed unconcerned.

"So?" Kevin said when it was just the three of us again.

"So?" Jake came back.

"So tell us. How was your day with the rabbi?"

"He's not a rabbi," Jake said seriously. "A rabbi is a teacher, and he's a student. As I get it, he will be all his life. But I'll tell you this, he outfished me."

"He outfished you? Did you see his gear? It was cheap thirty years ago when it came from Montgomery Ward."

"What did you talk about?" I asked.

"The usual stuff. Flies, patterns, feeding. The guide and I both listened. Hayim knows his stuff."

Whatever had happened, Jake was a changed man. Sherree came in with dessert, a delicious tangle of yellow cake, Palisades peaches and ice cream. She hung around—her story was she was making sure we liked it.

She cleared the dishes, and came clean.

"Are you going to walk me home, Jake?"

"No, sweetheart. I just wanted to make sure the way was safe. I think tonight you can do it on your own."

A changed man. We coaxed him to tell us what happened, but Jake was having none of it.

We took our coffee into the living room. The furniture was comfortable, arts and crafts, lots of books on fly fishing, Idaho history, and the Emigration of the Saints. Kevin made up a shaker of stingers, a tradition, and we sat around sipping.

"So," Kevin said, still probing. "You enjoyed your day?"

"Very much," Jake said. "I think you will too. And if you two want to float together, I'd be happy to fish with him both days."

Kevin excused himself to go outside with his cell. Not manners, reception. I sensed an opportunity. I jerked my head toward the darkened kitchen. "You've recalled the troops?"

"She's a nice girl," Jake said, meaning, I'm sure, something different from what our grandparents did by the phrase.

"So what happened?"

Jake eluded the question. "Wonderful day. I got some on dries towards evening. Your ginger quill worked. But for numbers, I couldn't keep up with Hayim."

"I didn't mean with fish. I meant with you."

He studied his coffee cup.

"We did a lot of talking."

"So, you were converted?"

"Nothing like that. He's not preachy. Mostly he tells stories."

"Stories." I couldn't imagine what had gone on. "Like what?"

Jake weighed my confidence. We've been close over the years, talk about everything together. Except anything important.

"I'll tell you one. He said he'd noticed me. With Sherree. Said I reminded him of someone."

"Who?"

"There was a man in this town. Some name with lots of Ch in it." He made the gargling sound. "A man who loved women."

"Just like you." He ignored me.

"All kinds. But he was married. To what Hayim called a woman of valor. He knew he was doing wrong. Just playing at it, you understand. Although from the story you couldn't tell whether or not the guy was scoring."

"Just like you." Jake gave a tight smile.

"So anyway, on this holy day, you're supposed to take account of yourself, mend your ways. So he goes to see the rabbi.

"He tells the rabbi how he's addicted to women and how he can't help himself. The rabbi knows him, knows his family—this is some

small town in Poland, unpronounceable—and he says to the man, Tonight I want you to go home, take off your belt and use it to beat your beautiful children.

"Well, the guy is shocked. He goes home, has dinner, and comes back to see the rabbi. 'I can't do it. Give me something else.'

"The rabbi shrugs. 'OK. Tonight, after supper let the fire burn. Stick the poker in the embers. At bed time, take it out and lay it across the flesh of your wife's back.'

"The guy is beginning to think the rabbi's nuts. I asked, why didn't he just get a new rabbi, and Kayim said, you don't do that.

"So the guy ignores him a second day. He comes back intending to tell the rabbi no more advice.

"The rabbi beats him to the draw. 'It's odd,' he says. 'You won't whip your children but you'll risk the abandonment and shame they'll suffer by you chasing your dick. You won't lay a hot poker on your wife's flesh but you'll scar her heart forever. I can give you no more advice. I must return to my studies, to learn where in the teachings of our ancestors you can possibly find a distinction.'"

Jake looked up. "That was it."

"And that's convinced you?"

"There were lots of stories. And sayings. He asked if we were married in a church, and when I said yes, he told me, 'When a man and wife divorce, even the altar weeps.'"

Kevin returned, ending our conversation with the problematic news that The Fed was dealing with higher inflation readings and slowing growth indicators. He is frantic to succeed, to move up the scale. In the castes of government trader, Kevin has explained to me, no one is lower than the bill trader. He deals in tiny margins, a basis point is a hundredth of a percent, and makes less than anyone else on the trading floor, which, as I get it, is between ten and a thousand times what I make.

Friday morning we decided Jake and I would fish together. Sabbath began at sundown, Chaim needed to prepare. Kevin was happy to cut the day short, so he could call in his weekend trading strategy.

