

## One

WHAT KIND OF MAN wants to be alone on his birthday? Wants to be lonely on that day. Wants to be homesick. Wants to go without wishes for a good one, jokes about getting up there, cracks about being over the hill. Wants to avoid presents, cards, cakes, candles. Wants to go someplace where no one knows him or cares about him or even notices him, hopes to find in this solitude a blinding flash of insight into his existential condition, a serenity that will see him safely through the coming year, a solace he can draw upon like an unlimited savings account, a wisdom that will make him the envy of all his friends. Wants, at the very minimum, to catch a trophy brown trout of such size, strength, and vibrancy that it temporarily reconciles him to life, the late middle part of it anyway, the upcoming installment in a trial by existence that wasn't getting any easier in this his fifty-sixth year.

There are plenty who *have* to be alone on their birthday; choice doesn't enter into it. In making my resolution I thought a lot about those poor souls who would give anything to have the family I have, and it made me hesitate. You often get what you wish for, especially on birthdays, and asking for solitude tempts a mordant

power that is ever ready to oblige. I had been alone on my thirtieth birthday and not because I was indulging a whim. Alone, as in depressed, suicidal, bewildered, suffering the illusion that in a world of the interconnected I was the only one who had failed to catch on. I can remember that feeling all too clearly—what real solitude is like, how easily it can ensnare a person, how difficult it can be to break free.

So I wasn't going to brag about my intention, far better just to slink away before anyone even noticed I was gone. To my family I tried explaining as best I could my more comprehensible motives. I'd had a difficult professional year in which luck seemed to have turned against me, and I needed to do something dramatic to change the run of play. I wanted (reason number two) to commemorate a birthday I saw as a landmark, the real big 5-5, not the phony big 5-0 that I had passed in a breeze. I wanted to get out from under things for a few weeks—the weight of routine, the burden of responsibilities, the settled groove a life sinks into. I needed to see things from the side, edge-on, from an entirely new perspective I couldn't manage at home. I wanted to test my eyes on a different landscape, sharpen my vision by having to rely on my seeing alone.

I wanted to accomplish all those things, take three weeks like Thoreau had taken his twenty-six months (in the inflated press of modern times, three weeks alone now is roughly commensurate to one year alone in 1845). But since these motives are difficult to explain, I usually announced another one, that was easier for people to understand: "The fishing is supposed to be great in Yellowstone in the fall. Spawning browns. I've always wanted to give it a try."

This is the nice thing about having an avocation you pursue

passionately—it becomes your alibi for everything. For most people, trout fishing is a much handier motive than philosophy. “You’re going fishing? I envy you.” That’s the kind of response I was, uh, angling for, and for the most part that’s what I got.

My daughter, Erin, age seventeen, was much shrewder; her comment cut right to the heart of the matter, and I didn’t have a snappy comeback. “Alone? On your birthday? You’ll be homesick, you’ll be home in two days.”

She was probably right—but what I couldn’t explain to her was that I needed to remind myself how good my life was, how far I had come since that thirtieth birthday alone. And even this was minor compared to my prime motive. My prime reason for wanting to be alone in Yellowstone National Park on my fifty-fifth birthday was to discover why I needed so badly to be alone in Yellowstone National Park on my fifty-fifth birthday.

Yellowstone, after all, was not the obvious choice. Anyone wanting to commemorate a big birthday might prefer going someplace exotic, backpacking on Baffin Island, say, or fly-fishing for those monster sea-run browns in Tierra del Fuego. I thought about this, but then decided (prodded by my bank account) that such a place would be *too* exotic—that there I would have no frame of reference within which I could begin to puzzle things out. This was going to be my year of paying attention, my year of slowing down—and tundra, exotica, weirdness, seemed the wrong way to start.

But Yellowstone can be a weird place, too, with its signature blend of the beautiful and the bizarre. I’d been there several times before. My first visit was in 1988—timed so that I arrived at the peak of the great fires, when two-thirds of the park was aflame. I’ve wondered over the years if this wasn’t one of the reasons I fell in love with it so rapidly—that when I first saw the park, it was

very close to disappearing. The great clouds of smoke; the sweet, inescapable smell of burning pine; the long line of firefighters waiting at pay phones to call home to say they were okay; the black, steaming embers I had to tiptoe around in order to fish. I sensed an awesomeness inside an awesomeness I couldn't penetrate—and when I left, defeated in my effort to see more than a fraction, I couldn't wait to come back.

Yellowstone is purest America, Wonderland, the country's least-known best-known place. Millions go there, but very few *see* it; the normal park stay is less than twenty-four hours, and only 2 percent of visitors ever leave the park roads. People know about the geysers, remember their parents' stories about feeding the bears, have heard horror stories about the crowds, and most seem content to leave it at that; in the contemporary American imagination it's become a place that was long since tamed, Yellowstone National Park, with photogenic bison, adorable rangers, and Old Faithful.

