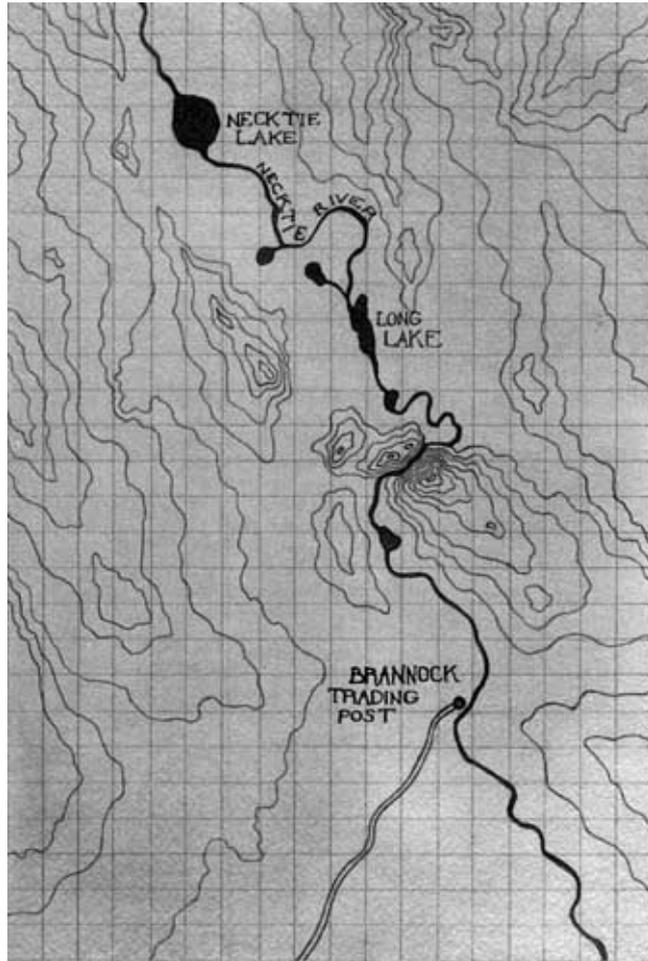


The River

Gary Paulsen

Delacorte Press

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THE RIVER

GARY PAULSEN



Delacorte Press

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To my daughter, Lynn, with love

Brian opened the door and stood back. There were three men, all in dark suits, standing on the front porch. They were large but not fat, well built, with bodies in decent shape. One of them was slightly thinner than the other two.

“Brian Robeson?”

Brian nodded. “Yes.”

The thin man smiled and stepped forward and held out his hand. “I’m Derek Holtzer. These other two are Bill Mannerly and Erik Ballard. Can we come in?”

Brian held the door open to let them come in. “Mother isn’t home right now. . . .”

“It’s you we want to see.” Derek stopped just in the entryway and the other two did the same. “Of course, we’ll wish to speak to your mother and father as well, but we came to see you. Didn’t you get a call about us?”

Brian shook his head. “I don’t think so. I mean, I know I didn’t, but I don’t think Mother did either. She would have said something.”

“How about your father?”

“He . . . doesn’t live here. My parents are divorced.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Derek truly looked embarrassed. “I didn’t know.”

“It happens.” Brian shrugged, but it was still new enough, just over a year and a half, to feel painful. He mentally pushed it away and had a sudden thought of his own foolishness. Three men he did not know were in the house. They did not look threatening, but you never knew.

“What can I do for you?”

“Well, if you don’t know anything about any of this, maybe we should wait for your mother to come home. We can come back.”

Brian nodded. “Whatever you want . . . but you could tell me what it’s about, if you wanted to.”

“Maybe I’d better check on you first. Are you the Brian Robeson who survived alone in the Canadian woods for two months?”

“Fifty-four days,” Brian said. “Not quite two months. Yes—that’s me.”

“Good.”

