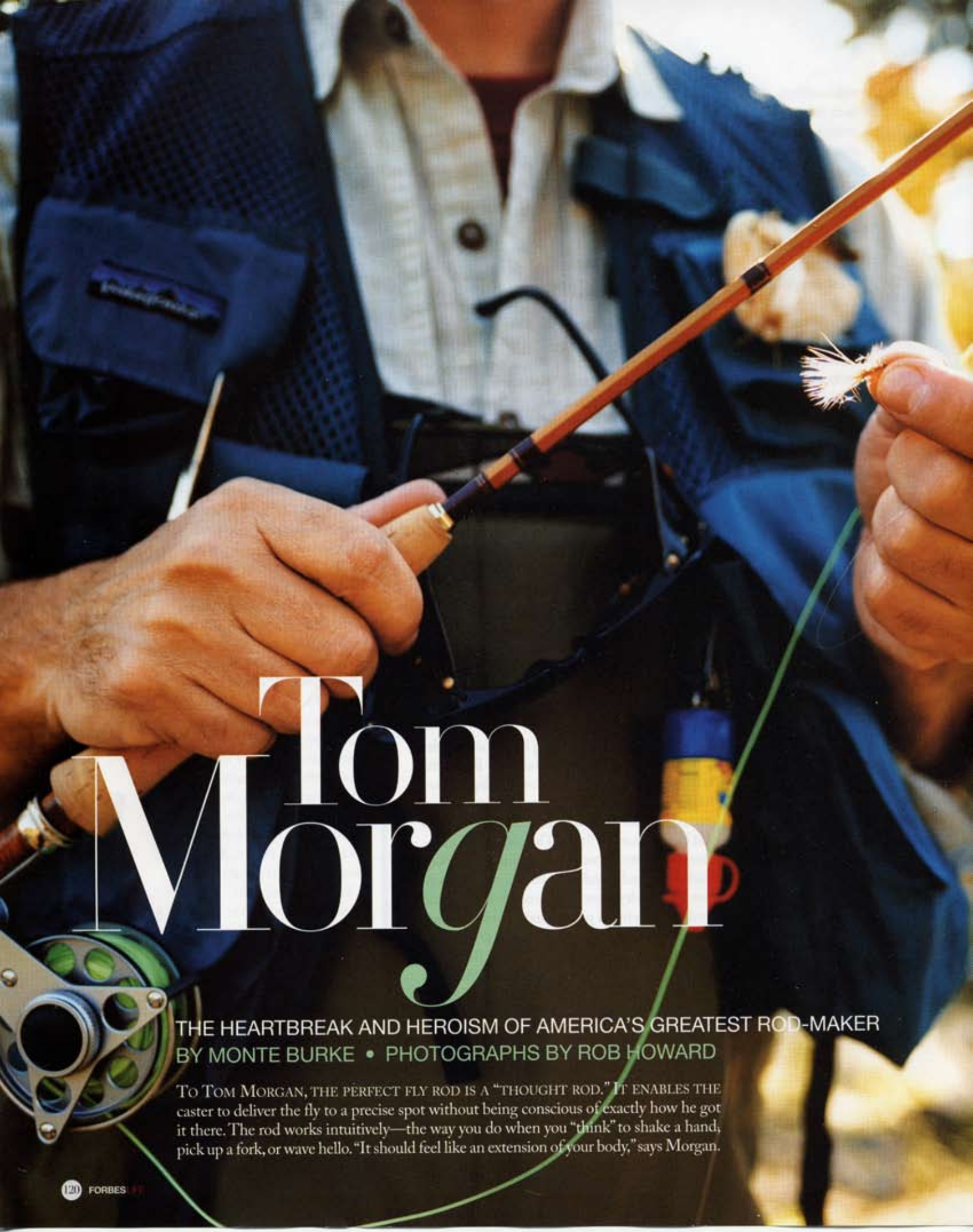


Tom Morgan

THE HEARTBREAK AND HEROISM OF AMERICA'S GREATEST ROD-MAKER

BY MONTE BURKE • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB HOWARD

To Tom Morgan, the perfect fly rod is a "thought rod." It enables the caster to deliver the fly to a precise spot without being conscious of exactly how he got it there. The rod works intuitively—the way you do when you "think" to shake a hand, pick up a fork, or wave hello. "It should feel like an extension of your body," says Morgan.

Opposite: Rods so carefully balanced they seem to work intuitively—a Tom Morgan Rodsmiths seven-foot, four-weight bamboo fly rod. Left: Stricken with multiple sclerosis, fly-fishing legend Tom Morgan relies on wife Gerri Carlson for the painstaking hand labor that goes into his rods.

