

“ROAD TRIPS” Excerpt

National Parks Tour

You know you're in Nevada when the gas station has a slot machine. And you can't get a vanilla latte in a paper cup—anywhere. And you know you're in Idaho when the billboards advertise Jesus. Where we're from—Northern California—this is foreign as another planet. Because in NorCal, of course, there is a Starbucks on every corner—sometimes two across the street from one another. And billboards are more likely to advertise plastic surgeons, psychics and In-N-Out Burger. We knew we were in for some strange and wondrous sites as we crossed the Western United States in early July to see the National Parks. And it wasn't all in the form of geysers.

The First Leg

For instance, there was the night clerk at the Rest Inn Suites Motel in Wells, NV (midpoint between Granite Bay, CA and the West Entrance of Yellowstone). Skinny and stooped with thick glasses, nostrils hooked to an oxygen tank below the desk, he admitted to being California born-and-raised. “Oakland,” he announced, as he tapped the mouse, next to which sat his half-empty pack of Winstons and a yellow Bic lighter (the entire lobby—hell, the entire motel—smelled of cigarette smoke). “Left in 1968—joined the military—and eventually ended up in Nevada. Never went back.” He smiled a brown-toothed grin, as if to suggest *who would want the Golden State—when you can run the night desk next to a truck stop in the desert?* “And you know who's ruining Nevada?” he added, as he handed me my key cards. “Californians. Coming here in droves. Too damned many of them.” He chuckled—nothing personal—and nodded politely. Although a few minutes later, when my two (obviously Cali) teenagers, asked him for the password to the free wi-fi, he would only snarl: “It's printed on the receipt!” (It turned out, amusingly, to be the word ‘wifi.’)

Or the next morning, there was Bella—of Bella's Restaurant and Espresso, catty-corner from the Rest Inn Suites Motel, directly across from the truck stop (Wells has just the one intersection). It was clearly Bella's *intent* to imitate a corporate coffee house, but almost as though she'd never actually seen one in person. At the “coffee bar” at its entrance, instead of a soft-spoken barista, it was Bella herself, dyed hair, heavy eye liner, obviously trying to pressure people to the “tables” in the restaurant, not just stand and order things to go. When she realized she had a silent crowd of a dozen “Californians” who wanted a pastry in a brown paper bag and flavored coffee in a paper cup, she flapped her hands and snapped at all of us: “Okay, well, if you're not going to sit down, it's going to be a few minutes—we have multiple things going on here!!” While she and her one employee conferred, kids and I took one look at the “pastry case” and fled—muffins the size of your face, topped with gooey snakes of purple frosting, a cinnamon roll the size of a top sirloin, covered in the same glutinous swirl of fat, this time yellow, like a jaundiced eye. As we pushed out the filthy glass doors and crossed the rigged-up “Drive Through”—which a car would have trouble actually pulling into—Bella shot the upper half of her body out the “window.” “I was going to take your order in a minute—I'm sorry you *don't have any patience*,” she shouted. “Have a good Fourth!” *Slam* went the window. What made us think she didn't mean it? (And

our eventual breakfast in northeastern Nevada? A package of Pop-Tarts and some bottled Starbucks vanilla latte bought at a Chevron in Jackpot—which in some sense, it certainly was.)

But Nevada wasn't all bad—it was where we saw tumbleweeds for the first time: both my kids laughed out loud when one crossed the path of our GMC Terrain, and blew apart behind us. It's where a badger darted across the road—"What was that?" (Several guesses before a search of their i-Phones, "Animals native to Eastern Nevada.") It's where we created the phrases "friendle" (the tail lights you decide to follow when you're unsure of the road or visibility is bad) and "turtle race" (when a semi tries to pass another semi on an incline). It's where we tried to outrun an ominous set of black clouds—and eventually lost, rain sluicing down our newly-replaced windshield wiper blades, back spray off the big-wheelers, flashes of white lightning in the distant hills. (To drought-parched Californians, this was amazing—water from the sky!)

