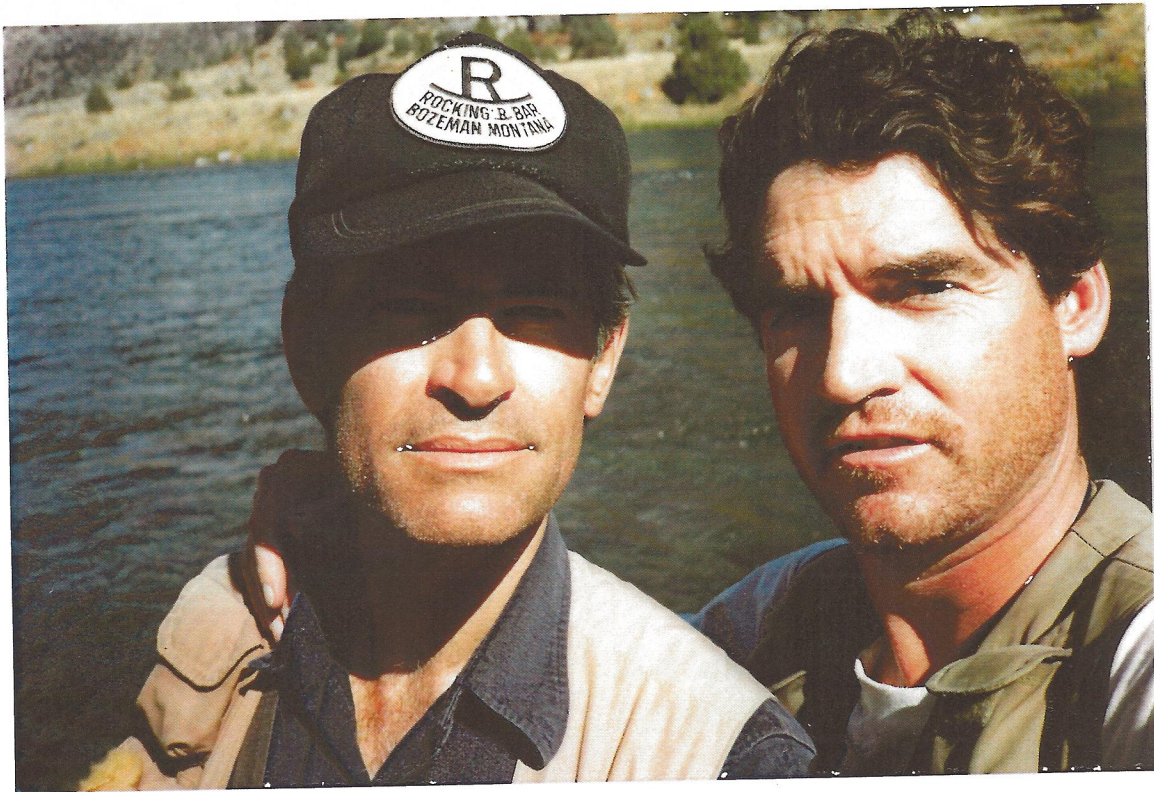


JIM & I

Twenty years of fishing & friendship

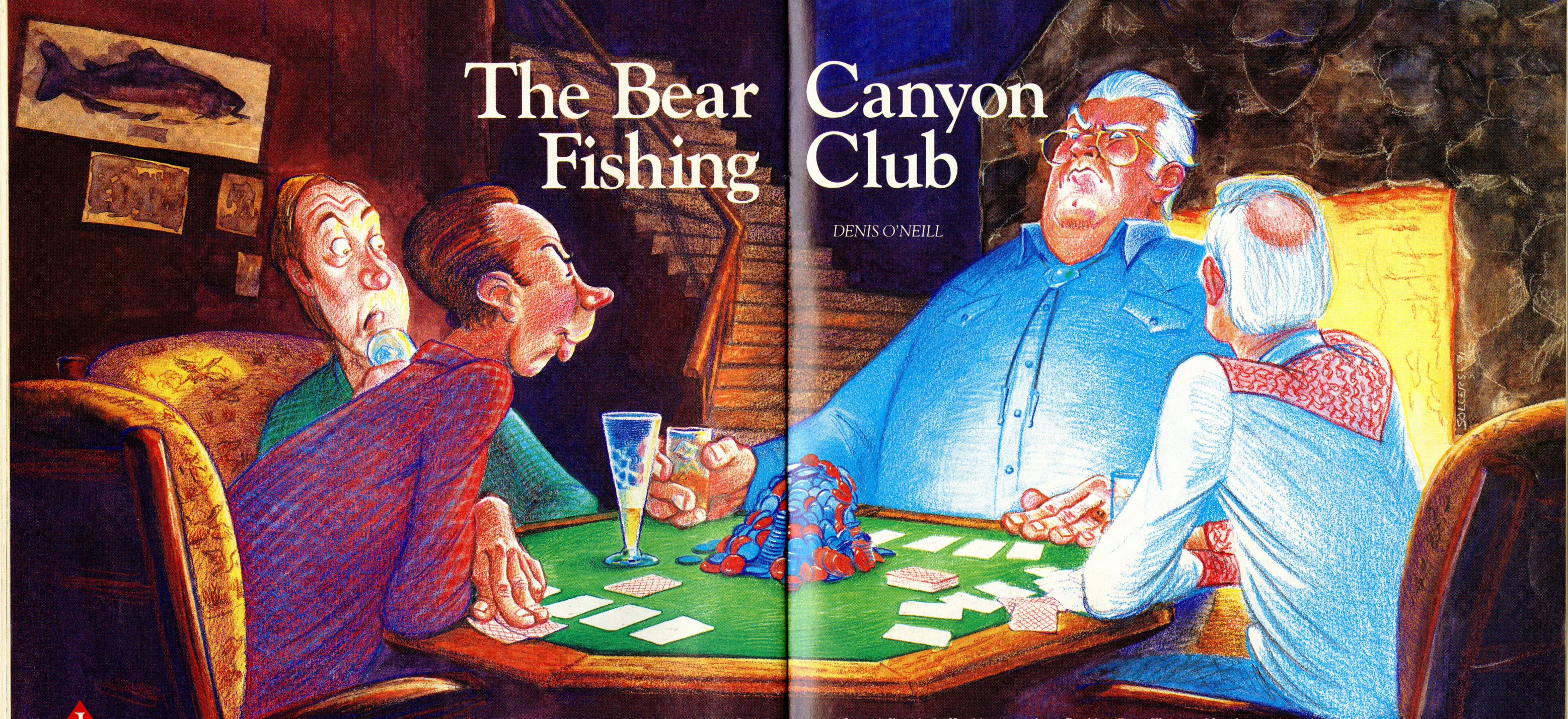


Short Stories

By
Denis O'Neill

The Bear Canyon Fishing Club

DENIS O'NEILL



JIM and I were never much for cards on any of our fishing trips. Trout were enough to bluff; even when we succeeded in landing one, we always had the feeling we were holding a pair of threes to their God-given full boat. I guess that's why I felt a little funny sitting at a poker table in the main lodge of the Bear Canyon Fishing Club, alternately eyeing the pair of nines in front of me and peering at the pairs of kings and aces Robin Lewis was basking behind on the far side of the chips and discards. The game was seven-card stud, with one card to go.

At breakfast the morning before, Robin Lewis had stuck out his tan, strong hand and bugled: "I'm Robin Lewis. I used to have a seat on the New York Stock Exchange."

I said I was happy to make his acquaintance. Jim glared at him like a whitefish. Robin Lewis, in his 50s, had a full head of silver hair. His eyes sparkled jauntily behind wire-rim glasses. His chin and cheeks, recently shaved, had the reddish glow brought on by a slap of skin bracer. His voice was Texas gravel.

Robin Lewis didn't eat breakfast as much as he presided over it. The miracle was he seemed to be able to eat and talk without swallowing even one syllable.

"I was just telling President Bush last week . . ."

Egg, over easy, speared, sliced and mushed against a wedge of sausage patty, propelled upward by a deft flick of the fork—as if he were striking a fish—into the jaws of life.

" . . . I'd be happy to teach him how to fly-fish." Fork retrieved and balanced on the edge of the plate. Rye toast ripped in half by practiced fingers, plunged into the yoke, brought to the choppers to be ground—once, twice—then swallowed.

"I mean if he's a fisherman, he might as well be a fly fisherman."