“Are you from the press?” For months after his return home, Brian had been followed by the press. Even after the television special—a camera crew went back with him to the lake and he showed them how he’d lived—they stayed after him. Newspapers, television, book publishers—they called him at home, followed him to school. It was hard to get away from them. One man even offered him money to put his face on a T-shirt, and a jeans company wanted to come out with a line of Brian Robeson Survival Jeans.

His mother had handled them all, with the help—through the mail—of his father, and he had some money in an account for college. Actually, enough to complete college. But it had finally slowed down and he didn’t miss it.

At first it had been exciting, but soon the thrill had worn off. He was famous, and that wasn’t too bad, but when they started following him with cameras and wanting to make movies of him and his life it got a little crazy.

He met a girl in school, Deborah McKenzie. They hit it off and went on a few dates, and pretty soon the press was bugging *her* as well and that was too much. He started going out the back door, wearing sunglasses, meeting Deborah in out-of-the-way places, and sliding down the hallways in school. He was only too glad when people stopped noticing him.

And here they were again. “I mean, are you with television or anything?”

Derek shook his head. “Nope—not even close. We’re with a government survival school.”

“Instructors?”

Derek shook his head. “Not exactly. Bill and Erik are instructors, but I’m a psychologist. We work with people who may need to survive in bad situations—you know, like downed pilots, astronauts, soldiers. How to live off the land and get out safely.”

“What do you want with me?”

Derek smiled. “You can probably guess. . . .”

Brian shook his head.

“Well, to make it short, we want you to do it again.”

Brian stared at him. “It’s a joke, right?”

Derek shook his head. “Not at all—but I think we should wait for your mother to come home and talk to her and your father. We’ll come back later.”

He turned to leave and the other two men, still silent, followed him to the door.

“Just a minute.” Brian stopped them. “Maybe I didn’t understand what you said—let me get it straight. You want me to go back and do it over again? Live in the woods with nothing but a hatchet?”

Derek nodded. “That’s it.”

“But that’s crazy. It was . . . rough. I mean, I almost died and it was just luck that I made it out.”

Derek shook his head. “No. Not luck. You had something more going for you besides luck.”

Brian had a mental picture of the porcupine coming into his shelter in the dark, throwing the hatchet and hitting the rock embedded in the wall and getting sparks. If the porcupine hadn’t come in and he hadn’t thrown the hatchet, and if the hatchet hadn’t hit the rock just right, there wouldn’t have been sparks and he wouldn’t have had a fire and he might not be standing here talking to this man now. “Most of it was luck. . . .”

“Let me explain what I mean.”

Brian waited.

“We teach what you did, or we try to. But the truth is, we have never done it and we don’t know anybody who has ever done it. Not for real.” He shrugged, his shoulders moving under the jacket. “Oh, we do silly little tests, you know, where we go out and pretend to survive. But nobody in our field has ever *had* to do it—where everything is on the line.” He looked directly at Brian. “Like you.”

The one named Bill Mannerly stepped forward. “We want you to teach us. Not from a book, not from pamphlets or training films, but really *teach* us what it’s like. So we can teach others more accurately.”

Brian smiled. He couldn’t help it. “You mean take a class out and show them what I

did?”

Derek held up his hands and shook his head. “No. Not like that. Nothing phony. We haven’t worked it all out yet, but we thought one of us would go with you and stay out there with you, live the way you live, watch you—learn. *Learn*. Take notebooks and make notes, write everything down. We really want to know how you did it—all the parts of it.”

Brian believed him. His voice was soft and sincere and his eyes were honest, but still Brian shook his head. “It wasn’t like you think. It wasn’t a camping trip. I lost weight, but more than that, I didn’t come back the same.” And, he thought, I’m still not the same; I’ll never be the same. He could not walk through a park without watching the trees for game, could not *not* hear things. Sometimes he wanted not to see, not to hear everything around him—noise, colors, movement. But he couldn’t blank them out. He saw, heard, smelled everything.

“That’s what we want to know. Those things.” Derek smiled. “Look, don’t say no yet. Let us come back and talk to your mother, explain it all, and then you can make a decision. All right?”

Brian nodded slowly. “All right. Just to talk, right?”

“Just to talk.”

