

Spring Dance on the Gallatin

MARRYPAT IS WEARING a wool hat, a vest, and a windbreaker. She cinches up her life jacket and picks up her wooden paddle. We look at each other.

"Ready?" she asks.

"I guess." I move toward the knot that holds the canoe in check.

For some reason it occurs to me that we haven't danced together in a long time, years maybe. Dancing is how we met, in large measure how we fell in love, but I wonder if we could regain that magic, find the rhythm again. I wonder if I really want to know.

Several times a summer we prevail on family or friends to take the kids for a day, and then escape to a segment of water we would never try with children aboard. We escape to paddle the way we used to paddle, to have one or two days away from the diaper-changing, dispute-setting, bill-paying, spill-cleaning, laundry-folding, storytelling, swing-pushing life harnessed up to three small children.

Escape is a relative term. It isn't really the way it used to

be. There is that small extra caution in every move on the water that is made up, at the root, of our knowing that those lives are, in every way, attendant to ours. The cord never cut.

I hear impatience in the sluicing, cold river water. The Gallatin, where it lopes over the northern boundary of Yellowstone National Park, is high and loud with the melt that has been imprisoned since fall in high-country snow and ice. The bank-full stream sounds reckless as desperadoes on the run. Damn the world anyway, it says. I'm free for now; come along or get the hell out of the way.

The red canoe sits in a narrow sliver of an eddy, tied to a slender willow. The boat nods and bumps against the tether, anxious as a spring-shy colt. I don't share the same impatience as the swollen flow, nor the light eagerness of the boat. I am still heavy with accumulated winter sloth, extra pounds, creaky joints, and the dark densities of the cold season, like dangerous boggy spots in the thawing interior landscape.

Snow clings in gray patches to the slopes just above the river and still lies deep in wooded thickets. The breeze carries a winter scent, and I think of the pair of gaunt elk listlessly feeding in the bottomland near Taylor Creek, their ribs standing out like barrel staves. They hardly lifted their heads as we drove past.

We settle into the canoe and take the first strokes away from the bank. There is that strange, niggling unease common to all our childless interludes, as if we've forgotten something big. The river's careless strength is a surprise. We bump on a rock, the current grabs at the upstream edge of the hull, and we have to brace hard to regain balance. We're not dancing yet, not by a long shot. The river is an impersonal strength, an impartial power, and it is bigger than we are.

Above Taylor Creek and all the way up into its headwa-

ters, the Gallatin is a smooth slick of river, winding fast and steadily against grass and willow banks over a gravel bottom. Below Taylor Creek it is all boulder garden and rapid, wave and emphatic eddy. Most of the year, and all year when the runoff is low, this rocky upper stretch isn't worth the trouble. Running it at low water is like playing pinball and being the ball. But when the runoff is strong, for a brief window of time, it is a spring run to wait for through the dark, frozen heart of winter.

Beneath Snowflake Falls, where warm water weeps down the hummocky green slope, we take a side channel barely twice the width of the canoe. It is a bobsled run, with hard turns against grassy banks, and we start to get our timing. Marypat leans out on a draw stroke at the head of a corner, I pry the stern around, and we schuss into the next straightaway.

"Nice. Really nice," I say to myself, not as a compliment, but because the motion, the lean of boat and the certain grab of current and the soundless turn, are so utterly sweet.

Being in a canoe together is the other way we fell in love. It's the same way, really, because the river flowing and the beat of waves and the blended percussion of strokes that takes us here and there on the water is dancing, too. Just as sure as rock and roll. When it's right, when it's good, the canoe is an appendage as alive and responsive as our arms and legs.

How do people share a house, eat food together, sleep belly to back, and yet drift apart? Weeks go past between times when I really see Marypat, when it's more than passing on the stairway carrying laundry or a dry kiss on the way out the door. Longer still between flickers of that old heady energy we can generate together, that thing that is greater than two.

As we go under the highway bridge, backpacking away from the center piling, the river changes. We pivot the canoe

clumsily into an eddy you could park a semi in below the first big rock we've seen. It isn't a pretty move, as eddy turns go, but we've arrived; we're starting to play off each other. I can't see Marypat's face, but I know she's grinning when she plants her paddle back in the murky flow and the boat turns smoothly downriver again, picking up speed.