Coffee: slurp. Orange juice, other hand: siiip, like a trout on an emerger. Second piece of toast sent to mop up the remaining yellow puddle of yoke. One ruthless swipe leaving nothing but white porcelain.

"President Carter. Now he was a fly fisherman."

Momentary rest to let all the names free-fall to the white tablecloth. All the time I was trying to figure out how the food was disappearing in the middle of the conversation hatch. Jim stirred his oatmeal with a spoon—a gesture, I knew, indicating a strong desire to blindfold Robin Lewis with a strip of bacon, spin him around three times and aim him toward the giant bear trap stuck to the wall above the fireplace at the end of the dining room.

Instead, Jim asked, "How'd you get to know President Carter?" "Gave him money," Robin Lewis replied, starting to attack the second egg.

"Want to know me?" Jim offered, lifting a glob of oatmeal to his lips.

Robin Lewis laughed a laugh perfected in a lifetime of bon mots, cocktail wisdom and old-boy insults.

TWO nights later, Jim returned from the bar and put a glass of beer beside my diminished stack of chips. "This might help," he said, patting me on the shoulder.

Robin Lewis had a big stack of chips on his side of the table but, then again, Robin Lewis used to have a seat on the Stock Exchange.

"Just like the old days when I had a seat on the New York Stock Exchange," he said cheerfully.

Jim gave me the kind of look he serves when he fails to raise a fish from a hole I've plundered the day before. I knew it was for Robin, but I couldn't help but feel the frost. He gestured at my down cards. I peeled back the corners, revealing the four and the jack of hearts. What I had, with one card to go, was a pair of nines

and four hearts.

"I'll see your 50," Robin Lewis said, "and raise you 50."

Cents, I should add. I never had a seat on the New York Stock Exchange. He pushed two more chips into the pile. Our host, the only thing between me and a showdown with Robin Lewis, took another look at his cards and turned them over.

"Too rich for me," he sighed.

Robin Lewis eyed me like pork bellies.

"I'm in," I told him, dropping two chips on the middle mound. Our host was dealing.

"Pot's right. Last one. Down and dirty."

He dealt Robin Lewis and me a final card, placed the deck neatly on the table and picked up his glass of bourbon. He rattled the ice once, looked at the former member of the New York Stock Exchange, then me, took a good gurgle and waited for something to happen in a room of stuffed trout, sepia photographs, elk antlers and the scent of burning hardwood.

It did, but first I probably ought to tell you how Jim and I ended up at the Bear Canyon Fishing Club in the first place. The truth is, 10 years of stalking trout together had prepared us for everything from snow and ice to deerflies and skunks. Every-

thing, that is, except luxury, which was what the Bear Canyon Fishing Club offered in spades.

Jim and I were bunked together in one of the four bedrooms in a log cabin called "The Fort." Each room had its own bathroom. The main room had a massive stone fireplace, a pantry, card tables (they seemed to be required gear, like fire extinguishers), chairs and a couch. All the furniture was made of sturdy, lacquered tree parts; all the upholstery had ducks and dogs flapping and pointing, looking very much like my favorite flannel pajamas when I was nine.

Jim and I had opened our eyes with a start the first morning. The room was dark, but our beds were close together, so we could see each other. Jim's done his share of sleeping with Contras and Mujahideen and Tamils and guerrillas of every stripe, so I figured he was the better watchdog of the two. I had merely done my share of sleeping. Now we were eye to eye, in the dark, with only our heads visible outside our quilts because we'd opened the windows the night before to let the late-fall air pour in around us like chilled, clear syrup.

"There's someone out there," Jim whispered.

Sure enough, someone or something was rustling around in the main room.

"Bear?" I breathed.

I don't know why, but I always say "bear?" when it comes to the unknown—just as surely as most people say "No, you didn't," after being sprung awake by a phone caller who wonders in a guilty voice if he woke you.

Jim shook his head. I was tempted to trot out his favorite saying: "Doesn't matter what the question is, the answer is having a maid," but I sensed circumstances demanded a more responsible tone.

"Think we ought to look, or what?" I said boldly, feeling a sudden and deep attachment to my quilt.

Jim strained to hear. I could see his dedication to the quest in the way he clutched the covers tighter around his neck.

Finally Jim said, "I think he's gone."