The three men left, and Brian looked at the digital clock on the table in the entryway. It would be an hour before his mother got home. He had some studying to do—it was the end of May and there were finals—but he decided to cook dinner.

He loved to cook.

It was one of the things that had changed about him from the time when he was in the woods. He thought of it as the Time.

Just that. The Time. When he was speaking quietly to Deborah about it—he’d tried to tell her of it, all of it, including the moments when he tried to end himself—when he spoke to her about it, he always started it with just those words:

The Time.

A year had passed, and in the world around him not much had changed. His mother still saw the man, though not as much, and Brian thought it might be passing, what they had between them. The divorce was still final—and would probably remain so. He’d gone to visit his father after the Time and found that he’d fallen in love with another woman and was going to marry her.

Things ground on, a day at a time.

But Brian had changed, completely.

And one of the things that had happened was that now he loved to cook. There was something about the food, preparing the food, looking at the food—there was so *much* of it compared to what he'd had in the woods. He enjoyed taking the food out, working with it and cooking it and serving it and eating it. Chewing each bite, *knowing* the food, watching other people eat. Sometimes he would just sit and watch his mother eat what he had cooked, and once it bothered her so much that she looked up at him, a piece of sauteed beef on a fork halfway to her mouth.

“What is it?”

“I'm just watching you eat,” he'd said to her. “It's something—eating. Just to see somebody eat. It's really something.”

“Are you . . . all right?” she'd asked. Of course, he wasn't—or maybe he was and had never been all right before in his life. But he'd smiled and nodded.

“Sure, fine . . .”

But it was more that he couldn't tell her what was wrong, or even if anything was wrong—he couldn't really talk to anybody about it because nobody understood what he meant.

His father and mother had insisted that he go to a counselor when he first came back, and more to humor them than anything else he went, but it didn't help. The counselor thought he was somehow mentally injured, somehow harmed, and the truth was almost the exact opposite. He tried to tell the counselor that he was more than he had been, not less—not just older, not just fifteen when before he had been fourteen, but more. Much more. But the counselor didn't understand, couldn't understand, because he hadn't been with Brian in the woods during the time. The Time.

“I discovered fire,” Brian told the counselor.

“Well, sure, but you're back now—”

Brian had stopped him. “No. You don't understand. I truly *discovered* fire—the way some man or woman did it thousands and thousands of years ago. I discovered fire where it had been hidden in the rock for all of time and it was there for me. It doesn't matter that we have matches or lighters or that fire is easy to make here in the other part of the world. I truly and honestly discovered fire. It was a great thing, a very great thing. . . .”

The counselor had sat behind his desk and smiled and nodded and tried to know what Brian was speaking about, but it wasn't there—he couldn't.

And that became the way of it for Brian. In all his dealings with the new world around him since he was reborn in the woods—as he thought of it—he had to be evasive, hold back. If he told the truth, nobody believed him; and if he was silent—which he found

himself becoming more and more—they thought he was sick.

He couldn't win.

He took two pork chops out of the freezer and thawed them in the microwave. Then he found the cookbook and flipped to the page for breaded pork chops.

When he first returned home, he found himself wanting to eat a great deal. He would buy a hamburger, eat it, drink a malt, then think immediately of buying another one, but that only lasted a brief time. His stomach had shrunk and the food made him feel heavy, wrong somehow, and he'd stopped overeating.

But he still took great pleasure in food, and he now prepared the pork chops slowly, enjoying himself as he worked.

He cut the fat off them, breaded them, preheated the oven, and put them in a glass pan. While they were baking he looked at the clock again—his mother was due in less than half an hour and she was never late—and put two potatoes on a plate to bake in the microwave. He would start them when she came home—they baked in a few minutes—and they could eat before the men came back.

“It was a wonderful meal,” his mother said, leaning back from the table and smiling, “as usual.”

Brian nodded. “Something I whipped up.”

They cleared the table. They had become strangely closer since his return. So much of the divorce, and the other man, had bothered him, but coming close to death in the woods had led him to understand some things about himself and other people. He realized that he was not always right, was, indeed, often not right, and at the same time he found that others were not always wrong.

