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When I aged, my horizons stretched into the hills of northern Maryland, my home state. And although it took me years to land an honest trout in the glassy water of the creeks that flow from Camp David and the Catoctin Mountains, those streams taught me how to deal with tight spaces. To roll cast. To savor the challenge of pocketwater. One that I've not yet conquered.

By then I was nymphing and trying to match the hatch. I had Dad's old Perrine boxes and lanyards, a rusty hemostat, and some polarized glasses my Mom bought me for baseball. I had nowhere to organize my gear. I needed a vest. One day, after hinting at my parents for such, I came home from school to find my father's last Army shirt draped over the turquoise sewing machine in our laundry room.

For days my mother worked, modeling my vest after my father's. I'd hinted that I'd like one just like Dad's, and she'd taken notice. His was splayed out on the floor, providing her a visual blueprint for mine. It'd been over a decade since she'd made his vest, but without pattern or pencil, she tapped the pedal and fired the bobbin, coming up with an almost duplicate of the first vest.

With each snip of fabric or clip of thread, a tiny sliver of our family history fell gently onto the cold, concrete floor, only later to be swept away, discarded, making space for new memories. New family history.

I loaded it with ratty flies, as I was just learning to tie. I'd line them up on my sheep's wool patch or enchain them and drop them into my father's old cigar tubes. That was back when it was okay to give your son such things. I piled in my boxes, a tin of my father's military-issue sunscreen, and my shades. I'd compare my organization to my father's, making sure my boxes and cigar tubes, my hemostat and floatant were in the same series of pockets as his. Then, when I was done, I hung it in our laundry room, right next to Dad's.

The last day I went fishing in that vest, I was deep in Philadelphia's Wissahickon Creek. It's a putrid, sluggish flow that winds through the city.

I'd just finished my medical school board exams and was halfway to graduation. My classmate Deepak Deshmuk accompanied me. He'd never seen fly fishing in person, but he'd seen *A River Runs Through It*, so he was sure he'd love it.

He chirped encouraging comments as I cast into the broad pools that spill though Philadelphia's largest city park. "Nice job, Irwin!," he shouted, not knowing that shouting has no role in fly angling. "He's going to eat that really soon, don't you worry!"

The fish in Wissahickon were thin, pale, and unhealthily tubular. Choice of fly patterns mattered little.

I cast to fish after fish, coming up with a foul-hooked diaper at one point, tearing my waders on a rusty, discarded tricycle at another. As I flipped my Woolly Bugger into another stagnant pool, I heard a thrashing on the adjacent bank, and a man tumbled out of the bushes with his wrists slit.

I dashed to help, not knowing exactly what to do. Deshmuk ran to the patient as well, looking as medically naïve as myself. We hadn't learned any clinical skills yet—only the fundamental minutia that would guide us into our clinical rotations.

We grappled with the patient who eventually rolled into submission as we assessed his trauma. I used my socks as tourniquets, flagged down a car to call for help, and held the man as he rhythmically exsanguinated on my vest and on my hands. In the end he lived. And I later found out he was HIV negative.

The emergency room was packed that day. I was still in waders, terrified as I sweated into the seat of a cheap plastic lawn chair in a rundown waiting room. While I waited, I took a deep breath, balled up my crimson-stained fly vest, and threw it away.

Before its bloody end, the vest dripped with the waters of many great rivers. The Madison, The Snake, The Kicking Horse, and The Green. It spent a summer in my trunk in Montana and took its own trip to Topeka in lost luggage after absorbing the water of high alpine tarns in Colorado.

It endured more than one sopping of cheap beer in college but was later rinsed clean in the riffles of the Letort. And with each passing year, each cast, each pulse of my thick blood, the vest wore more thin. But it never wore out. Just like an entire generation's memories of a war that could have killed me. Before I was born.

