

Bend in the River

Grandpa steadied the aluminum skiff as I lifted my legs over the side. No easy feat wearing bib waders. Once I stood with him on the river bank, we dragged the flat-bottomed boat higher onto the land. “Here, champ, hold the rods,” he said, handing them to me. “Careful. The tips break easily.” After setting the anchor, Grandpa reached into a small cooler we’d brought with us and grabbed a beer. He pried open the cap, took a swig, then offered the bottle to me. “Go ahead,” he said, seeing me hesitate. “Beer on a fishing trip is good luck.” Thrilled, I took a sip. The bitter taste didn’t appeal, but I wasn’t about to let him know. I handed it back. He looked around and gave a confirming thumbs-up. “We’ll fish from here.”

A heavy overcast blanketed the sky and hid the sun. Grandpa praised the soft light, saying it made for better fishing, and that the steady breeze would discourage mosquitoes from swarming around us. When we’d arrived in Alaska the day before, I mistook their large mosquitoes for snowflakes. “That’s not snow,” he had replied, laughing. “Snow doesn’t bite!” Brown bears do, and he cautioned that we would have to watch for them. They fished the river, too. He said we should speak loudly to one another to ensure that bears knew we were there.

The land on both sides of the river was mostly marsh and thawing tundra—not quite solid but not liquid either—with a scattering of dwarfed trees that Grandpa said had been stunted by fierce winds and the short growing seasons. Their strange, tortured appearance, unlike anything I’d seen before, captured my imagination.

Grandpa attached a reel to one of the rod’s cork handles and strung line through its eyelets. He pinched a feathery fly from a small metal box and tied it to the tippet at the end of the leader, cutting extra filament with the nail clipper he kept in one of the many pockets of his fishing vest. As he started rigging the other rod, I looked around, nervously checking for bears.

Beyond the low, scrubby bushes and tall reeds on the muddy bank where we stood, I saw a distant forest. “What kind of trees are those?” I asked, pointing.

He hunched his shoulders. “Don’t know. Think the ones with white bark are birches.

He pointed out salmon swimming in the shallows, their reddish bodies surprisingly visible. “We could catch them with our hands!” I said, laughing. He laughed, too, and dared me to try. Everything about this place astounded me and requested my attention, from the rustling leaves and gurgling river water to the squawking gulls and piercing cries of ospreys and eagles soaring overhead. My marveling ended abruptly when a sudden yank on my arm nearly pulled me off my feet. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” Grandpa said, smiling, but in a stern tone. “You’ve got to stay alert out here. Daydreaming can get you in trouble.”

Leading me by the hand, we walked into the cold river. Standing in water knee-deep, I braced myself, spreading my legs to resist the current, while continually readjusting my stance as the mud and silt shifted underfoot. “Let’s cast from here,” Grandpa said, pulling a length of leader from the spool on his rod. Using his wrist to flick the rod above and behind him, a long length of line traveled backward in a graceful loop. He flicked his wrist again and sent the line forward, lowering the rod as the line touched down lightly in the middle of the river. “Your turn,” he said. “Like we practiced.”

Before I could attempt a cast, my grandfather’s line jiggled, then made a zinging noise. He had a fish on his line. “Woo hoo!” he yelled as the fish swam away, then jumped out of the water and smacked back down with a splash. “It’s a silver! Here, you bring him!” We exchanged poles. “Hold the rod up,” he shouted. “If the fish wants to run, let him pull the line out. If he swims toward you, reel it in.” My heart pounded; I could barely breathe. “Just be sure to keep the line tight so he can’t spit out the fly,” he cautioned.

It took all my strength to hold onto the rod and keep it pointing up. It nearly bent in two. “I’m afraid of breaking the pole,” I cried as I struggled.

“Don’t worry about that. The rod’s made to bend. If he changes direction, change with him. Don’t fight his changes. Go with them.”

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Grandfather tapped me on the shoulder. “Hey, where were you?”

“I was thinking about our first fishing trip in Alaska.”

His chesty laugh sounded like the rumbling of an old car. “What was that, twenty years ago?”

I handed him the shillelagh he’d found years earlier in Ireland and used as a walking stick. His other hand grasped my arm. Since his recent stroke, the left side of his body misinterpreted his commands, and walking had become a challenge. He stood in the doorway of his house, looking like a shepherd holding his staff. This once vigorous man, an avid sportsman into his eighties, might have lost his abilities, but not his spirit.

He called our goal of walking roundtrip from his house to the mailbox at the far end of the driveway his physical therapy. Two steps beyond the doorway and his jerky movements had me questioning the wisdom of this journey, and wondering if I could catch him if he fell.

An overgrown flower garden bordered the path. “All these years and it’s still hers,” he said, stopping to look about him.

“She did love purple,” I replied. “I remember that poem she kept on her dresser about growing old and wearing a purple hat.”

He sighed. “Damn shame she didn’t get to wear that hat.” With effort, he uncurled his fingers and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand to discourage an itch or tears—I couldn’t tell which. He nodded at each flower as he rattled off its name. “Foxglove. Rhododendron. Columbine. Iris.” He shook his head. “After her shock at hearing me say their names, your grandmother would have told me to get in there and start weeding!” He laughed before turning away.

I stared into the distance, trying to spot a bird I could hear making pinging noises, until I felt a sharp tug on my arm, hard enough to pull me off balance. Fearing that my grandfather

had fallen, I turned quickly, my stomach knotted, and saw him standing upright with a mischievous smile on his face. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” he said, his grip tight on my shirtsleeve. He chuckled. “Daydreaming? Thinking about the ladies?”

I smirked and waved away his suggestion. “You know I’m married.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t think about them,” he replied. “I may be eighty-seven, but I’m not dead yet.”

I laughed. “You’ve dealt with a lot of changes over the years.”

He nodded. “People are flexible. We’re built to bend.”

“Like a fly rod,” I said.

He smiled.