In his case, the "thought rod" metaphor takes on another meaning. Considered by many to be the world's finest living fly-rod-maker—a craft that relies almost solely on feel—the 67-year-old Morgan has not been able to cast, or even hold, one of his creations for more than a decade.

Morgan has multiple sclerosis, a still mystifying degenerative disease that occurs when a mix-up in nerve signal transmissions causes the immune system to attack the insulating sheaths around the nerves. Morgan has a particularly debilitating form of MS and has extremely limited movement below his neck. He is confined to his bed and to a high-tech wheelchair with a headrest, a reclining contraption that resembles a dental examination chair. Morgan's thought rods are a pure extension of his mind.

On a sun-sweet day last summer, I visited Morgan at his home outside of Bozeman in southwestern Montana, an area veined with some of the best trout rivers in the world. His house doubles as the headquarters of his company, Tom Morgan Rodsmiths. To the west glittered the snowcapped peaks of the Tobacco Root Mountains; to the south lay the grazing lands occupied by Ted Turner's bison herd.

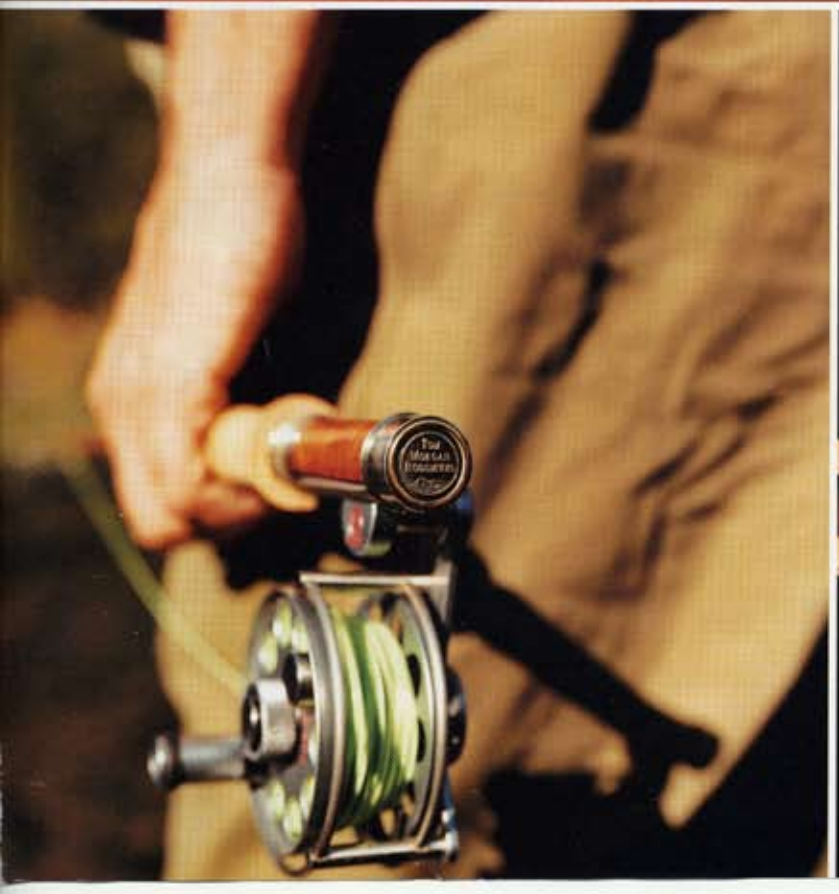
When I arrived, I met a Morgan client and his wife from Oregon. He already owned four Morgan rods and was here to test out a fifth. He had a wide-eyed, happy look on his face, like King Arthur on a long-deferred visit to Excalibur's forge. Morgan gets visitors all year round—pilgrims, really—from as far away as Japan, who come by to cast a rod and to put their names on the two-year waiting list to buy one.

