

# AND A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

BY MORGAN HOLCOMB

IMAGE BY MEGAN CRAWFORD

*dear montana,*

I was first introduced to you many years ago, on a silver screen in my childhood living room— a glittering, young Brad Pitt waist-deep in one of your rivers, a fish triumphantly in hand. With the golden light streaming and music swelling over the trees, I must admit, dear Montana, I was a bit infatuated, perhaps with both of you, and left with a strange desire to go fly fishing.

Your next appearance was in an old photo album. My parents— newlywed and cold, smiled back at me from a snow-covered world of stone and mist in Glacier National Park. The black and white film miniaturizing your mountains until they fit in an Ansel Adams-like 4"x6" and could be stuffed into a book of memories.

From then on, I let you wander into the back of my mind. You became a "one day" place, somewhere my friends joked about having land and chickens when we were grown. I thought about riding horses (yes, I was one of *those*) and sitting by a riverbank. We don't have riverbanks in Southern California, hence the appeal, only small creeks and raging oceans. The water only invites you in if you can first clamber over or under waves and tread where your feet don't touch the ground.





High school and college came and went. I traveled to other continents, saw an American rainforest, bought crystals in Salem, Massachusetts, drove through the flat middle of the country, but you, dear Montana, stayed far away, a dreamlike, golden haze of “one day.” A place only mentioned in the autumnal stories I habitually watched and read every September. You mingled with the North Carolina of *Cold Mountain*, the New Hampshire of *Tuck Everlasting*, and cameoed in *Legends of the Fall*. But then, a dear friend told me about a magazine that her dear friend (whom I will take liberty in assuming is now my friend as well?) was editing, and did I maybe want to buy a copy to support her? The magazine was called *Montana Woman*, and as I flipped open the soft cover, I realized that maybe Montana was calling me back again.

For a year trapped at home, I ordered copies and poured over pages of poetry and pines, syrupy chai and societal change, and felt a glowing ache to see the treasure state in person.

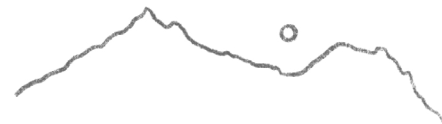
When it again seemed safe to venture out, I asked my father, my yearly companion for all trips historical and natural, if we could see Glacier National Park, and if he were so inclined to drive the 20 hours it would take to get there.

And so, we planned a summer trip that happened to

mirror the winter one he had taken with my mother 30 years before. She wished us well, and though we invited her to come, assured us that seeing the National parks once had been plenty for her.

In our first real introduction, dear Montana, I noticed people pulled off the highway, glittering, waist-deep in one of your rivers.

Every few miles, as if by compulsion, cars were stopped wherever the river met the road and adults played and splashed in the water like they’d been suddenly called by a childhood wish, whispered back to them.



Our hostel outside the park was really a ranch, with ravens and flat-eared mules that sensed the coming storm we didn’t. We hurriedly unpacked our bags into the cabin, got back in the car, and parked as soon as we saw the water. We scuttled down the slippery bank and jogged to the edge, peering at the impossibly candy-colored rocks beneath the surface. Immediately, my father began combing the shore for flat, circular pebbles— a habit he and I had picked up on a still morning at Walden pond. Some part of me wondered if he felt regret at waiting 25 years to teach his daughter the art of skipping rocks,



but then again, we didn’t have “ponds” at home nor the flat pebbles required.

Though cold, the water was delightful, softer and clearer somehow than any other I’d waded into. Your weather indulged us for a few moments, allowing us to meet you, warm and calm with something like a hug before you flung our hair behind us (mine more than his) and sent thunder and rain to wash the sun from our shoulders and chase us playfully back to our car.

And then, dear Montana, I met the people who call you home. By a stroke of luck (or lightning in this case), the editor of this fine magazine lived seven minutes away and we had mentioned trying to say “hi” while I was in town. Through a thunderstorm the likes of which I had never seen, we drove while the clouds shook the car. Finally, we pulled into the drive. Absolutely soaked through and laughing, Megan and I stood in the rain and hugged with copies of previous issues exchanged and salutations to each other’s cats promised. A friend all the way up here (I’ve decided, we are officially friends), and words I’d written hidden in pages states away.

Before driving off, I flipped to page 82, which featured a poem I’d penned about childhood memories. I watched my father read, take a few blinks, and pat my knee. Here it was, already in your

state, dear Montana, all the love I had for them, printed, saved, and a little rain-soaked, waiting.

At a grill that night, we tried bison burgers and huckleberry ale like true tourists while chatting with whoever sat down next to us (I am not the extrovert here, but it helps to travel with one.) Our immediate neighbors were from the East Coast, and those sitting across were locals. One woman with silvery hair and striking green-hazel eyes asked if I liked horses as she had a ranch a few minutes away. My inner 12-year-old squealed and bounced while my outer 27-year-old just smiled and said yes, like a normal person. She offered a tour if we wanted to visit before heading into the park the next day, even if it was very early. There are few people, dear Montana, that I wish to invite into my house before 8 am, even fewer strangers, and yet, here she was, welcoming us in at 6:45 am like old friends.