WITH that put to bed, the next thing I heard, at 7:00, was the breakfast gong. When Jim and I stepped into the main room, there was a fire crackling a chipper good morning in the fireplace, filling the room with a warm, woody scent. We looked at each other and realized the bear had been anyone but Smokey; "having a maid" had in fact been the answer—the maid whose job it was to make sure we didn't confront a new day at the Bear Canyon Fishing Club in a cold room. One who also made our beds while we enjoyed a bout of eggs & B and Robin Lewis, not so easy over.

This was actually our second chance at fishing from the lap of luxury. Our host had invited us the year before but it hadn't worked out. When he piped up with another invitation, I told Jim it might be the last, the luster of the Bear Canyon Fishing Club being what it is. So we signed up, and arrived by rented car with our host's daughter and boyfriend, turning off the main highway across from a motel and general store that sold everything from bus tickets to beef jerky.

The club had claimed a prime stretch of a spring creek since 1901, when someone from San Francisco realized that the descendants of the two-foot-long trout he saw finning in the clear flow only yards from where the water jumped out of the earth had a good chance of being there nearly 90 years later. He also had the moola, which makes the syllable's difference between vision and visionary.

After breakfast, that first morning, our host took us to the hallowed ground a few miles upstream. The trout were there, big as bluefish, practically waddling amongst the watercress and redds. We looked down from a bridge plastered with No Fishing signs, thinking the unthinkable: that we might actually find something that big at the end of our fly lines.

Jim kind of held his head in his hands and sighed. We both knew it was the original bait-and-switch: See the big fish, catch the small one. We also knew it was good training for life in general. So we played the game and pretended we had a chance.

Our host arranged for us to float the Madison on day #2. A good plan given the weather, but what was good for the tans and leaf-

gazers—bluebird, 85-degree days—put the spook in the trout. That first day we'd pounded the spring creek with a grand haul of three face-slappers between us. A boat would at least get us over more water.

That was the theory, and of course we did cover more water. And our dry flies floated over more wary trout. And no matter how many drag-free tidbits we passed by overhanging banks, boulders and brush, the fish were off the bite. It was hard to complain too loudly, what with the cottonwoods shimmying their fall canopies of yellow leaves, and the Madison whooshing along in ever-changing shades of green. But when you've put in as many hours as Jim and I have, with a trout-per-hour ratio sounding more like a muskie figure, beautiful scenery takes you only so far. Frankly, we are owed, and any day we don't start collecting only means we'll have to run up bigger numbers down the road just to get even. So to avoid 100-fish days in our golden years it's important to do a bit of pillaging while the wrists are still supple.

We ate our lunches the club had packed for us, and tried to rally our spirits.

"Maybe we'd better go down," Jim said, sipping a thermos of beef bouillon and Worcestershire, meaning nymphs.

I dug into my breast of turkey club sandwich on sourdough. A cup of tuna on the side lay ahead, with chilled seedless grapes to follow. There was no getting away from the luxury, no matter how many miles you put between you and the Bear Canyon Fishing Club. We were lying on a grass bank at a bend in the river, feet chilling in the river, waders rolled down, sun hot on our foreheads.

The prospect of plunking nymphs and BBs was not irresistible.

"Maybe," I said, slow-chewing the turkey.

"Yeah, maybe not," Jim sighed, flinging his arms out and lying back in the grass.

"I'm not saying you're wrong," I said, after deciding one particular cloud looked like an anteater.

"I know," Jim said.

I asked him if he saw the anteater.

"Looks more like an alligator to me."

I looked at the white shape for a while and it began to stretch out.

"Now it does," I agreed.

There's something about downtime in the middle of fly-fishing that seems almost like a coma. Maybe it's a natural reaction to the long stretches of intense concentration. After staring at something so small for so long, the system demands an unguided wallow. A free period, with no one to tell you your color's good but your line needs work. A blank screen, to be filled by anything, everything or nothing. Clouds and girls fly by. Missed fish. Favorite meals. A kaleidoscope of shapes and faces and thoughts—with moving water for sound track. Finally someone moves and the waders crinkle. A gust of wind rustles the leaves. A word is spoken. Focus creeps in. Your body is stirred once again by the possibility of a trout.

THE bottom half of the day was no better, or worse, than the top. Our fish debt dropped deeper into the red. By the time we'd driven back, showered, gorged at the dinner gong and retreated to the card tables, Jim and I had heard more from Robin Lewis than we wanted to about the need for long leaders on bright days. We needed to beat him at cards. It was that simple and it was up to me.