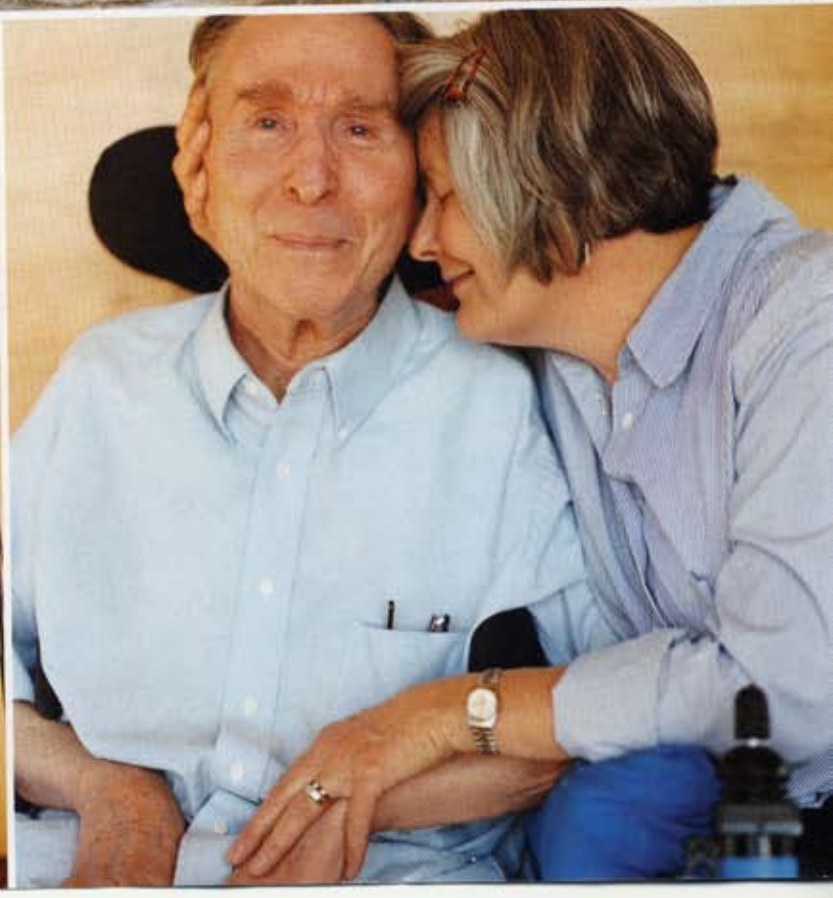
After the couple left, I walked into the dining area of the house, where Morgan sat in his chair, reclining. His face is weathered from years spent in the Montana sun. He wears big, wide-lensed glasses fitted with two little mirrored squares, known as prism glasses, which allow him to be semirecumbent and still see the person he is talking to. They reflect his eyes, little pools of blue.

The sorcerer's apprentice (top left): Carlson applying a coating in the Morgan workshop. Bottom left: A three-weight bamboo rod, rod tubes with Morgan's trademark medallions, and a rack of exotic-wood reel seats. Opposite, clockwise from top: Carlson wraps a rod while Morgan looks on through special glasses that allow him to observe while semirecumbent; rod builder Bill Blackburn splits bamboo; awaiting a morning hatch on the Madison River

By his side was Gerri Carlson, his wife and the co-owner of the company. She periodically put a straw to his lips so he could sip from a can of Mountain Dew. Carlson, 58, bright-eyed and cheerful, is the bridge between Morgan's mind and the making of the rods.

Morgan was born in Hollywood, California. In 1946, when his brother's asthma necessitated a move, his parents chose the ranching town of Ennis, Montana, where they opened the El Western, a fishing resort. By the age of 15, Morgan was a guide, and he spent 14 years wading beside his clients, observing how their equipment either helped or hindered them. Sometime around 1969, he made his first fly rod.





In 1973, Morgan learned that San Francisco's R.L. Winston Company, one of the hallowed brands in fly rod manufacture, was for sale. Partnering with businessman Sid Eliason, Morgan rustled up the $110,000 necessary to buy the company and moved it to Twin Bridges, Montana.

Morgan made his first mark as a bamboo rod-maker at Winston, creating rods in the tradition of the 19th-century American master H. L. Leonard. In the fly-fishing world, bamboo rods are an enduring foundation, and Morgan mastered this old art.

At first, he made primarily bamboo and fiberglass rods. Then, in the early 1970s, graphite hit the scene. By making rods lighter and stiffer, the new material yielded a faster "action"—the bend and speed generated by the rod. Graphite also changed the nature of the business. Every few years a new generation of graphite was introduced in pursuit of what had become the fly-fishing grail: allowing flies to be cast farther and farther. By doing this, rod-makers shrewdly appealed to the way most fishermen road-test a rod: in a fly shop parking lot, where, inevitably, they try to cast as far as they can.

Morgan's friend Steve Hamner fishes with his Morgan rod on the Gallatin River (opposite, top); a world-class rod rack at the Morgan workshop (opposite, bottom left); Morgan and his "life-saver," Carlson (opposite, bottom right). Bill Blackburn scans the lower Madison River for rising trout (right).

