

Endings and Beginnings

The meadow sweeping from the treeline down to the lake below had turned yellow almost overnight, with purple patches of the frost-seared ground cover showing through. The lake surface was no longer a smooth reflection of the stony peaks, standing against the cold sky and dusted now with new snow, but an infinite series of parallel waves driven ashore by a hard wind. All summer, the Van Kirks, Ed and James, and I had fished the high lakes hard, driving up to the mountains in early evening and hiking out to the truck well after darkness, following the close of the long summer days. For weeks past the solstice, the shortening light had been nearly ignorable, before the early frosts hit. Now not summer alone, but the notion of summer as well, was dispelled. Summer was finished not for the year only but quite possibly—it seemed—forever. It was sad, but it was true, and there was no use being sorry about it. As I approached the bank, a lone duck of some sort, apparently underfledged and flightless, shot from the shoreline toward the middle of the lake, cutting a sliver track across the black water. There is not much future for a flightless duck on an 11,000-foot-high lake in early September in the Rocky Mountains.

I walked on around the lake, past the curious beaver swimming in circles at a distance from their lodge, toward a quartzite cliff falling almost at a right angle to the water. Standing on a boulder at the water's edge, I strung the number-six rod, selected one of Ed's dry flies from my flybox, secured it to the nine-and-a-half-foot 5x leader, and dressed the hackle lightly. I had not seen a rise on the lake since I'd walked out of the trees a quarter-hour ago, but fishing is one of those activities to which faith is necessary for success.

A 30 m.p.h. wind played hell with my casting, but the second try produced a strong swirl on the water's surface. I raised the tip as the rod bowed nicely and stripped in line, not too fast. These alpine trout fight hard and end up in the rocks if you give them their head. This one felt like a respectable fish, but not more than that: A really big trout creates a heavy, profound, pumping action on the rod. I

took in another handful of line and saw the first flash of his silver side underwater as he fought the hook. Holding the rod above my head, I bent to wet my free hand in the cold water to receive him. He was a brook trout, about 14 inches long and well fleshed, red as blood on his underside. I held him by the lip with my thumb to keep him still, removed the barbless hook from his jaw, and returned him to shallow water. Then, I wiped the fly to remove the fish mucous and dried it, redressed the hackle, and paused for the wind to come right again. As I cast, a fresh gust caught the fly as it hit the water and lifted it into the air again, directly above the answering swirl.

Though I kept catching fish as I moved along the shore in the direction of the inlet at the north end of the lake, the summertime action was faded, almost past. The fish were still aggressive, but they were no longer berserk as they had been earlier in the season, missing the fly every other cast in their frenzy. As I went, I caught fewer brookies and more splake—the missile-shaped, fork-tailed cross between a lake trout and a brook trout, less colorful than brook trout but as good fighters, or better. The longest was around 19 inches and weighed perhaps a pound and a half. When my rod arm tired, I reeled in and hiked back through the dwarf willow and krummholz pine to the valley in which we were camped, keeping an eye out ahead for the yellow eye of a fire and the pale shape of a lone white horse.

I found the horse but not the fire; Maureen had kept a cold camp and retired early to the tent. I halloed her from 50 yards out, causing the mare to turn a sour face toward me from the clump of trees in which I had snubbed her before leaving camp, six hours ago. I staked her on the picket line to graze the thin lakeside grass and sat with my back against a rock, consulting a flask of scotch before hunting up supper for myself. The wind poured through the pass above the head of the lake, raising waves a foot tall that crashed like ocean surf along the shore.

"It's going to be cold tonight!" Maureen called from inside the tent.

"Actually, it's warmed up in the last



hour! It would be good if the wind would quit, though! It plays hell with the fishing situation!"

"Do you want me to get you something to eat?"

I turned the flask in my hand, admiring how its sterling-silver side flashed—like a fish—in the clear alpine twilight. "I'm doing fine on my own, but thanks anyhow!"