He learned to accept things—his mother, the situation, his life, all of it—and with the acceptance, he found that he admired her.

She was trying to make a go of it alone, working in a real estate office selling lots, and it was rough.

“We have to talk,” he said, putting the dishes in the dishwasher. *To have dishes, he thought, just to have dishes and pots and pans and a stove to cook the food—it still marveled him.* “Some men are coming over to talk to you.”

“What men?”

He explained Derek and the other two, what they wanted.

“You mean what they *said* they wanted. They might be anybody. We should call the police.”

He shrugged. “If you want. I was a little worried at first, but they didn’t do anything and they seemed all right, so I told them to come back.”

She thought it over and finally nodded. “Let’s see if they come—we’ll play it the way it looks best.”

As if on cue the doorbell rang, and she went to the door with Brian following.

Derek stood alone on the front step. He backed away so they could see him well through the peephole in the door.

She opened the door.

“Hello. I’m Derek Holtzer—”

“My son told me about you. Weren’t there two others?”

“We thought one man might be less pushy. They stayed in the motel.”

“Please come in. We’ll have some coffee.”

Derek followed her in and they sat down at the dining room table and Derek explained to Brian’s mother what he wanted—all that he had told Brian.

“We would control the operation closely,” he said, “and take every precaution possible. Of course, we wouldn’t do anything without your permission, and Brian’s father’s as well,” Derek concluded.

His mother sipped coffee and put the cup down carefully. Her voice was even, as if talking about the weather. “I think it’s insane.”

Brian half agreed with her. In all the time since his return, he had had dozens of kids and not a few adults say how much they would have liked to do it—be marooned in the woods with nothing but a hatchet. But they always said it when they weren’t over a block and a half from a grocery store, usually in a room with lights and cushions on a couch and running water. None of them had ever said it while they were sitting in the dark with mosquitoes plugging their nostrils or night sounds so loud around them they couldn’t think.

To want to go back was insane.

And yet.

And yet . . .

Yet there was this small feeling, a tingle at the back of his neck as his hairs went up.

“I know it sounds strange, but Brian has had a unique experience,” Derek said. He set his cup down carefully on the saucer. “It could save lives if he would help us.”

“It’s still insane.” Brian’s mother shook her head. “I don’t think you have the slightest idea of what you’re asking. You must realize that for the time Brian was gone we thought he was dead. Dead. We were told by experts that he couldn’t possibly still be alive and then we got him back. Back from the dead. And now you’re asking me—his mother—to send him back out there?”

Derek took a breath, held it, let it out. “Don’t you see? That’s exactly *why* we must do it. Because he was thought to be dead and lived, because he did something nobody else could do and if he could share that with us, show us, take us through it with him—he could save others who are in the same place. It’s not just what he learned about survival—we know most of that. Or at least the survival instructors do. It’s his thinking, his psychological processes, how his mind worked for him—that’s what’s so important.”

“I have to do it.” God, Brian thought—was that *my* voice?

Both of them looked at Brian. Derek in surprise, his mother with a stunned look on her face.

“What?”

Brian leaned back. “I know, Mother. But he’s right. I . . . learned something there. About how to live—I mean how to *live*. And if it could help others, I have to do it.”

“There is money,” Derek said. “We can contract him and the government will pay well for his help.”

His mother was still staring at him, but he knew, Brian knew, that she understood. There was much between them since he came back, much understanding. She treated him much more as an adult and she understood. Still, she held back, and the worry was alive in her face. “Are you sure—absolutely certain?”

Brian sighed. “I have to—if it will help others.”

She nodded slowly, biting her lower lip. But she nodded.

“I’ll have to call his father,” she said. “He may say no.”

But Brian knew.

He was going.

It was strangely easy for him to get in the bush plane. Brian had thought at one time that he would never get in a small plane again, and when he went to visit his father after the Time it had been hard to enter the plane. But now he clambered in and took the seat in back with a relaxed attitude—it all felt the same and yet different somehow.