Taylor Creek is a thick, muddy brown cascade coming in from the west, roaring off the slopes of the Taylor Peaks and washing in its load of rock and sediment. The Gallatin turns from a big stream into a small river right there. The two flows run side by side, distinct shades of brown refusing to mix. The river is suddenly full of rocks and standing waves, and the noise is a throaty drumroll that we have to shout above to be heard.

But we aren't talking much. I watch Marypat's strokes, sense her body language, see the routes she's picking, and follow her lead. In the stern I take the longer view and choose our general course, aiming toward the outside of the next bend, or to the left of a gravel bar, or along the base of ledgy cliffs. The canoe sideslips above a boulder and then dives down a narrow "V" of water; we slow down to coast through a set of waves and then eddy out against shore to breathe and bail the sloshing collection of splashes. The motion is a constant, fluid, dynamic flirtation with power.

The Gallatin is the color of bad truck-stop coffee. Clouds move quickly overhead. In succession it hails, rains, drizzles, and is bright with sun. A winter-killed mule deer lies on the bank, bedraggled as a wet rug, settling into the earth. Mer-gansers stand on the tops of boulders and wing downstream ahead of us, just above the wave tops. Spotted sandpipers run in the stones at the river's edge. They bob and peep and pick at food in Charlie Chaplin double time.

The miles that roll under us are at once familiar and full of surprises. For a decade we have paddled this stretch of water every year when the runoff has been strong. I remem-

ber the choices where the river divides at a small island—one channel is a straight shot through waves; the other, a jumble of rocks. I see a spindly fir that is still maintaining the same impossible levitation it has for years, sticking straight out over the river, hanging on against gravity and the slow, inevitable picking away of the bank. But there are also new deadfall in the river, spring logjams, reconfigured rapids, and blocked side channels.

We have logged thousands of miles together now, hundreds of days making boats move along beneath sky. It is like something saved away, a wealth, an accumulation to dip into: the way Marypat leans back as we ram into a wave; her square, strong shoulders twisting for a cross-bow draw; her irrepressible giggle that bubbles out at the head of a long chute; the way, when we've nailed something at the edge of our skill, that she whips around to look at me as if it's the first, best time and she wants to be sure I am there with her. We are richer at every bend.

The canoe dodges and weaves through a mile-long rock garden and then slides beneath the low bridge at the 320 Ranch. My legs are wet from the knees down and my fingers are rigid with cold, but we have a momentum now. It is a good rhythm, this piece of river, and we are lost in it—the canoe is wearing us and we are wearing it. It feels as if we're dancing every song in a long set, our moves mirroring each other's. The energy rises up, better than warmth, and breaks out in the inebriated grins we wear. The band is hot, the floor shakes, and neither one of us wants it to stop. So we don't stop, not until we eddy against the bank below the bridge at Red Cliff. By then it is only adrenaline that keeps us warm.

Adrenaline, and the realization that somewhere in the wordless tumult and sweet motion we have lost the dead spaces between us, the gray decay of winter.

A Fly-Fishing Tradition

MY BROTHER-IN-LAW and my fishing guide for the day, Paul, has just handed me his \$450 graphite fly rod with a pretty convincing show of nonchalance. I strive for the appropriate affectation of practiced ease. Sawyer is with me for the day, standing nearby in his little life vest, waiting the way all children learn to wait for whatever is coming next. In the ongoing negotiations that surround parental labor, it is understood that Marypat will get time on the water at some unspecified future date in return for granting me this fishing outing on the Madison River.

While Paul busies himself readying the drift boat and fussing with gear, I wander through a *deja vu* moment. I am a kid again, standing near my father along the Stillwater River, upstream of Nye, Montana. Dad's gaze is concentrated on the dense selection of fake barbed insects lying in the worn leaves of his leather-bound fly book. He plucks one, mysteriously, from the jumble, deliberately ties it to his line, and settles himself, already lost in the study of water, intent on eddy and rock and pool.