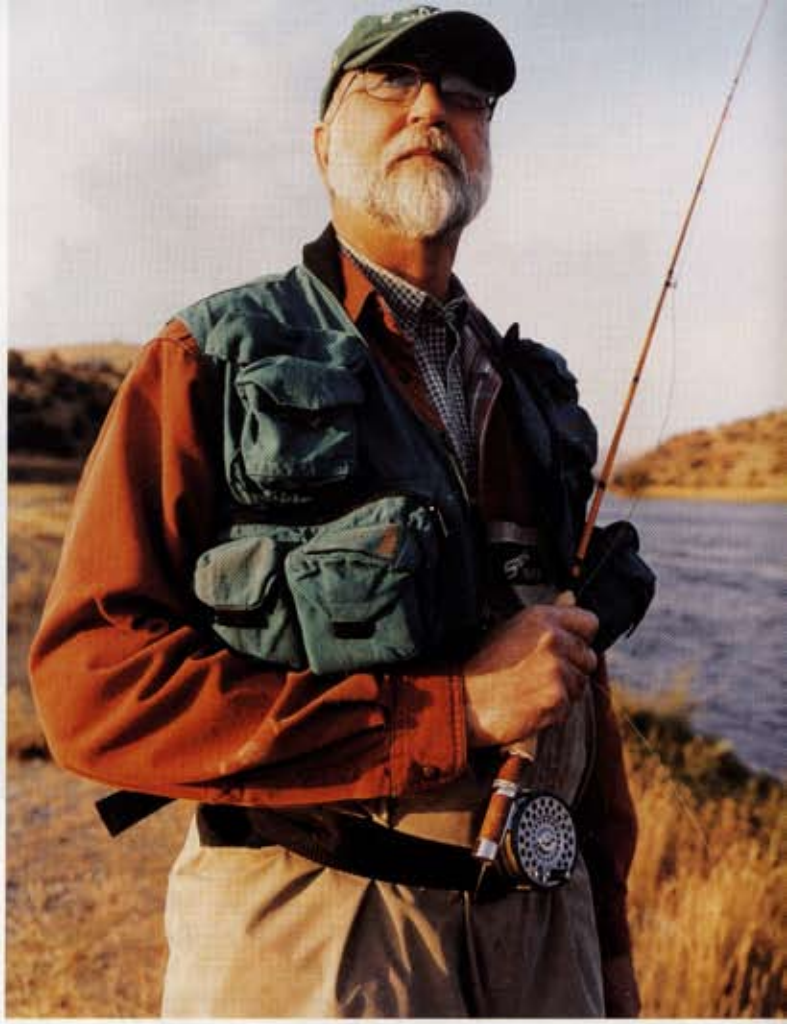
But something was lost along the way—finesse. For most types of fly-fishing (especially trout fishing), casting a fly into the next county does not make you a better angler. Most fly-fishing takes place 20 to 50 feet from the caster. Accuracy is the key.

Morgan has dedicated his rod-building life to rods that find that sweet spot. He embraced graphite yet created a rod with a bamboolike, traditional feel. In the mid-1980s, he developed an eight-foot, four-weight rod for Winston—known as the Tom Morgan Favorite—that is "the Coca-Cola of fly rods, what all other rods are measured against," says Jerry Kustich, a fellow rod-maker. (Winston still sells it. Imagine Rossignol still selling skis from the 1980s.)

Morgan never really understood the fetish with distance casting, yet it was apparently what fly-fishermen wanted. The trend was among the reasons—along with financial incentives—that led him to sell Winston in 1991. "I felt I could make better rods on my own," he says.

He signed a seven-year noncompete clause with Winston and planned to use the years to refresh his mind and work on new designs. But around this time, he felt the first signs that something was amiss with his body. He was in Washington, D.C., touring the monuments in what should have been, literally, a walk in the park for an outdoorsman like Morgan. But after a quarter of a mile, he had to sit down to rest his legs.

Morgan had episodes like this for the next few months. He would suddenly stumble in a small stream he had fished all his life, and he lost his balance when walking, "like a man who was dizzy or had had too much to drink," says Glenn Brackett, a former partner at Winston. Finally, in 1992, a neurologist in Great Falls diagnosed him with MS.



For a few years, he had what's known as "relapsing-remitting" multiple sclerosis. "There were long stretches of time when I felt like nothing was wrong with me," Morgan says. It was during this time that he met Gerri Carlson, a former English teacher who had just returned to Montana after a stint in the Peace Corps. At the urging of a friend, she went out with Morgan on a blind date. "I knew nothing of his fame in the fly-fishing world," she says.