We were greeted with beautiful, black shiplap and two giant, regal wolfhounds who were instantly enamoured with my 6’4” father and his ability to provide very big pets. They followed us around (mostly him) as our new tour guide introduced us to her horses. We stared in awe at the morning mist that curled beneath the mountains and slid through the trees behind the property. The wildflowers that peeked through the path glittered with dew, the yearling’s muzzle— a soft velvet beneath my hand.



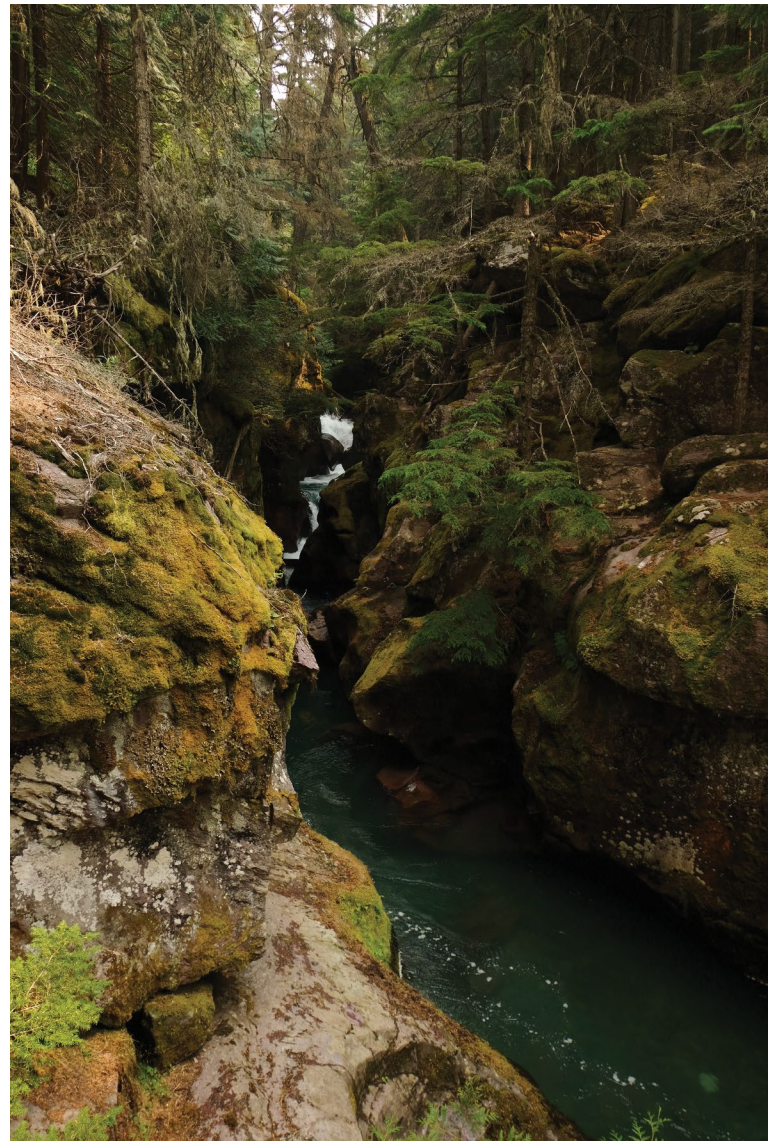


The land seemed to hold a little magic. The golden, fictional glow that I had cast your state in seemed undiluted by reality.

At the end of our tour, our guide produced a drawer full of hand-painted bowls made as gifts for visitors to the ranch. She asked which I liked, and between the illustrated bears and paired woodland animals, I reached for a dish with a little orange fox running across the surface. Safely stowed in bubble wrap, the bowl hid in my backpack while we chatted and left with recommendations for lakes and views in the park.

Dear Montana, you outdid yourself with Glacier.

Not five minutes into the Going to the Sun Road, we had pulled over to take in the beauty of Lake McDonald in the morning. A mirror of silver and



mist spanned the horizon in a gorgeous liminal calm. I watched as a rock arched gracefully over the still surface, bouncing, once, Twice, Three, Four times, leaving perfect and undisturbed ripples in its wake.

I marveled at the hot pink fireweed that grew between the dead trunks of burned trees, the ruby and emerald colored rocks that shimmered in rivers as blue as the tropics, the wild raspberries that lined the trails, the little black dot across the water that signified a bear on the hunt for a drink. If I had been infatuated with you before, dear Montana, I now had a hopeless crush.