After supper, I snubbed the horse close again, took my rod, and walked down to the lake to learn if there was any action happening. The wind whistled, bending the upper third of the rod sideways as I went, and spray blew off the whitecaps like driven snow. I made a series of long casts with my back to the wind without provoking a swirl and was on the point of reeling in when the wind fell abruptly and died. Close inshore, a fish rose delicately, and then a second, the two circles expanding on the glassy surface to form an Olympic ring as a third fish came up. I cast to them, taking two of the three, and, after that, the lake died suddenly. You might as well have tried casting a fly to the talus slope climbing steeply from the water's edge as flog any more fish out of that lake. The trout were over now, and so was another summer.

"I'm through up there," Ed said when I saw him in town several days later. "Too busy now with other things. The shop will be done with my truck the day before the first day of antelope season."

He and James came by the house for me at a quarter past five that morning with the repaired Suburban hitched to a flatbed trailer carrying a wheeled game cart. It was a mild morning, but the wind was up before the sun, laying the roadside grasses over in the headlights. Leaving the truck at the rancher's gate, the three of us started on foot across the dark prairie, dressed in warm hunting clothes and taking with us only the guns, the shoot-

ing sticks, and our hunting knives. We had hiked 400 yards before Ed turned from the two-track and cut cross-country another few hundred feet to a dry irrigation ditch, barely discernible in the coming light rising from behind the eastern mountains. Bent almost double in the shallow ditch, we proceeded toward the fence corner a quarter-mile off, until Ed signaled James and me to get down. Lying prone below the verge of the irrigation ditch, we studied a herd of grazing antelope, out 600 yards, through binoculars as the tan-and-white forms emerged imperceptibly from darkness into daylight. We braced the shooting sticks in the clay bank, chambered our rounds, and waited there behind the guns, watching the shifting forms.

"About a quarter of the antelope I've shot, I've taken from right here," Ed remarked in a stage whisper. "All we have to do is wait and they'll come in within shooting range, sooner or later."

The cold snap came just before the sun breached the mountains at our backs, stiffening my fingers and burning at the end of my nose. The early light showed traffic moving on the interstate to the north a couple of miles off, two small ranches out ahead about a mile, and, in the west, lion-colored foothills lifting against the mountain range where patches of golden aspen flamed among the black timber. The crows awoke and began talking back and forth, and, from a distance, a rifle report sounded dully.

"There's a couple of respectable bucks in that herd," Ed said, taking the glasses away from his face.

"It looks like they're moving this way," James suggested; "—sort of."

All of us heard the rattle of a diesel engine away to the left, beyond the next property line. Together, we watched through three pairs of binoculars as the flatbed truck stopped and three orange blips separated themselves from it.

"Now, things are going to *change*," Ed predicted. "Those hunters are going to kick these antelope our way. Are you ready, James?"

The hunters vanished behind an irrigation bank running north at a right angle to the one we lay in, but nearly an hour passed before ten or eleven does and fawns appeared over the top of the embankment at a run, headed toward our herd. The two bucks, having raised their heads for a glance at the commotion behind them, commenced to graze peacefully again. But the momentum applied

at the rear of the herd as the two groups merged set the second in motion as well, and soon all 25 or 30 animals were moving along the fenceline out ahead of the ditch where they paused abruptly, the leaders feinting as if to make a turn toward the north. "Oh, don't do that," Ed urged under his breath. "That isn't what you're supposed to do." The antelope milled, looking one way and another, and then they were moving again, running this time in a wide arc that swung them around in the prairie swales and brought them directly in toward the ditch.

"You take the first shot," I told James, who looked at Ed, who nodded.

"You and I have the entire month to hunt antelope," he agreed. "James has school, and football after classes. Don't anyone move, now. Here they come."

