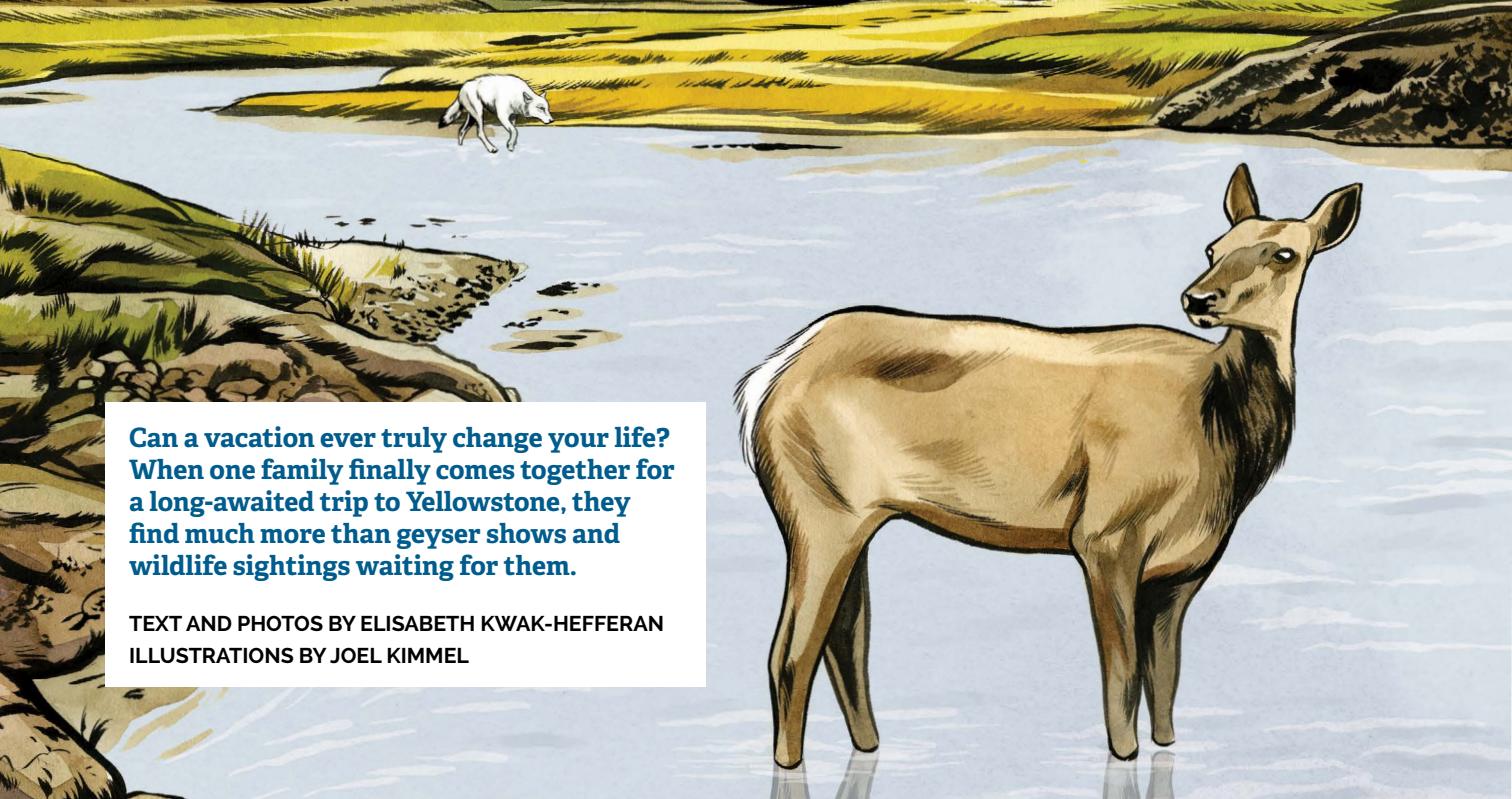


# ANYTHING

CAN HAPPEN AT

# YELLOWSTONE



**Can a vacation ever truly change your life? When one family finally comes together for a long-awaited trip to Yellowstone, they find much more than geyser shows and wildlife sightings waiting for them.**