Derek got in the front and sat next to the pilot and turned to Brian.

“Are you uncomfortable flying?”

Brian shook his head. He looked out the window at his mother standing by the station wagon. They were at a different small airport, but it was the same station wagon with the phony brown wood sides. She waved when she saw him turn to look, and he waved and mouthed “good-bye” so she could see it.

The pilot started the engine and Brian jumped a little with the noise, but he settled back down at once.

He still could not quite believe that he was doing it, felt as if he were half in a dream. It had been two weeks since Derek first came to him, and in that time they had made detailed plans. After Brian had further convinced his mother and worked on his father over the phone, Derek had come back with maps and plans and they had included Brian’s mother in the whole process.

Derek had decided he should be the one to go—even though he had little or no survival knowledge—because he was a psychologist and that was the aspect they wished to learn about.

They picked a lake in the middle of the wilderness, perhaps a hundred miles east of the lake Brian had crashed into the first time. Brian’s mother thought of using the same lake, but Derek vetoed it because they wanted it all to be new to Brian. The lake was not named on the map, though it fed a river that went south and east until it disappeared off the map.

“We selected the lake carefully,” Derek said, circling it with a felt-tip pen while they sat in Brian’s dining room. “It has the same kind of terrain as the lake you crashed into, and roughly the same altitude and kind of forest.”

“How far is it from help?” Brian’s mother asked.

Derek smiled. “We’ll have a radio, and if any trouble develops we can have a plane

there in three or four hours. Please don't worry."

"But I do worry, that's just it."

She did worry, Brian thought, watching her as the plane taxied out to the runway. She did worry. Again he watched her get smaller and smaller and again he flinched with the noise of the engine throttling up and again he was amazed at how easy the plane slid into the air and flew.

And he was suddenly afraid.

He couldn't help it. His breath quickened and he looked up front at the pilot and thought, here it is again: one pilot and one engine and if either of them quit they were going down. If the pilot died, if he died and Derek couldn't fly, there would be nobody up front to control the plane. Brian would have to lunge over him and grab the wheel, try to get his feet to the rudder pedals. . . .

He shook his head. Easy now, easy and easy and easy. Breathe deeply, fight it. Memories of the crash came sweeping back into his mind. Mental pictures of the plane crashing down through the trees and into the water—the blue-green water, with the dead pilot next to him—suddenly filled his thoughts.

He pulled a long breath, held it, and fought the pictures away. After he'd returned home there had been dreams. Even after he had flown again, going to visit his father, there had been dreams. Not nightmares so much as reliving dreams of the crash and his time in the woods.

The Time.

But now it was different, all different. He looked at the pilot and saw that he was much younger than Jake had been—so young that he had a cassette recorder held with duct tape to the dashboard of the plane and was listening to rock music with a small set of headsets, his chin bobbing with the music. He flew loosely, slouched in the seat, his fingers lightly on the wheel, and something about him, the way he sat and moved with the music, relaxed Brian.

He eased back in the seat and looked out the window. Down and to the right he saw the amphibious float with the wheels on the side. They would land right on the lake, but the pilot could also take off from solid ground.

The floats didn't seem to slow the plane very much, as big as they were, and they skimmed over the trees until the pilot gained enough altitude to make them seem to slow down.

Derek was silent, looking out the side window, and Brian realized it was the first time the man had been silent for as long as he'd known and been with him. He had asked endless questions of Brian.

He'd read all the stories about Brian's "adventure" (as he put it), had all the news stories on tape, and seemed to have memorized everything that happened to Brian.

"When you ate the chokecherries," he would say, "how long did it take you to get sick?"

Or, "Did you notice any changes in the way you went to the bathroom?"

"Oh, come on," Brian had said.

"No, really. All these things are important. They could save lives." And his face would get serious. "This is really, really important."

Brian realized then that Derek truly cared. Until that moment, sitting in the dining room at his house with maps all over the table—until that moment Brian wasn't sure he was still going. He had said he would, thought he would, but he wasn't totally certain until he'd looked at Derek's face and realized that Derek really wanted to help people by learning what Brian knew.