The Yellowstone I had come to know is entirely different—a place where with only the slightest amount of effort you can be alone in one of the most magnificent and unspoiled landscapes in the world. For Yellowstone even now is *the* classic American place—and a shot of pure, classic America is something I badly needed after the year we lovers of the country had been through. With all that happened, ever since . . . and you can insert your own favorite atrocity here . . . I'd still managed to cling to an unreasoned, instinctive, gut-level patriotism that makes the manufactured, flag-waving version seem puny. In my genes, in all our genes, is a chemical signal that is not quite extinct, a pulse that awakens in us, give it half a chance—the original awe and wonder our ancestors felt when they first came face to face with the

continent's splendors. Every new outrage, every new shabbiness, each new instance of aggression, and the gene grows fainter, yet in Yellowstone the wonder comes alive again, the love for the land that can be so overpowering it makes me want to sob.

Yellowstone has always been one of the places where writers go for meaning, as in, What is the *meaning* of Yellowstone? Yes, I told myself, in planning all the details, I'll take a crack at that—and maybe there will be enough meaning left over that I can apply some to myself.

For reading material, I brought along some accounts by early travelers to Yellowstone—the ones who were afraid of being branded as outrageous liars if they wrote sober, matter-of-fact accounts of what they had seen. These narratives all begin with the long, hard slog to reach the park. Reading these, I couldn't bring myself to complain about the plane ride west to Bozeman. Yes, it was a good flight, there were no major foul-ups, I was frisked going through security by an unusually polite and apologetic guard, we flew right over a brilliantly shiny Toronto, and later the pilot obligingly lowered a wing so we could see the furrowed hillside site of Custer's Last Stand.

There was some down time in Minneapolis between flights and I noticed something as I waited. I noticed that when you reach my age, no one notices you. Seniors, yes, they're quick to be scooped up by those golf carts and whisked to their proper gate; kids, too—there are always people on the lookout for lost kids. The teenagers and the twentysomethings check each other out and casually preen . . . which leaves middle-aged people to cope on their own. No one expects a fuss out of us, no one ogles us or pities us, we're pretty much part of the plastic.

But I'm noticing the late middle-agers, even if no one else is, men a little older than I am, men in their late fifties or early sixties. I can't remember doing this since I was twelve—looking at older males to find a role model I could emulate. There are a surprisingly large number of men to choose from, a good many traveling alone. The businessmen I quickly skip, finding them too haggard-looking, too predictable; the paunchy men a little ahead of their wives on the moving sidewalk I skip over as well. But there are others, comfortable, fit-looking men who sometimes carry briefcases, but are more apt to be toting fly rods or tennis rackets or even fairly thick books. They're a damn-fine-looking bunch; they tend to be tanned, tend to wear chinos, tend to look like football refs. The ones I stare at longest seem marked by a generous kind of sophistication (they can talk with anybody), and a relaxed sort of acceptance; they're comfortable with themselves, but far from smug. Role models? The kind of man I'd like to be in ten years' time? Well, maybe, maybe not, but it's interesting to catch myself looking.

The only other part of the trip worth mentioning is the unbelievable miracle of it, something the unsophisticated nineteenth-century hick in me can never get over. I wake up just before dawn in rural New England, walk to our window that faces east, see in the moonlight the lenticular cloud that drapes itself over the wooded slope of our local mountain, then go to bed that same night in a cabin facing Mount Evarts, the castle-like rampart that seals off Yellowstone's northwest corner, watching the same moon apply the same milky whitewash against an entirely different texture. The same day! It's a hard concept to get your mind around—so hard it made me restless, and about midnight, to convince myself I was really there, I threw on my jacket and went outside.

I was there all right. Yellowstone, by god. The Mammoth terraces, the reek of sulfur, elk droppings squishing underfoot. I walked gingerly over to the old parade ground, crossed to the middle, stood there looking up at the bright red eye of Mars (at its closest approach to earth in centuries), then turned to face the ghostly steam wafting off the bone-colored terraces behind me.

Wrapped around me with the moonlight was a silence that at first seemed total (and why, I wondered then and later, is silence in Yellowstone *more* silent than silence in New Hampshire?). But I was wrong on this; my ears simply hadn't adapted yet to this new, richer, more pregnant kind of ether, and after a few minutes my hearing, like my vision, started to catch up.