Robin Lewis, with two visible pairs, had the bet. He looked at his final card, placed it next to the two hole cards and counted out a stack of chips.

"One dollar," he said, pushing the chips into the middle.

I was ready for him.

I launched my counterattack by ignoring my down card; didn't give it so much as a glance or a finger-tap. Instead I aimed a steely reply through Robin Lewis' wire-framed glasses, counted out a dollar's worth of chips and pushed them into the middle. Then I counted out a pile twice the size and slid it toward the pot.

"Buck, and back two."

Our host cleared his throat.

"Dollar limit on bumps," he told me, his (Continued on page 64)

*We played
the game
and pretended
we had
a chance.*

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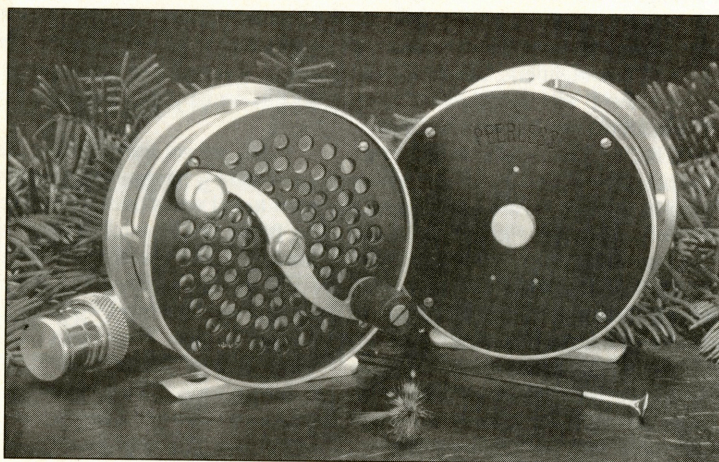


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BEAR CANYON

Continued from page 48

voice offering more apology than authority. I think he'd had enough of Robin Lewis too.

"Ah," I sighed, hoping to make Robin Lewis feel like a recent buyer in a bear market.

"Bear Canyon rules," I shrugged, in case he'd failed to make the connection on his own.

As I corralled one of my stacks, Jim chipped in with a nice line: "We could have used the extra money," he whispered just loud enough so Robin Lewis could hear.

Suddenly Robin Lewis' eyes held the worry of a whitefish. He kept peering at my nines, wondering what in the world was backing them up. He had reached the point where the trout are taking everything but what's at the end of your line, leaving you to stare at an open box of flies, desperately seeking the magic selection. Science given way to hunch. Never comforting on a trout stream, there was—with waders on—only pride to be lost. But Robin Lewis used to have a seat on the New York Stock Exchange.

"Dollar to you, Robin," I reminded him.

Robin Lewis was debating good money after bad. The brow wrinkled. The mind churned. The wheels raced to plug in the right numbers and print the right response. Robin Lewis was staring at a trout that didn't know Latin. That wouldn't take the fly it was supposed to be taking. For a man of decision, his very silence was an embarrassment. Then came the order to sell.

"All yours," he said unhappily, laying his cards down.

Jim helped me rake in the chips—making sure to clink them as much as possible while Robin Lewis squinted at my down card.

Discipline finally gave way to disgrace.

"Did you have the flush?" Robin Lewis asked, nursing the words from his mouth.

I turned over a corner of the down card, then swept it into the rest of the discards.

"Hard to say," I said to Robin Lewis.

JIM and I stayed and fished an extra day. Our host's daughter and her boyfriend left with the rented car so we had to walk to the highway and general store with our gear and flag down the bus that rumbled by daily.

Jim did better than Robin Lewis. He at least waited until we'd claimed seats before asking me if I'd picked up the flush on the final card. I almost told him, being as pleased as I was with the results. It was a heart all right, but when you've fished as much as I have with a regular partner, there's a competitiveness that sweetens the camaraderie as sure as sugar sweetens coffee. To give it away could only remove inches from future uncorroborated trout measurements.

Jim said he'd get it out of me sooner or later and he probably will. For the moment, as we chugged south, rod cases rattling in the rack overhead, he was happy enough to savor the thought that we were probably the only guests in the history of the Bear Canyon Fishing Club to leave the place by bus. □