So, here he was, in a bush plane heading north. And it somehow seemed perfectly logical, perfectly all right. As if going back were the most normal thing in the world.

He looked out the window, down past the float on the right. They had been flying half an hour and they were already getting over forest. There were still some farms here and there, but less and less of them, even as he watched. When he looked ahead of the plane, through the whirling propeller, he saw the endless trees stretching away to the horizon.

With the fear gone, or controlled, something about the forest drew him; and that was a surprise as well.

His thinking had changed during the time he was at the lake. It had to, or he would have died. He had to revert, to become part of the woods, an animal. But when he came back, and had been back a time, he started to "recitify," as he thought of it. He became used to the city again. The first time he went to a mall he became ill, dizzy with all the movement and noise, and to make himself normal again he went back to the mall again and again until finally it didn't bother him.

And the woods slipped away. The dreams came less and less and he began not to think about them. He didn't forget them—he knew he would never forget them—but he didn't think about them as much; and when he did, there wasn't any fondness.

He remembered the rough parts.

The mosquitoes. Tearing at him, clouds of them, the awful, ripping, thick masses of the small monsters trying to bleed him dry.

"What was it like?" His mother had asked him one day when they were sitting in the

kitchen. “What was the main problem—the worst part of it?”

And he thought at first of mosquitoes, started to tell her about them and shook his head.

“Hunger.”

“Really?” She had seemed surprised. “I thought it would be the danger, or being alone, or the weather.”

“I don’t mean hunger like you’re thinking of it,” he had told her. “Not just when you miss a meal and feel like eating a little bit. Or even if you go a day without eating. I mean where you don’t think you’re ever going to eat again—don’t know if there will ever be more food. An end to food. Where you won’t eat and you won’t eat and then you still won’t eat and finally you *still* won’t eat and even when you die and are gone, even then there won’t be any food. *That* kind of hunger.”

The outburst had made his mother sit back and blink, but he meant it. The hunger was the worst, worse than the mosquitoes, worse than any of it.

Hunger.

He looked out the window again. Only forest below now, forest and lakes and the plane droning. The air was rough, rougher than he remembered from before, but he didn’t mind the jolting.

They had left the runway in northern New York in the early morning, but climbing had brought them into the bright sun and it warmed the inside of the plane until it was hot.

Brian was wearing a T-shirt and a baseball cap with a picture of a fish on the front. He pulled the brim down and turned away from the sun. As he turned he saw the equipment in back of the seats.

There was enough for a small army, and it bothered him and he couldn’t pin it down—how or why it bothered him.

It just felt wrong.

Derek had gone over the list with his mother. Food for weeks, tent, a rubber boat, first-aid kit and mosquito repellent, fishing gear, a gun—a gun. Just what we need.

“Just for emergencies,” Derek had explained. “In case we need them—we have everything we need.”

And there it was, he thought. They had everything they needed and it ruined it all, made the whole trip worthless. It wouldn’t be the same.

He tapped Derek on the shoulder and the big man turned in his seat.

“Too much,” Brian yelled over the noise of the engine.

“What?”

“Too much stuff.” Brian pointed over his shoulder at the mound of gear.

But Derek misunderstood and nodded and smiled. “Great, isn’t it? We have everything but the kitchen sink.”

Brian shrugged. “Yeah. Great.”

But it ate at him. What they were going to do proved nothing. They were playing a game and it struck him that Derek did that—his whole life was that. He knew it was unfair to think of the man that way—he didn’t, after all, know him very well. But he acted that way. Like it was all a game and Derek was approaching this whole business that way. Just a game. Football. Soccer.

If it didn’t work right, they could call time out and eat a good meal and go swimming and sail off into the sunset in the rubber boat shooting things with the gun and talking to people on the radio.

Survival.

Right.

The plane seemed to hang in the sky over the woods, the trees green like a carpet out and out, and Brian sat there and watched them without seeing them and thought that it was wrong.

There was too much.

It was all wrong.