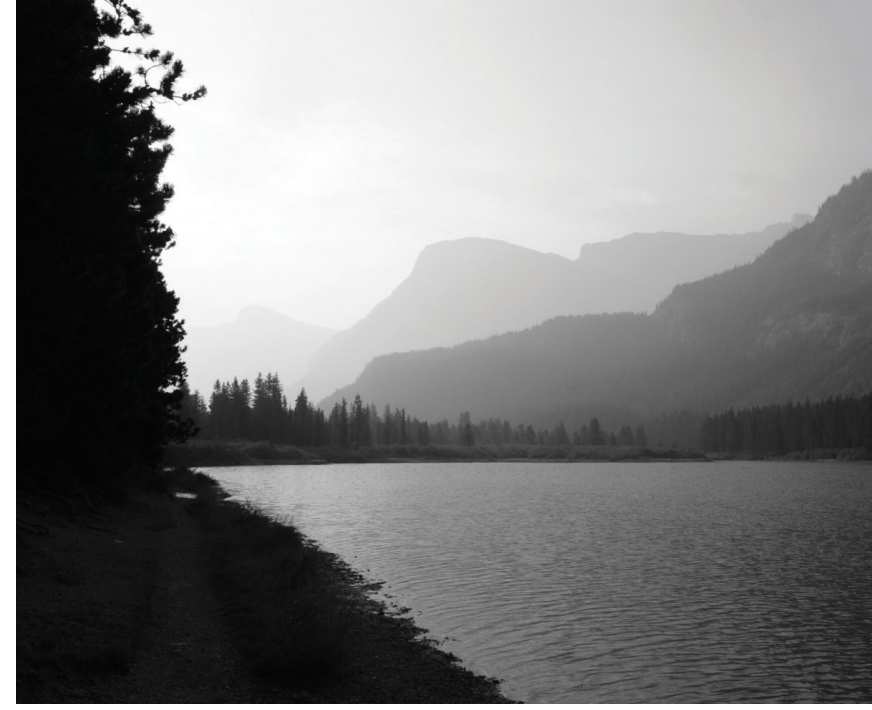
I was shocked by the accessibility of your beauty and

the way people wandered through tiny paths and paddled on the water. Everyone passed with a smile and “hello.” We all seemed gently enchanted and comfortably insignificant beneath the ancient gaze of the mountains that surrounded us.

As we drove towards Logan Pass, we stopped at a vista point, waiting for a cloud to roll by, and suddenly, there it was: the river that ran through it. Through the haze, it glinted and snaked through a black-brown world, the only light seeming to come from its winding form. A Norman MacLean quote bubbled up instantly:

*Eventually,  
all things  
merge into  
one, and a  
river runs  
through it*

The next day we drove from our cabin, which sat on the land of a Blackfoot art gallery. In the blue light of the ridiculously early morning, cows ambled by, unmoved by our hurry to get back into the park before the world woke up. We crawled along a construction road and got the idea that maybe you, dear Montana, wanted us to slow down and just exist for a while. The park would still be there even when the sun came up. While inching down the gravel path, I peered out to see a little orange fox sitting by the road, looking straight at me. I fumbled with my camera and squeaked for the car to stop while there the fox sat, calmly waiting for me to get myself together. Like a perfect model, he looked down the lens long enough for me to take the picture and then loped off, almost as if he had a particular, hand-painted bowl to run back to. When we informed our new acquaintance of the fox we





had seen on our way to her recommended lake, she seemed unsurprised, “the fox was a certainty the minute you chose the bowl.”

Just as you suggested, dear Montana, we wandered through our second day, taking time to sit with you, hiking a little too far to see a waterfall (which my father promptly climbed, giving me a heart attack), and watching a chipmunk eat huckleberries for breakfast. We stopped to talk to a young family and their little boy who “took pictures too!” He and I talked about photography as he knew it from a 6 or 7-year-old’s eyes while he ran to catch up to me. At the end of the trail, he jumped in front of my spot on the bank and held out his hand, “for you!” he exclaimed. The little red rock thumped into my palm and we smiled at each other while his mother and I giggled. He produced the little green one that was his to complete the set.

By chance, we happened upon a beautiful teal and pink waterfall where some adventurous hikers had decided to go swimming. There was a clear, shockingly peacock-blue pool where families waded and jumped from a ledge just above. We hopped into bathing suits and climbed over the rocks to join in. Butterflies flitted around us, alighting on shoulders and toes. In a surprising splash of spontaneity, I slipped into the freezing water, grateful that my feet could touch the bottom while my arms shivered and chest heaved from the unexpected and all-encompassing cold. We sat there for a long time, my father and I, with our feet in the icy water, watching brave divers leap from the small cliff, enjoying the butterflies and the pristine view of the mountains. I looked through my phone for a moment, laughing at a picture of me, glittering, waist-deep in one of your rivers, and I thought of how you, dear Montana, make such wonderful stories.

*with so much love,  
a visitor*

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IMAGE BY MEGAN CRAWFORD