The tall shooting sticks were a problem from the prone position. I piled three rocks on the verge of embankment, covered them with a woolen glove, and rested the forestock of the rifle across it, grateful that I did not have to shoot. Stretched beside me on the cold earth, James appeared comfortable behind his shorter sticks. The herd pounded on, drawing closer, then pulled up short at 300 yards. At this range, the better of the two bucks looked very good as he stood broadside to the ditch, his dark moon-creature eyes focused on the three inert human forms within it. The report of the .30-06 beside my left ear was not as loud as I'd anticipated. "It looked to me like you had a clean miss," Ed told James, as the antelope wheeled and fled into a shallow draw. "I had him scoped at the moment you fired. Dang! Dang!"

"It was a long shot," I offered.

"Too much movement," Ed decided. "They knew we were here: It's easier when there's just one person. So much for strategy number one. We can come back here this afternoon, if we feel like it. They're not that spooked; we only fired once. Why don't we take a look over the hill and see what's hanging out down along the river?"

Below the bluff, the Little Laramie wound through hay meadows and willows, past the rancher's house tucked inside a draw partway up the side of the cliff. The meadows were dotted with white-and-tan specks, several dozen of them. Ed laughed behind his binoculars. "They all came over *here*," he exclaimed, letting the glasses fall on his chest. "Let's go on back to the truck and have lunch."

We stood about the trailer to eat, keeping an eye on the prairie around, and were nearly finished with the meal when a doe antelope, followed by two fawns, bounded into the head of the draw coming up from the hay meadow.

"I wonder what got them moving?" Ed said. He picked up his rifle, walked over to the fence, and set up a careful shot from the top of the gatepost. Then, without having touched the trigger, he lifted the gun from the post as the antelope trotted on. "Do you suppose there could be something else coming along?" he added.

We finished lunch, packed the coolers into the truck, and climbed in ourselves. The Suburban was already started forward when the rest of the antelope herd appeared in the draw 250 yards out and started across at a trot on the far side of the fence. "Go!" Ed exclaimed, from behind the wheel.

James took a rest on one of the gate posts, and I took the other. He fired, a buck dropped, and I heard the *thwack* of the bullet hitting him. I missed my animal on the first shot and winged him with a second, another 50 or so yards farther out. Too far. It's what happens when you allow yourself to be seduced by a variable scope at long range. No fool like an old fool, as the wise man said.

"The Lunchtime Ambush," James said, looking modest.

"Good shooting," I told him.

"We need to try and catch up with that hit one," Ed said. "He has a hind leg dragging. I don't think he was hurt badly, though."

The wind, which had died before sunrise, blew hard now out of the west where shelves of gray cloud had formed, pushing out from the mountains. What had been a summer sky at sunrise had abruptly become a fall one, bearing its rumor of winter.

I removed the live round from the chamber and inserted it into the magazine. Then I pulled on the woolen gloves, turned up the collar of my hunting coat, and shouldered the rifle on its sling. "I'm going after him," I said. Suddenly, a solitary walk on the open prairie seemed like a good idea.

To Subscribe:
(800) 877-5459

by Thomas Fleming

Shop Like You Mean It

“Shop Like You Mean It” read the ads for a nearby mall every “Holiday Season.” The obvious question is: *Mean what?* The ad agency probably wants us to get into the spirit of the season of wasteful expenditure and conspicuous consumption, but, if we interpreted their ungrammatical sentence not according to the intention but according to the words themselves, we might derive a useful lesson. Since most Christians are going to do some Christmas shopping this year, how can they make their spending spree significant?

I can think of many ways. The first and most obvious decision to make is to shop, wherever possible, at stores owned by other Christians or, at least, by families or companies who do not subsidize the campaign to take the Christ out of Christmas, out of schools, and out of our lives. Jesus kicked the moneychangers out of the temple. Why can't we, at least, refrain from going to the malls, chain stores, and websites where they have reset up shop?

How do you spot the anti-Christian stores? That is not too hard. They are the ones open on Sunday. They would be open on Christmas Day itself (as some Walgreens are), if they thought they would get enough business. I once argued with my father, an ex-Catholic atheist, that Jewish merchants had a right to open their stores on Sunday. The old man surprised me by pointing out that, not only did those store owners gain an unfair advantage over non-Jewish competitors, they forced Christians to violate the Sabbath—and their consciences. Although there are many Blue Laws I do not agree with, I am happy to see them observed. A local camera store (Camera Craft) won my loyalty when they put up a sign saying they were sorry if their Sunday closing caused any inconvenience, but they wished to keep the Sabbath holy.