Also surprising, how quickly Nevada's desert gives way to the green of Idaho, just minutes—well, at 90 mph—after crossing the state border. Gone is the sand and desert grass, those tumbleweeds. Replaced by corn fields, tidy clapboard houses, painted shutters, carefully tended flower boxes on the front porch; the Snake River curling around and crisscrossing the highway over and over again, occasionally pouring out into big blue lakes. Where Nevada towns make you feel you'd jump on the slow-moving freight to escape them, towns in Idaho—with those neat-as-a-pin properties; those paddle-boat recreation areas; those Jesus-Saves billboards—make you think there is possibly a "good life" there, one we might be missing in California with our agnostic ways and McMansions, our brown lawns.

Eventually you realize, however, at the Last Chance General Store on the Idaho border, you are only *starting* to get to the good part—and that involves leaving the state. As you cross into Montana, and are within miles of the Western gate, it all changes: horses—possibly wild herds? or at least allowed to roam and live freely; Lincoln Log houses, with vacationing high tech folks, or maybe an escapee from L.A., four-wheeling in front of them; and suddenly a startling view out the passenger side window. "Wait! What am I looking at?" my 15-year-old son exclaims. "Is it...? It is! The Grand Tetons!" Sure enough, off in the purple distance, the distinctive pointy shapes appear on the horizon. Then, of course, the forest begins, towering pines, increasing brown-and-yellow signs to "W. Yellowstone." A couple of blocks of tacky tourist gift shops ("Espresso and frozen yogurt!"), jay-walking pedestrians, but finally, *what you've been waiting for all along*: a happy middle-aged woman, in a crisp Park Ranger uniform, carefully coifed hair and glasses, leans out of her booth to say, "Welcome to Yellowstone National Park." And before you can barely put away the stack of maps and guidebooks and informative newsletters she's handed you, you hit a dead-stop, the first traffic jam in 24 hours: a shaggy-haired bison is lumbering down the middle of Grand Loop Drive.

Yellowstone

We are in Yellowstone, making this trip, primarily because of my son, or rather—my son’s photography teacher (and varsity soccer coach), Steve (“Big Fish”) Fischer, who spent the entire spring semester exhorting his (mostly bored) photography class at Granite Bay High to “see the National Parks!” While the rest of the kids discreetly checked their text messages or complained about their low photography grades (“Fischer only likes the soccer players!”), my blue-eyed son, who is also a soccer player, took in every word. With his own money, he carefully scoped out a deal on a Canon EOS 70D camera on eBay, and asked me with characteristic (and impossible to refuse) passion, “Can we go? It would be so great. I really want to take pictures and film, [my sister] could play her guitar, you could write. How much could it cost if we camp?”

It is also the summer before his sister leaves for college. After a “gap” year working and saving money, she is moving to the town of Davis, CA, in September—40 minutes up I-80 West from our home in Granite Bay—where she’ll attend the University of California there, and live in a blue rental house on Colgate Drive with three other 19-year-olds. So it’s not lost on any of us that this is also our “last summer” to some extent. It is time for a big trip, a memorable trip, a trip of a lifetime.

And sure enough, our timing is, as my daughter puts it, “impeccable.” First the bison greeting us, as it were, as we entered the park, quickly followed by our experience at Old Faithful, our first stop. No cell service inside the park, so no idea when the geyser is set to go off, now or an hour from now. We pull in the parking lot, my daughter uncertain at the wheel. She circles way off course for a minute, then rolls up to the Old Faithful Inn, an imposing dark wood structure built in the early 1900s. There is an open parking space directly in front, despite the large crowd that has formed on the boardwalk that surrounds a hissing, sputtering hole. We race toward the geyser, and it erupts seconds after my son points his Canon 70D at it: only it’s not like the cartoons, not a cliché fire hose of gushing water. But instead: a fairy cloud gently spiraling up and out of the earth, not unlike the blue clouds that float above California’s Highway 1 at Big Sur. Our world at its most magic.