We had a slow day. The sun was summer hot and in the clear water, tippet lay on the surface like barge cable. Toward the end, under the shade of the first wisps of cirrus, the fish began to move, but on the whole it was a frustrating day.

I expected Kevin to be furious. He comes the farthest, he picks the time of year. He also has this Big City view that each of his minutes should show a profit—if he's fishing, the fish need to take notice. It comes from living among raging ambitions, where serenity can't buy itself a congregation or a cathedral. We sat on the porch of the rooming house, consoling ourselves with tall tonic drinks, the three of us, telling our tales of woe.

Darkness settled. The screen door opened and Chaim appeared. He still wore that preposterous hat, but under it he had dressed in a white velvet suit. He looked like a comic book hero, from an 18th century comic book.

"Hayim," Jake called. "Tell us you're not throwing it all in for a career in Vegas."

He gave his pigeon dip, and though his face was bathed in shadow, I think a ripple of appreciation crossed his face. "I simply wanted to wish you," he spoke formally, "my fishing compatriots, a good Shabbos. And to thank you for allowing me to join your party."

We returned the wishes. He addressed me.

"Our Shabbos lasts until sunset tomorrow. But I have a special dispensation allowing me to fish. I will meet you at the river."

I told him Cort intended to put in ten miles upstream. We'd all drive up together.

"My dispensation is to do the fly fishing, not to break a Commandment. Our laws prohibit riding on the Sabbath."

"Cut yourself some slack, Hayim," Jake said. With Sherree out of the picture he had charm to spare. "Who will know?"

"Who indeed?" Chaim said. He then jerked his thumb skyward and gave—hard to be sure in the fading light with that dark cloud on his head—a wink.

"So you'll walk to the put-in?"

"I'll walk. I'll study. I'll think. When you arrive, I'll fish."

Ten miles. Both of my pals groaned.

"Please excuse us," I told him. "We just want you to have the comforts we have. You're stuck with nonbelievers."

"I understand. You want us all to be alike. It is only human." And without a beat he launched a story.

"The Tsar comes to the great Tanhum and says, 'Rabbi, your people and mine would stop being enemies if we became one people.'

"Tanhum replies, 'An excellent suggestion. But of course we who are circumcised cannot become like you. So you get circumcised and become like us.'

"A wise answer,' says the Tsar. 'Unfortunately it is the law that anyone who bests the Tsar in argument must be thrown to the lions.'

"So they threw Rabbi Tanhum to the lions. But the lions stood back and would not attack him. An unbeliever was watching this, and said, 'The reason the lions do not eat him is that they are not hungry.' To test this theory, the Tsar had the unbeliever thrown to the lions. They promptly gobbled him up."

Now there was no mistaking his expression. The warmest of smiles opened, revealing the crookedest of teeth, and Chaim withdrew.

I noticed at dinner that Kevin left his cell off the table. It and his Blackberry usually replaced knife and spoon. I asked him whether there was a parable about Blackberries.

"It's a funny thing. Kayim started in and I told him right off I was here to fish. No God crap. He never said another word."

"So we fished. I got skunked in the morning. Mid-afternoon I foul-hooked a tiny brookie. Meantime he's pulling them in. Not tons, understand, but steady. On a tough day. I'm going nuts.

"Finally, four o'clock, remember our boat has an early day, I can't stand it. I ask him. 'Can you tell me what you're using?'

"He smiles. Reels in. Then he looks at me and asks, 'Can I tell you a story?' Well, I reel in too. There we are, drifting down this canyon, water green and fishy is passing me by.

"At the end of the story he hands me his rod. Goes," and Kevin moves his hand palm up to say, Give it a try. "I look. He's got an attractor nymph up top, a smidge of weight, twelve inches lower a sixteen Caddis emerger. Ties them himself."

"And the story?" Jake and I inched in.

"A man, the only rich man in the village—could have been the same village as your guy, Jake—makes a donation to the little synagogue. The rabbi asks how he is, and he boasts about his business. He never mentions his family, his wife. Only how much money he makes.

"The rabbi thanks the man for the donation and asks him to help with a chore. A nail has worked loose on the rabbi's study bench. He asks the man to hold the bench.

"The rabbi takes a gold watch from the man's pocket and holds it in the palm of his hand. And uses it to drive the nail.

"Well, naturally, the watch shatters. 'What are you doing?' yells the man.

"You see how ill suited is this tool for the task? The watch has a very different purpose.