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOEL KIMMEL

**W**here my family comes from, you don't see wolves. You don't even think of seeing wolves. They might as well be mythological creatures: the bristling beasts of fairy tales, or the stars of PBS nature shows, depending on your perspective, but never something live, trotting along a riverbank on a Sunday morning. But we had left home—and expectations—far behind. Here it was, a misty, drizzling morning in late August along the Lamar River in Yellowstone National Park. And there it was—a huge, shaggy white wolf.

"That's the alpha female of the Junction Butte pack," said our new best friend, Paul. If you're going to pull up next to someone on the bluff overlooking the Lamar Valley, you couldn't do better than Paul, a white-haired wolf lover with a cabin in Silver City, right on the border of the park. He almost immediately offered us a peep through his spotting scope. One by one, my dad, mom, brother, and I squinted through the lens, raking the riverbank with our eyes until the white wolf materialized. After consultation with a neighboring wolf-watcher, Paul adjusted his scope to pick up the pack's alpha male, leggy and hulking as its mate but black, and we elbowed each other with delight at our luck.

All this time a cow elk had been standing chest-deep in the Lamar River some distance away, warily eying the wolves. Suddenly, the predators got up almost casually and strolled upriver. The alpha female stuck a paw into the current—"Is she...?"—then another, then—"Oh, wow"—the wolf was all in and dog-paddling purposefully toward the elk. I was torn: Seeing a wolf in all its carnivorous glory would be as incredible as it would be gory. It was hard not to root for that beautiful elk.

The wolf swam against the icy treadmill of the Lamar. The elk held its ground. On land, it might have been easy prey for a lethal pair like this, but rooted in the deep water it stood a chance of outlasting the predators. The wolf put on a burst of speed and drifted closer than ever, maybe close enough to bite, but no—not quite. Ten more minutes passed while the white wolf steadily paddled, treading water. Then a switch flipped and the wolf gave up, returning to the bank with a wet-dog shake. All the drama of the hunt, with none of the tooth and claw of the kill.

I glanced back at my family—my mom with her binoculars, my brother staring through Paul's scope, my dad taking the whole thing in with naked eyes—and saw identical expressions. Eyes wide, slight smiles. "Can you believe that?" we asked each other. Nope. Not at all. But here we are.

**M**y parents, both Chicagoans born and bred, had dreamed of coming to Yellowstone their entire lives. My mom had read all about it, lured by the geysers and the wildlife: "It's like nowhere else on earth," she always said. Once or twice they even got so far as looking into rental cars, but money or work or my volleyball schedule or my brother's tennis matches always got in the way. Once my brother, John, and I were firmly established in adulthood, me in Seattle, him in grad school in Illinois, we revived the idea of that family trip. And then came a five-year streak of truly rotten luck.

My dad was diagnosed with cancer, and my parents' unused vacation fund went straight into medical bills. Then he lost his job, and money got even tighter. In fact, in that belt-tightening

economic climate, my parents—a horticulturist with 40 years of experience and a florist/horticulturist-turned health information manager with three college degrees between them—suddenly found themselves competing for low-paying jobs just to get by. And that wasn't even the worst of it.

Cancer swiftly took my aunt just a few months after her diagnosis, and a year later my uncle's heart stopped in the middle of dinner. By the time my dad's older brother lost his own battle with cancer six months after that, we were all reeling. Each blow was tough enough by itself, but this unrelenting conveyor belt of bad news verged on devastating. We'd lost three family members, all my parents' age, in two years. My parents took it the hardest. So hard, in fact, that I began to fear they were giving up on the idea that life had any positive surprises left in store.