One of Yellowstone’s first and most enduring nicknames, at the turn of the 20th century, was “Wonderland,” as in *Alice and the rabbit hole*, and it’s perfectly fitting. Molten bubbling pits of sulfur-infused water or mud, pools in deep neon colors, steam from hot springs and erupting geysers dotting the horizon, surreal waterfalls inside canyons the colors of a child’s paint box. Not to mention, of course, the real crowd-pleasers: the animals. After our first bison—in the middle of the road yet; *was he addled? old?* we wonder later—we quickly become nonchalant about the buffalo, and affectionately bad mouth the pulled-over drivers, big zoom lenses pointed at a shaggy haired guy way up on the hill. We are not so flippant about our next encounter, however, and quickly join the throngs—a stream of cars parked at precarious angles along the roadside in Hayden Valley, people of all ages running excitedly, pointing,

seriously relaying that one word: *Bear*. It turns out to be a young grizzly, who is at first swimming in the Yellowstone River, then jumps up on an island and begins rolling in and nosing through wildflowers and brush on the bank. Playful and silly, he is delightful, and my son and I are somewhat less terrified a grizzly will tear us from our tent at night.

But after that, we begin to feel this “paparazzi” is somewhat undignified. Like the grocery store clerk in Malibu who must pay little to no attention to the movie stars he rings up, in their baseball hats and dark glasses, we temper our reactions: “Oh, look, a traffic jam—must be another bear.” *Yawn*. We are happy to carefully check off every animal we see in the Yellowstone Map’s Wildlife Guide though: grizzly bear, bison, bighorn sheep, mule deer, pronghorn, mallard ducks, Canada geese, trout, bull elk, and—pretty much our favorites—those tiny campground chipmunks. Later, this will all seem...well, like a strange dream, one that got curiouser and curiouser, as did Alice’s.

There are several highlights to our stay—one is the Lake Hotel. We pitched our brand new tent in the Bridge Bay campground, near a gorgeous marina and probably the ONLY useful store in the park, but best of all, it is just around the bend from the “Lake Area.” Here there are no “cowboy” cookouts or bison stew; no ‘50s diners with big burgers and tacky gift shops; no cafeteria that reminds me vaguely of being in a hospital. Instead, the Lake Hotel has obviously been designated for the high maintenance tourists (and we fit right in, fussy Northern Californians with “no patience,” as Bella so rightly pointed out on the Fourth of July). The first morning we discover it because my son is starving—at 15, he can only survive so long on Pop Tarts from the Chevron station, a lukewarm hot dog at Old Faithful, handfuls of Goldfish and trail mix in the car. So we wander into this grand old lady, circa 1885, painted butter yellow on the outside, cream inside, with original oak hardwood floors, period light fixtures, a massive (and lit) fireplace, comfortable chairs facing (original) windows, a wide veranda too, all of which look out over the blue and peaceful Yellowstone Lake. There is a (better) Starbucks imitation off the lobby, which we’ll stop at the last morning, on our way out of the park, and snicker at the complicated orders people are snapping at the hapless “baristas,” three men ranging in age from 18 to 50, who probably don’t drink coffee at all or—if they do—take it black in a mug. (Until, that is, we get up there with our own requests for non-fat milk, extra shots of espresso, sugar-free chocolate, real vanilla.) But that first morning, we forgo the long line and the Starbucks’ crowd’s antics, and go to the dining room, where we’re seated immediately at a table with a spotless white tablecloth, heavy silver, a view of the veranda and the lake. An excellent choice, primarily because the 55-year-old waitress delights in feeding my hungry teen boy: a stack of pancakes, eggs and bacon, several refills of orange juice, and toast. When we ask if there is any other kind of jelly besides the fancy orange marmalade, she returns with a bowl of Smuckers’ strawberry jam. “This is what they have for the staff, I don’t know why they don’t put it out for the guests—it is good,” she winks. I tell the kids I’m certain they have weddings there, and briefly picture my daughter and some handsome fiancé saying vows in front of those wavy-glassed windows, the lake behind them, all our family and friends booked in those undoubtedly gorgeous \$400 rooms upstairs.