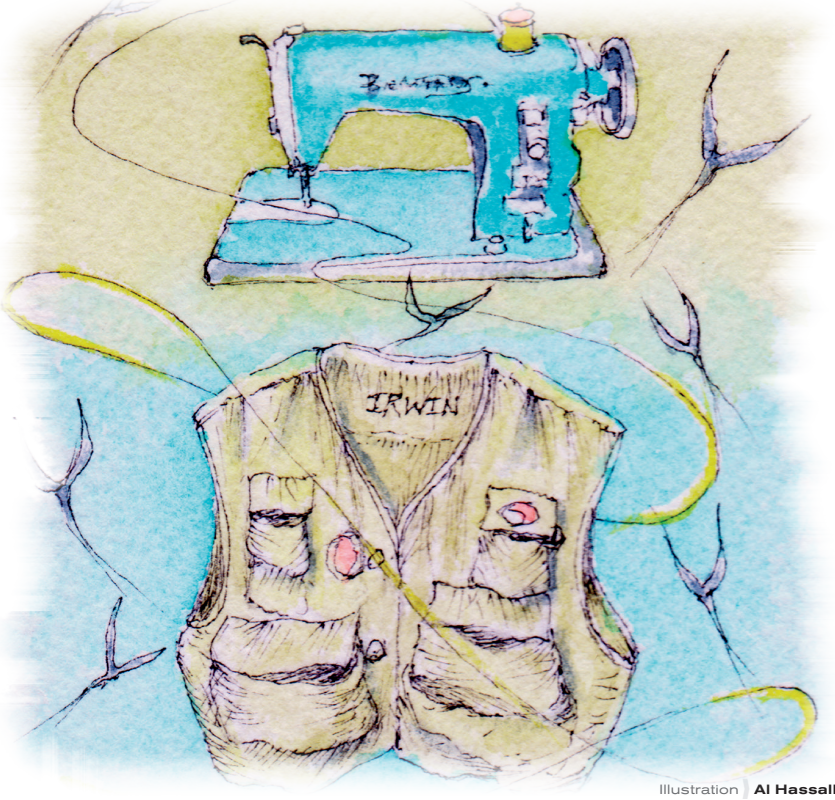

Illustration | **Al Hassall**

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My Alive

BRIAN IRWIN

MY FATHER'S FLY-FISHING vest came from South Carolina. That's where my father went to basic training after being drafted into the Army in 1969—a year and a day after he married the woman who would become my mother. He was issued two khaki uniforms which my mother would later fashion into fishing vests for both of us. His orders were for Vietnam, often a death sentence. He was to stop in Hawaii for a training course before his tour began. He aced his class and in turn was offered a change of orders. He could skip 'Nam and stay in Honolulu to teach the course himself. And so my father served his country well for two years on a tropical island.

Illustration | Al Hassall

The shirts escaped the war in Vietnam. They saw no la guerre blood, rather they endured days on the North Shore: Propping my father up as his superiors criticized his sloppy salute as the type of hand-visor one might execute if they were "looking for Indians." Screening the vapor of a good time at a Santana concert in Diamond Head Crater. It was an era in which pain was pervasive, good friends died frequently, and everyone hoped to escape the best way they could. If you were lucky, the war would end, and you'd still be alive. And my father was.

After the war, my folks settled in West Virginia, where my father learned to fly fish. He was studying for his doctorate in literature, and his angling mentors were his professors. I was a baby, and money was tight, so my mother took a needle and knife to dad's uniform shirt to craft a fly-fishing vest.

No part of fabric was spared. The sleeves were turned into pockets, rod butt holsters, a rainjacket pouch on the rear. In the end, it was a work of art. I watched him wear it on every excursion to our local waters, and also those afar. Each time my father packed his vest and left for a trip, I'd wave goodbye. As he pulled out of the driveway I scampered into his closet where a single crisply pressed khaki shirt hung. His last one.

My first forays with a fly rod were to my barber's pond. His surname was Barber also. Barber's pond was weed-choked and full of hydroponically fed bass, some of which grew to bizarrely large proportions. I could land a dozen a day, plus sunfish. It was the perfect schoolroom. The fish were unselective and I needed only a few buggers and poppers in my repertoire to ensure a successful day. There was no need for an entire vest full of flies.

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