Somewhere in there, the family Yellowstone trip drifted back to me. *Wouldn't it be great if we could actually do it?* became, *Well, why couldn't we?* Mom and Dad demurred again and again—too much money, not enough time. As the editor of this magazine, I got to visit a couple of times over those years. When I'd tell them about the geysers or the animals or the scenery, their replies went dark: "Too bad I'll never get to see it."

But I couldn't let go of the idea: It would be something happy to look forward to for once. The fulfillment of a lifelong dream, even. Going to Yellowstone wouldn't erase the trauma of the past few years, but it could be proof that life wasn't just a string of other shoes dropping. That we could break the spell, change our destiny, make wonderful things happen instead of waiting for terrible things to happen to us. Yellowstone stopped being a vacation destination—in my daydreams, I built it into nothing less than a rebirth.

Could any trip possibly live up to such expectations? No matter. One day last July, I called my parents. "I booked your tickets," I said. "We're going."



THE AUTHOR'S DAD, MOM, AND BROTHER AT THE GRAND CANYON OF THE YELLOWSTONE

Where we come from, boiling water fountains don't just spout out of the ground. But poised on the brink of Norris Geyser Basin on day one of our trip, I had a good feeling. A hundred feet below, springs the shade of a swimming pool steamed and clay sinter cones bubbled, rusty streaks rich in heat-loving bacteria snaking between them across the bleached-white ground. "Yeah, this doesn't suck," my dad said.

We descended a few hundred yards on the gravelly trail into Back Basin, winding among hot springs and steam vents and stopping expectantly when Steamboat Geyser, the world's tallest at 300-plus feet, threw off a few offhand splashes. That was as far as it went, though, so we moved on, taking our time past the washing-machine turbulence of Green Dragon Spring and the roiling dirt of Blue Mud Steam Vent. My brother, now studying to be a physical therapist after stints as a Chicago bouncer and competitive kickboxer, surveyed the basin. "What a desolate hellscape," he said, deadpan.

I laughed. "But in a good way, right?"

It was just sinking in that we were actually all here together, that this trip was finally happening, when Vixen Geyser blew a 20-foot cloud of steam right in front of us. All four of us tipped our heads back, surprised and exhilarated at our private show, as the superheated water fought a two-minute battle with gravity it ultimately lost. The geyser shut off like someone had cranked a faucet, the water swirling back down into the ground with the sound of a giant toilet flushing. "Wow," said my mom. My dad stared at the hole with his mouth actually hanging open.

All that was nothing compared to what waited just down the road. It had already been a banner day—besides Norris, we'd toured the Mammoth terraces and spotted our first elk, coyote, sandhill crane, and bison—but I'd underestimated the symbolic power of seeing Old Faithful erupt. I'd witnessed "the Kim Kardashian of geysers," as I'd once heard a ranger call it, in full spout a handful of times before. But perched on the Old Faithful Inn's second-floor patio watching each member of my family light up with every preliminary splash, I was more excited than I'd ever been.

Old Faithful erupted, a 150-foot flagpole of water with the wind weaving its flapping flag of mist and steam. And I was thrilled—not just because that geyser is truly impressive, but because we were all there to see it. Not so long ago, my parents had given up on ever watching this with their own eyes. Even when the tickets

were bought and the plans set, I'd still worried something would come up to ruin it: an injury, a house fire, a natural disaster, something. I didn't let myself really believe this trip would happen until I saw all three of them walking toward me at the Bozeman airport two days before. Yet here we all were, watching Old Faithful, just like I'd imagined it. *If this can happen*, I thought in that moment, *anything can*.

"I want to see it again," Mom announced. So we walked the boardwalk at Upper Geyser Basin, marveling at still more springs and fumaroles and a sputtering Grand Geyser while bison grazed in the background, for another 90 minutes until Old Faithful was due again. This time we sat on the benches, as close to the geyser as you can get. On the drive back to our tiny rented suite in Gardiner, we passed a bull bison walking the park road. I slowed the car to a crawl and edged past while it gave us the hairy eye from two feet away. When we finally checked in well past sunset, my mom collapsed on the couch. "If we do this much again tomorrow," she said, "you'll kill me." But she was smiling.