Faint at first, like a distant radio station that isn't quite tuned in, then much sharper, came the sound of wolves, frantically howling, yipping and barking. Closer, but just as wild, was the sound of elk bugling, showing off for their harems, warning off rivals, enjoying, it's easy to imagine, their liberation from muteness that only comes once a year. Earlier, I'd seen bulls grazing on the lawn outside the old officers' quarters; there's a ventriloquistic quality to the sound they make, and when you look at the animal that's emitting the sound, it looks like it must be coming from somewhere else.

Now in the darkness, listening intently, I tried coming up with a better description of what I was hearing. There is definitely a bugle note in an elk's call—a bugle as played by a kid in summer camp who's got lots of wind, but not much lip. There's also something birdlike about it, a lonesome bird, something on the order of a loon. Add a horse's whinny—a kind of pathetic and wistful clumsiness of expression, as if the elk, though trying its best, regrets not making the sound sweeter. If you had to guess,

not knowing what the sound came from, you might think it was a squeaky pipe organ played at its highest pitch. Pipe organ, horse whinny, bugle, loon. Blend all these and you can start to imagine the kind of primal thrill it must create in a female elk.

But say one thing for it—it's one of the few sounds in nature worth traveling two thousand miles to hear. When the chill finally got to me and I went back to my cabin, the sound was even louder, the air absolutely lousy with elk lust. But that's not a bad thing for a man my age to fall asleep to after crossing the continent in a single bound, not a bad thing at all.

*A man my age.* How curious that the words come to me this way now. Another taunting symptom of late middle age—and I seem to be on the lookout for these everywhere. There's a new kind of brooding I've been doing half-heartedly at home, and one of my purposes in visiting Yellowstone was to find the time and space to brood more explicitly, letting my moodiness have its head. Any year is a journey, of course, but this upcoming year loomed as a harder, more significant journey than the others in my life, so there was all the more reason to emerge from it with a semi-lucid account. The event-crammed, seemingly endless years of middle age, with luck, can seem like a prolonged voyage along a well-marked coast—hard, sure, stormy, often, but with those reassuring beacons, lighthouses and channel markers to help one sail on. Late middle age promises to be, as I prepare to set out, an entirely different kind of voyage, one that takes me well out of sight of land, amid icebergs and reefs, tsunamis and williwaws, with no navigational aids or buoys, and no chance of rescue.

While there are many memoirs of youth and aspiration, and—a new fashion—many accounts of midlife crises, as well

as reminiscences of old people summing up their lives, there are hardly any memoirs written of late-middle age. How-to books, yes—users’ manuals by pop psychologists who usually advise you to set goals and draw up lists. Except for these, the sixth decade of life, the fifties, represent a largely unknown zone, a decade you’re expected to barge through with your mouth stoically shut. The heroes of the great American novels are jaded, used-up men at thirty; there *are* second acts in American lives (Fitzgerald was wrong on this), but no one is interested in watching past the first.

It’s always been an oddly silent, under-reported decade—and yet, judging by the years I’ve already had of it, it can be the most testing decade of all, real crunch time when it comes to the trial-by-existence we all undergo, the decade when a life draws to the point where there are simply no more. Yet here we are, men and women both, suddenly dealing with the most profound and troubling physical and emotional changes since puberty, and so who we are, rather than being a finished product, becomes, yet again, a work in progress.

Late middle age is not the end of the journey, far from it, and people that age can experience despair not unlike that which a young person feels when they’re faced with the daunting task of making a place for themselves in a largely indifferent world. Here’s a quote from someone whose life was a real journey, not just a metaphoric one—Roald Amundsen, the first person to reach the South Pole. At age fifty-four, he’s experiencing a typical late-middle-age moment, albeit with a twist, he’s lamenting the fact that he can’t find any backers for a new expedition, this one to fly over the North Pole in a dirigible:

*As I sat in my room at the Waldorf Astoria, it seemed to me as if the future had closed solidly against me, and that my career as an*

*explorer had come to an inglorious end. Courage, will power, indomitable faith—these qualities had carried me through many adventures and to many achievements. Now even their merits seemed of no avail. I was nearer to black despair than ever before in my 54 years of life.*

*The future had closed solidly against me.* That's what an ardent, frustrated twenty-year-old is supposed to feel, not a successful man in his mid-fifties. I read this passage five times when I first came across it, put the book down, went outside to chop wood, came back and read it three more times. This feels like the same predicament that has taken hold of me at precisely Amundsen's age—that all those virtues that have gotten me this far in the journey, scraps of seamanship, rough- and-ready navigational talents, a gritty kind of stamina, are suddenly of no use whatsoever in the journey toward the next stage of life. Youthful ardor? Ardor of the Amundsen kind? Yes, it's great while it lasts, and it can last for a surprisingly long time, but what happens when it ends?