In 1995 Morgan suffered a five-month period of near total collapse. He lost the ability to walk, then the movement in his arms. Facing a raft of medical bills and uncertainty about the future, Morgan petitioned David Ondaatje, the owner of Winston, to release him from the noncompete clause. Ondaatje gave his assent. That allowed Morgan to start Tom Morgan Rodsmiths in 1996. At that point, Morgan was unable to cast a rod from his wheelchair and needed 24-hour care. "We didn't plan it like this," says Carlson. "It just turned out this way." They were married in 1996.

One can't help but listen for a hint of wistfulness in her voice, the leaky crack in a dam holding back a reservoir of regret or resentment. I didn't hear it. Neither have others. "I was devastated when I heard how bad things had gotten for Tom and

Morgan and Carlson at home outside Bozeman, Montana. "I was devastated" for Tom and Gerri, says a friend, when he learned of Tom Morgan's disease, "but they never were."

Gerri," says Brackett. "But they never were."

Then came the hard part. In order to make the company work, Morgan had to somehow transmit all his knowledge to Carlson. She was an accomplished quilter, so she had the required nimble fingers. And growing up, she had helped her father, who was a logger, so she was comfortable with heavy tools. But she knew nothing about fly rods or handling graphite blanks.

It is the blanks, the graphite tubes, that are the foundation of a Morgan's exquisite feel—that weightless sensation one experiences with, say, a perfectly struck three-iron. Morgan had his recipe for the blanks, which were manufactured under a veil of secrecy at G. Loomis, a Washington State fly rod company owned by friends, stored on his voice-activated computer. (Mounted on a swinging arm over his hospital bed, the computer is Morgan's gateway to the world: He reads books and trades stocks with it, and estimates that he's sent 19,000 e-mails in the last decade.) He had fiddled for years with the taper of the blanks to get the bend that would load best with 20 to 50 feet of line. Morgan's blanks, when made into rods, actually store energy in the bend, so in a forward cast, the rod, not the wrist, does most of the work.

Morgan could still handle quality control, running his experienced eye over the blanks when they came in. (Half don't meet his demanding standards in flex or aesthetics.) But somehow he had to impart to Carlson the other crucial aspects of fly-rod-making: the wrapping of the guides, the application of the finish, and the turning of the cork handles. Early on, Morgan tried to explain how to make a jig for drilling cork. It took her all day to do a task that would have taken Morgan an hour or so to complete, leaving her exhausted and frustrated. "I would be lying in bed at 5:30, just wiped out from the day in the shop. And I'd still have to make dinner," she says.

One of the problems was that Morgan tried to micromanage the process, detailing it step-by-step, envisioning Carlson as merely the hands of the operation. "But I needed to be more than that. I needed to get into the creative process," she says. After a day in which they both ended up in tears, Morgan changed his methods, focusing on helping her understand the final product and letting her develop her own methods of getting there. He would describe a step as many times as needed for her to "get it," then back off. It turned out that nimble fingers and comfort with tools aside, the patience that Carlson had acquired as an English teacher was her best preparation for the task—astonishingly, she gained proficiency in only a few months.

When Morgan's fishing buddies came by to test the new rods, they discovered something remarkable: "Tom's Winston rods were some of the best ever made," says George Anderson, owner of the Yellowstone Angler, in Livingston, Montana. "But these were better."

Morgan and Carlson make 35 to 40 graphite rods a year, in two to six weights, costing up to $1,295. Morgan recently added a line of bamboo rods that are as fine as any on the market. They sell 20 a year for $3,850 a pop. I own one of Morgan's Winston rods and count it among my most prized possessions. But casting his latest models made me feel like that guy from Oregon. The seven-foot, four-weight bamboo is the perfect marriage of ancient form and modern function. The eight-and-a-half-foot, five-weight graphite model has a sweet and smooth action, progressing without a knock or hitch from the strong butt to the soft and supple tip. The sensitive tip allows for accuracy in closer casts; the stiff butt means you can crank out a long one when needed. The feel of a Morgan rod—which is personal and hard to describe, a bit like love—lulls the user, when on the stream, into what novelist Vance Bourjaily once called "the trance of instinct."

The unparalleled beauty of his rods is easier to put into words. They have a rich garnet varnish and reel seats made from exotic woods, like beautifully burled amboyna. The looping cursive script on the butt and the octagonal rod tube add to the delight. Putting a Tom Morgan rod away after a day on the river is like letting your eyes linger over your Lamborghini as it cools down in the garage.

Morgan, with the considerable help of Carlson, has accomplished something similar to Beethoven, who, late in his life, went completely deaf, losing what he called "my most prized possession," only to compose arguably his finest works. Morgan is a composer too, creating something meant for others to play. That, according to Carlson, has saved his life. ■

Tom Morgan Rodsmiths, 406-282-7110, www.troutrods.com.