"Tonight when you go home, I want you to spend five minutes looking in the mirror. Look at your eye. Consider how it works. It is more beautiful, more complex than this watch. And it is a single part of the most complex machine in the universe. Ask yourself whether that invention, constructed with such elegance, is good only to make money.'

"Oh yes. And with your donation, I'm going to buy you a new watch.'

"Then Kayim hands me his rod and tells me if I will also give five minutes to looking in the mirror at my eye, I can fish with his rod the rest of the day.

"I used that rod. Got three good fish before the pull-out."

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I began my day with Chaim as did Kevin, resolved not to discuss the Talmud, life in Poland, or the ways of God to the dry fly. Just to fish.

Chaim was waiting by the put-in when the guide and I drove up, the McKenzie boat lashed to the trailer we pulled. He was in his black suit, the odd tassels, a clean white shirt buttoned at the collar. And of course the encompassing hat. He must have sensed my reluctance to engage, for he said little as we began the float. The guide and I spoke about fishing techniques. Occasionally Chaim chimed in.

We beached midway and Cort set up a field table and chairs for our lunch. He'd brought fried chicken, coleslaw, potato salad, for himself and me. Chaim took a large white kerchief from a pocket and unwrapped it. Bowed his head in prayer. We waited until he finished.

That's when I asked him something personal. I didn't want to be rude, but I was curious.

"Where was I born? What makes you ask?"

"You have an interesting accent."

"I was born in Bronx, New York."

Had I brought up the wrong subject? "Then your accent . . ."

". . . is Yiddish. That is my first language."

"Really. I didn't know it was still spoken."

"A Frenchman speaks French, an Italian speaks Italian. A Jew speaks Jewish."



"I know lots of Jews who don't speak it."

"I know lots of birds who don't fly. Turkeys, do you envy them? Chickens lay eggs for men and foxes to eat."

"Do you have an answer for every question?"

"Did you ask a question?"

I smiled. He had me.

"So you have a rebuttal for every statement."

"For every question, I have a question. For every argument I have an argument."

We fished a while in silence. Every fish I hooked he hooked and landed two. Cort had a quizzical smile on his face. I think I did too.

"Chaim, tell me what 'Hasid' means."

"'Hasid' means pious. Hasidim, the pious ones."

I considered my next comment. I wasn't sure I should make it. "I'm not a pious person." He unleashed a low, flat cast that sped under the overhang of a cottonwood. A fat rainbow took the fly. Chaim didn't respond until the fish had been netted, unhooked, set free.

"The Talmud teaches," he squinted at the sky and I checked to be sure he wasn't reading his lines, "that when you are brought before the heavenly court, God's first question is, 'Did you live a righteous life?' His second question is, 'Did you set aside regular time for study of my word?' What can we conclude from this?"

"I'm not sure."

He shook his finger as if counting a tempo. "It is more important to be righteous than pious," he said immediately.

All the God talk made me nervous. I told him.

"A good sign. We should be nervous in the presence of the Almighty."

He reeled in a little brook trout, all spangles and raspberry spots in a blue halo. "Salvelinus fontinalis," he said to me and held the hook at its bend. The fish slipped free and fell back in the stream untouched.

There were two hunts going on. In one, he and I were hunter, and the fish were prey. In the second, he was deftly leading me, his quarry, through maze and trail, hoping to snare me in a theological discussion. I would play, but on my terms.

I asked about the Hasids. People think, he said, because they dress in black and keep to themselves, Hasidim are dour people. No one, he said, emphasizes more the joy of Creation, the beauty of God's gifts. Sex, he said. It surprised me. "No child is born except through pleasure and joy. Food, drink, this—" and he pointed his clumsy rod at our glorious surroundings.

"So why do they dress in that getup?"

"It honors our founder. And also reminds us that clothes are just a fashion."

For years Hasidim were warned against the "treyfe medina." The outside world, he translated, but I knew it meant the unclean world. But now his people see the benefit in coming out and explaining themselves. That was part of what he was doing on this trip.

"So how do you get to be so proficient an angler, living in the Bronx?"

"Study," he replied as if the answer were obvious. He had started with Isaac Walton. Then the Schwiebert two-volume work. All of Roderick Haig-Brown, all of Joe Brooks. To learn to tie, Jack Dennis and Doug Swisher.

"But you must have done a lot of fishing as well?"

"No. Only this." He let go an S-cast to the bank, configured to let the line absorb two intermediate currents and allow the fly a natural float. It was a perfect cast, and so thought a foot-long brown.

"You didn't learn that from books."

"Books and practice. In the basement of my *shul*—you know that word?" he asked slyly.

"I know that word."