Fueled on pancakes, we stop next at Artist Point, specifically designed for people with sketchpads in hand, my daughter being one, and every lookout is increasingly better than the last. First the colored canyon walls and a trickle of turquoise water winding along the bottom; the next, a rushing waterfall with a magical ribbon of vivid green in it; then finally a panorama of Yellowstone's "Grand Canyon," with all of these elements combined. We happen to overhear an ancient tour guide—many of the park personnel, rangers and guides, seem to be octogenarians, and can put us to shame, huffing and puffing as we are in the high altitude—who nimbly jumps on a boulder and shouts to his equally elderly tourists: "Don't get tricked into stopping at the first possible lookout point—keep going and hold out for the best one." Reminds me of Principal McGuire's speech at my daughter's Granite Bay High graduation last spring: *There are many parking spots on the road to success—don't pull in.* Words to take to heart—in the park and outside it too?

That same afternoon, the kids decide to overcome their altitude breathlessness and take on the 3-mile hike to one of the tallest peaks in the park: Mount Washburn, elevation 10,243 feet. Unlike some of the other sites in Yellowstone, this is a quiet place, wildflowers blowing in the breeze, an occasional fellow hiker coming down. Mostly by themselves, they see animals—including baby sheep—as well as magnificent views, finally reaching the visitor center at the top, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the park. Proud and exultant, they take pictures around the Mount Washburn sign they will later post on Instagram, send to their friends. "That was probably my best experience EVER," says my son.

But I have quieter moments: while they hike, I climb a little way up the path, in part because I'm suddenly overcome with worry. This is grizzly country! Signs all over the trailhead warn you to know what to do if you see one (they don't?!?), always carry bear spray (they don't?!?!), never run (they would?!?!). What was I thinking, letting them go off into the wilderness by themselves, at 19 and 15?!?! In my writer's imagination, I see myself on the local Wyoming and Montana news channels, explaining *they were smart kids, it seemed safe enough, and no, I wasn't just being selfish sitting in my car reading while they went off to certain death.* In an attempt to brush these thoughts away, as well as hoping to see them come around the bend sooner, I sit down in a little overlook. And it dawns on me it is one of the prettiest sights I've ever seen. Steep, rolling hills, so green, but also streaked with yellow, blue, white chalk pastel—the occasional pop of pink or orange. Up close, of course, they are covered in wildflowers: yellow from arrowleaf balsamroot, blue from lupine, white with phlox, pinks and oranges from paintbrush—and I'm mesmerized by this view, wind blowing in my face, making my eyes tear up. I of course have been worrying about my children, too, and for weeks now, can easily move into fear of my daughter leaving home. Wiping my face, I see another elderly park employee, this one a ranger, tan and sinewy, could be 60, could be 100, striding up the path. We nod, say hello; then a few minutes later, he comes down again. "One of the prettiest seasons we've had of flowers this year," he says matter-of-factly. I will wish later I'd stopped him, asked him the names, asked why it was such a good season. But either way, his comment cheers me up, I return to my car, and my book, quiet my worries. And soon, here comes my strawberry blond in her beanie and plaid shirt; my tall blonde in a blue ONLY hat worn

backwards. Their faces are flushed, sun-kissed, they had the time of their lives. Not eaten by bears, not falling to their death from a cliff, but charmed by baby sheep, laughing at their inside jokes, confident in their own abilities to strike out and take risks.

And our impeccable timing continues: thunderstorms blanket the park, day and night, right after we pull away.