We hear a lot of talk about midlife crises, but these are fashionable, even expected, for people age forty or forty-five. If I ever experienced one it happened during the night and I slept right through it. My forties were busy years, successful ones, and there was never a point where I felt the need (let alone the ability) to slow time down the way I intended to slow it down on this trip; the family-friends-career current was sweeping me along, sure, but for the most part it was roughly the direction I wished to be carried.

Now I'm not sure where the current is taking me, feel puzzled by this, even panicky, so I spend an inordinate amount of time emotionally flailing about—or, in reaction to the fatigue of this, passively treading water. The truth is, the past year had been

testing. A sudden roadblock in my career (and a pothole in my vocation's future), a declining family income at the very time the demands on that income are highest, some health concerns, even—and you have to live in rural New England to appreciate the weight of this—the coldest, longest winter of our twenty-five years here, followed by the wettest, gloomiest summer. Add to these the heartbreaking spectacle of the country I love suddenly running amok, and it was not a year I'd care to repeat.

Certainly, the coming year is going to be full of changes whether I welcome them or not. My son, Matthew, at thirteen, is entering the crucial years of puberty; later in the year he will be leaving our cozy local grade school for the challenge of an aggressively competitive high school in the neighboring town. My daughter, Erin, will be graduating from high school and beginning her first year in college, assuming we ever complete this nerve-wracking search for which one to attend. My father, nearing ninety, beset by handicaps that make mine seem puny, is faced with leaving the home he's lived in for forty-six years. All of which means I'm a charter member of the sandwich generation, though at times the responsibility makes it seem less like being squished between bread slices than being pressed between the jaws of a vise.

My marriage, as always, is a constant tug-of-war—the tug on one side being the life Celeste and I have managed to work out for ourselves over the course of twenty years, the tug on the other side being the pandemic virus (there is no other word) of divorce, which spreads through our culture, through our town . . . yes, here it comes now, working its way door to door . . . so all who value their marriage as we do can't help feeling that in the absence of a miraculous inoculation their marriage may be the next to become sick. Add to this all my emotional failings (so far yet

from the serenity I thought I'd have gained by now; too boyishly innocent, too easily hurt, for a person my age, in my profession) and the physical changes I see in myself, which are the most extreme since puberty, and it equals a year that promises to pose a unique set of challenges, with plenty of everyday drama, as a man and his family seek to be true to themselves in what are, in what always are, perilous times.

I realize that there are many other people currently embarked on a similar journey. Late middle age can sometimes be lonely and a solo voyage, but a more apt analogy might be to an enormous armada of ships, often invisible to each other in the fog, moving in parallel. Through a trick of demographic history, a vastly larger than average number of babies were born in America during the ten years following World War Two. Many people had delayed having families because of the war, others had held off because of Depression-induced fears that they wouldn't be able to adequately care for them. The intersection of a large supply of prospective parents, for whom the biological clock was rapidly ticking, with a large supply of prospective parents suddenly very confident about the future meant—along with all the other enormous implications for our society and culture—that in the first years of the twenty-first century there would be a huge number of adults in this country very close to either side of their fifty-fifth birthday, including me.

Which brings up a question of definition. To young people, people in their fifties are old, end of story. To octogenarians, someone my age is a brash youngster, and they don't want to hear any complaints. Split the difference and you can label us middle-aged, but that's too broad a term to span many real differences. Late middle age, a person's fifties, are much different

than a early middle age, a person's thirties. Then, too, as with puberty, the aging process varies tremendously from individual to individual (and when I say "aging," I mean aging well just as much as I mean aging badly). And yet my gut instinct is that the border is very precise—that someone fifty-four is middle-aged; that someone fifty-five is *late*-middle-aged. (With increasing life spans, seniors running wild, people talk about sixty being "the new forty," but if you play around with this scale, eighteen-year-olds are newborns.)

Arbitrary? You bet. I'm drawing lines, me who hates to draw lines, but there you are. We fifty-four-year-eleven-month-twelve-day-olds tend to be melodramatic. Whether fifty-five turns out to be a cliff over which I tumble, a trampoline from which I bounce up and down in pretty much the same place, or a springboard launching me toward better things (toward serenity? generosity? acceptance?) I will soon discover, and yet the fact that something new and different is taking hold of me is—from this cabin where I lie awake brooding—indisputable. Late middle age is where the young part of you and the old part stand tightly back to back, and what is good about it and what is bad comes from their alternately comforting and irritating negotiations.

Up early in the morning, a quick bite to eat in the cafeteria, a bag lunch packed, then out I drive on the Mammoth–Tower Road, exhilarated from being in the exact place on the planet I want to be at absolutely the right moment.

Yellowstone labors under a burden that would sink a lesser place: everyone who visits here expects to be enchanted immediately. The good news is that, yes, you come upon enchantment very quickly, especially in the morning when you're apt to have