"In the basement is a long room, used for overflow. It has a sixteen-foot ceiling. I was allowed to practice. A book in one hand, the rod in the other. Excellent discipline that ceiling. It keeps your loop low and tight."

"And your gear?"

"Bought from E-Bay. All good values. The rod cost eleven dollars. Plus shipping."

He realized he was being out-manuevered and turned a question on me.

"Tell me about your work."

So I did. I didn't think God could intrude on American Colonial history, so I told him. Of my studies, my teaching, my paltry research papers. By the end I began to hear the discouragement in my words. Perhaps, I ventured, I'd been at it too long.

"Can one study history too long?" he asked.

"Aren't all things possible?"

He smiled. "Well, my friend. I too study history. I study four or five hours every day. And every day the same book. Have I been at it too long?"

"And to answer your question. Yes indeed. All things are possible. But only if you recognize the Force that creates possibilities."

His Sabbath ended at sunset, on the river, and there was a prayer for that. Afterwards, we were in Cort's SUV, pulling the McKenzie and bouncing along rutted dirt roads. Cort was telling us how the valley had been settled by LDS families during the great Emigration. I was in the front seat, Chaim behind. At a break, I turned to him. He had more to say.

"You believe you are not pious. Do you know what the word means?"

"Religious."

"That is a second meaning. Its first meaning is Dedicated. You are dedicated to your family and your studies."

"I suppose I am."

"So you are pious. Yet you still sometimes feel lonely and empty."

"Did I say that?"

"Did you have to? I think you wonder about who you are."

"Don't you?"

"Now it is you who answer a question with a question. There is an old saying . . ."

"Why am I not surprised?"

". . . that when two people become friends, they make two souls against a single body. Bodies are self-centered—each pursues its own needs. Two souls can join forces. I am writing down for you my telephone number. You call me. We will find an hour every Thursday to discuss. Our talk will nourish two souls, give focus to two lives. You will see."

I took the paper, crumpled it, and stuck it in my vest. I had no intention of using it.

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Bright and early Sunday morning, after a breakfast of steak, fried eggs, and cowboy coffee, we said our goodbyes. We thanked Mrs. Henders and tipped her heavily to compensate for Jake's change of heart. A somewhat bewildered Sherree hung back. We stuffed our gear into the trunk of the rental car and speculated whether we'd have a chance to say goodbye to Chaim. Sure enough, on cue, he appeared.

Somehow the perpetual eclipse under the hat had dissipated. Maybe it was the long-slanting morning light, a maizey reflection off the freshly mowed alfalfa fields, but you could actually see his face. He seemed younger, and—funny what a day in a boat can do—he looked like someone we'd known a long time.

He carried his fishing gear. "I want you to know you have made this trip a memorable one for me. After all, I am not what you ex-

pected, and I can not replace your missing companion." Since we'd met Chaim, no one had mentioned Ed. "I shall always remember you."

We were to a man embarrassed. Kevin mumbled something about paths crossing and I thought to say how much meeting him had meant to us, but didn't. Jake offered a ride to the airport.

"No thank you. Cort drives me to Boise for my bus."

"Bus? To the Bronx?"

"Actually the East Side Terminal. Manhattan."

"How long does that take?"

"Two days, fourteen hours." We blinked in unison. No one asked whether it was ritual, economy, or preference. "Do you know," he asked, "there is a town in Wyoming called Little America? I hope to see it, although we stop there at three thirty in the morning."

"I want to make gifts to you." He handed Jake his fly box. Inside three-dozen flies, dry and nymph, every one hand-tied, were lined up in the ridged foam in size places. Chaim's flies were works of art, you could hang the collection on the wall like a shadow-box. I envied Jake his gift.

Then he gave Kevin his reel. It was a tinny, simple thing, a gift perhaps with a message, since Kevin had only the newest and best of everything. His own reel was a large arbor, block-cast aluminum model that twenty of Chaim's would not have bought.

And to me he handed his rod, a thick, awkward stick that in his hands had been a wand of grace.

"To you," he said in his stiff, old-world way. "The pious angler."

Cort threw the black satchel in back of the pick-up, and Chaim folded his shrouded frame into the front seat. What, I wondered, would they talk of? Would Cort tell him of his doubts with the fantastical story of Joseph Smith and the invisible golden tablets, the magical lenses, the visit of the Angel Moroni? Or would they talk hatches?

I left that paper in my vest the rest of the season. It was December before I pulled it out, January before I used it. I don't think I've missed half a dozen Thursdays since. I've become fanatical about that conversation, where ethics, diet, history, God, ritual, joy, observance and culture are discussed. Every once in a while, Chaim asks about fishing.