



FICTION

OFF *the* HOOK

Jim stood at the edge of the river, feeding his line through the eye of the fly and tying a clinch knot, surveying the wonder of creation. Only 10 minutes from his house, the river was more of a fast-moving creek at this spot this time of year. The water flowed gently over the rocks.

by CHRIS FABRY

WITH FINGERNAIL clippers, Jim cut the excess line and let the fly dangle in the breeze. It looked like the water bugs lighting on the swirling pool across the creek.

Fishing took Jim back to his childhood and his father's advice. His father was tall and imposing, but put a fishing rod in his hand and he opened, revealing the best bait for bass or catfish, how to still yourself and not scare the fish.

"To become a fisherman is to become quiet and patient."

The sound of the rippling water, only a few feet deep here, and the wind through the trees were a gateway to rich, warm memories of men who had stood shoulder to shoulder with Jim on the banks of lakes and rivers. He had fished on the ocean twice. He had seen and felt fish of incredible size and strength. But it was always the gentle stream that felt most like home.

Today he fished alone.

As a child, Jim used a Zebco® reel with a red and white bobber that sat on the water's surface with a hook baited with a worm from the earth or a grasshopper from a nearby field or a minnow seined from a creek. He'd met a friend in basic training who had opened the door to the art

of fly-fishing. He wore the floppy hat the man had given him, and he thought of his friend every time he wore it.

When life became difficult and complicated and when decisions loomed, he searched for water and would lose himself in a four-count rhythm. Connecting with the stream and hearing the water and smelling the aroma of a freshly caught salmon grounded him. He processed his life at the edge of the water. The water felt like time itself, rushing past, and all he could do was step into it and stand.

The sun glowed orange now in the trees, and he waded a little farther, feeling the smooth rocks underneath his boots. His wife had cautioned him, worrying that something might happen. Her concern about her children had shifted to her parents as they grew older, and now she focused on him. She was like a river in that way, meandering, cutting new channels. And he knew this was her way, her duty.

A hummingbird buzzed past him and then another, and the two chased each other into the sky in the half-light of the evening. He pulled the rod back and forth, expecting a fish to be as hungry as he was, and he heard his father somewhere downriver.

"Fish don't think like we do. The trick is to stop thinking and simply become part of the water."



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He smiled. His father had been gone a decade, and Jim still heard his chuckle. In the solitude and repeated motion, muscles in memory, another voice surfaced. It was his own. He spoke to his son on the bank. The child threw rocks into the water. Jim said something harsh. His son turned away, but the look on his face said it all. His shoulders slumped. Jim gathered the gear and led him away.

Solitude and nature bring welcomed and unwelcomed memories.

He kept up the motion and saw his daughter's face bounding up the stairs, a friend behind her. Her first day of high school. The girl had given her a ride in a car held together by duct tape and prayer, it seemed to him. And later, alone with her, he had discouraged their friendship and advised against the "wrong crowd." She stayed in her room that night.

Gnats moved toward him in a cloud, and he swatted them. When they became thick, he moved to the bank, holding the rod above him, waiting for them to pass.

So many regrets. So many hurtful words and looks he'd given. So many ways he had communicated something other than love.

And then he saw his wife's face. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health. Till death us do part. They had plunged down life's rapids and the whitewater of children and now grandchildren. But he had hurt her as well. Things he had done or had forgotten to do or opportunities missed because he was too busy. He had apologized to all of them, and he knew they had forgiven him. Still ... the memories returned.

The swarm moved downstream, and he waded a little farther than before to try one last time for a fish. And this was what most couldn't understand about fishing. It wasn't about winning or succeeding or catching the biggest or the



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most. It was becoming part of something bigger, becoming part of the stream and having the courage to step into it and believe there is something there for him and hope he will find it.

You cannot stand in the river and not think of God, he thought.

The beauty around him always turned his thoughts to the God who created extravagantly. He had used every color

in the palette. But God has also loved extravagantly, becoming a man who gave Himself to fulfill His own holy demand. God poured Himself out in a stream of love so that Jim could be forgiven and made right with his Creator. He believed that fully.

But the line of memory tugged so often at his heart, and there were promises broken and unkind words that accused him. Why did his mistakes so often surface in his memory?

In the midst of his reverie, he noticed the fly disappearing from the surface and his line tightened and the end of the rod bent in an upside-down U. It felt like a monster on the other end.

He planted his feet and slowly pulled the fish toward him, reeling in the slack, careful not to pull too hard. Several times he thought the fish would break the line, but he stepped forward on the slippery rocks, patiently waiting for the fish to tire as shadows fell. The swarm returned, and he dipped his head, closing his eyes and mouth, tightly holding the rod.

Several minutes later, he drew the fish close enough to unhook the net from his side and scoop the fish into it. Monster was right. He could barely hold it up with one hand. Such beauty and color, even in shadows.

He splashed to the bank, set the rod down, and took the fish in his hands, working the hook from its mouth using small pliers. Then he held it aloft, like it was an offering. If only his father were here. If only he could show his friend who had taught him these skills. They were both gone.

Then he thought of his son. He should invite him to this spot. Why hadn't he done that? His daughter too. She could bring the grandchildren. He could teach them. Or they could throw rocks.

He waded into the stream, cradling the fish, and stooped and placed it in the water and kept his hands there for support. In slow motion, the fish moved slightly, bending, feeling the water, feeling its weight. With a flick of its tail and a splash, it swam.

Free.

"Good-bye, friend," Jim said whispering.

"Why did you let it go?"

He turned and saw his wife. Hands in her pockets. She looked more beautiful now than when they had married. And his heart warmed.

"He wasn't mine to keep."

She smiled. "But what were you thinking when you released him?"

Jim walked to the bank and looked up at her.

"I was thinking it's hard to swim with a hook in your mouth attached to a line. And if God removes it, the best thing we can do is swim free." 🍷

CHRIS FABRY is an award-winning author of more than 80 books, including his novelization of the Kendrick Brothers film, *Overcomer*. Look for Chris' new novel, *A Piece of the Moon*, coming in April 2021. If you have a dream to write, find encouragement at heyyoucanwrite.com. Chris is also the host of Chris Fabry Live on Moody Radio.



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