The stores that open on Sunday are also the stores in which the clerks say “Happy Holidays,” and, when you tell them you find the phrase anti-Christian and offensive, they wearily explain it is “store policy.” I politely explain that it is my policy not to shop in any store that has an anti-Christian policy.

With corporate stores, the question is pretty easy. Why buy Christmas presents from corporations that advertise pornography, force Christian employees to work on the Sabbath, or give money to Planned Parenthood, NOW, People for the American Way, the ACLU, or the Southern Poverty Law Center? How can you tell which corporations do not do any of the above? The truth is that so many of them are funding anti-Christian campaigns that you would do best not to spend your money on any national company that does not advertise its commitments.

I asked Kathy Coll (prolifepac.com) about where to find detailed information on corporations that support Planned Parenthood, and she told me to go to Life Decisions International, which puts out a long list of antilife companies—including Bank of America, Adobe, Kenneth Cole, Unilever (which owns Calvin Klein) and Gannett. Life Decisions International can be contacted at fightpp.org. The American Family Association (afa.net) has information on a number of companies, including Procter and Gamble, which they accuse of promoting the homosexual agenda.

A more difficult trick is to locate national companies that are not aggressively anti-Christian. Several people I know do business with Sierra Trading Post (sierratradingpost.com), which advertises itself as adhering to a Christian business ethic, and Hobby Lobby posts signs proclaiming its Sunday-closing policy. Hobby Lobby also supports organizations that translate and distribute Bibles and places offensively Christian ads all around the country with such phrases as “Come to the manger this Christmas, Come to life eternal.”

My own preference has always been to shop with people I have come to know and trust. I have already mentioned Camera Craft in Rockford, and I always try to give presents of secondhand books from the local bookshops or an Irish gift from the Tin Whistle or a gift pack of Italian food from an Italian grocery like DiTullio's. At Christmas, we send cheese from Baumgartner's Cheese Store & Tavern, (1023 16th Avenue, Monroe, WI 53566, (608) 325-6157). Although Baumgart-

ner's does sell imported cheese, it is famous (in Monroe, at least) for having the best American-made cheese in these United States. Although they are not set up especially for mail-order business, they have always been courteous and efficient, and everyone who has received a present of their cheese has expressed delight and asked how to order it for himself.

If you like pistachios, the best we have tasted in a long time come from Eagle Ranch in Alamogordo, New Mexico (eagleranchpistachios.com). It is a family-run operation, but I do not know what, if any, is their policy on charitable giving.

With a little patience and time, anyone can do some meaningful shopping for Christmas presents. Avoid the chains (and the malls, if you can). Don't patronize the enemies of your Faith. But more important than the boycotts is to adopt a positive strategy of supporting the hometown merchants and manufacturers who give your neighbors jobs. The Estwing company in Rockford (estwing.com), as I only recently discovered, makes perhaps the best hammers (one-piece forged steel) and grip tools in America, and we have begun giving Estwing hammers as a practical (and beautiful) gift. Every American town has something to export, if only some local food products and recipes. Better a hammer or bag of pecans than the master collection of Cohen brothers films I am afraid I will receive some day. There's one for the chipper.

Money is not important in itself, but every dollar we earn represents an increment of time that we have worked, and every dollar we spend expresses our vision of the world as it ought to be. Much of our spending must inevitably be neutral: An obsession with saving the environment, opposing racism, or even buying American is a sign of an unsteady mind. There are more important things to do with our lives, and, if going to Kroger's or eating—ugh—at McDonald's is now and then convenient, do not waste time on repentance. On the other hand, if conservative Christians began using their buying power prudently, by shopping locally instead of globally, they would brighten the corners where they are. ©