I thought our luck ran out on day two. Rain. Thick, cold, pounding rain. I winced when I looked out the window; we were supposed to go horseback riding today. "What do you guys think about the horses?" I asked over coffee. John was on the fence, and Dad, truth be told, wouldn't have minded a dry morning on the couch with a book. But my mom settled it: "We came here to go horseback riding, and I want to go." She had her own horse as a teenager, but hadn't ridden in decades; today, she was obviously itching to get back in the saddle, rain be damned. Really, I wasn't used to seeing my mother that outwardly excited about anything.

So an hour later, we sat astride our horses in the still-pouring rain at the Johnson Family Ranch, a stable with trails leading straight into the Gallatin National Forest just north of Yellowstone. All the other clients had bailed, leaving us with our own private tour of the lush woods. We set off huddled under our rain jackets. I like horses, but the ride was rough for me: By the end the rain had chilled my hands into stiff claws, and my horse kept trying to scrape me off his back on trailside trees. My dad, riding a huge white steed with less-than-sure footing on the muddy bits (and there were a lot of muddy bits), was similarly ready to dismount by hour's end.

But John and my mom? They loved it. She rode easily, asking our guide for bear stories and admiring the quiet forest. John thought it was fun when his horse dashed off-trail to jockey for position in our line. We rounded one corner to spot a white-tailed deer slinking through the trees. "I'm going to think of this next time I'm stuck in traffic," Mom said dreamily.

That afternoon, my dad had his turn at triumph. The skies finally cleared when we arrived at the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, and I hoped we'd get to see the park's most magnificent waterfalls without soaking our shoes. The cloudbreak held as we reached the overlook to Upper Falls, where the mighty Yellowstone River takes a 100-foot dive over cream-colored cliffs. Then we picked up the South Rim Trail to hike the canyon's edge out to Artist Point, a famous overlook with views across the canyon and out to Lower



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: SIBLING BONDING AT UPPER GEYSER BASIN; JOHN AT FAIRY FALLS; ASCENDING UNCLE TOM'S TRAIL AT GRAND CANYON OF THE YELLOWSTONE'S SOUTH RIM

Falls, three times taller than its upstream cousin.

I'd scouted the canyon the summer before, and I knew Artist Point offered a fantastic gazing spot. But I also knew the view from Uncle Tom's Trail, a short spur off the rim, was absolutely breathtaking: The "trail" is actually a metal staircase bolted to the canyon's south wall that descends to a spray-in-your-face look at Lower Falls. It's not a place for anyone with a fear of heights, though—anyone like my dad, in other words, who gets nervous on a stepladder.

So when we hit Uncle Tom's trailhead, John and I were the only ones who wanted a look. "Go ahead—we'll wait," our parents said, so we dashed down the stairs to snap a few photos.

But when we'd climbed back out of the canyon, they'd changed their minds. "Really?" I asked. "Are you sure? It's, like,"—I checked the trailhead warning sign—"328 steps."

"Yeah, why not?" my dad said, looking remarkably calm about the prospect of hanging off the side of a sheer cliff. The two of them set off down the stairs.

"I can't believe he's doing that," I told John. "Oh my god, they're going all the way to the bottom." I did my best to stifle my worry as we watched them pick their way down and out of sight. Ten minutes later, they reappeared, tiptoeing back up the steps.

"It was spectacular," Dad said once he was back on solid ground. "And I was okay. I just didn't look down."

Later, I asked how he'd possibly pulled it off. "I wasn't going to let you guys show me up," he said. Then, more seriously: "I didn't want to miss out because I knew it was going to be something special. And I'm glad I did it." So much for my assumptions about what my dad wouldn't—or couldn't—do. So much for his assumptions about himself.

One might assume we'd cashed in all our vacation karma by 8:30 a.m. on day three, Wolf Day. Seeing one wolf had already been a tall order, never mind two in hot pursuit of an elk. But as we were quickly learning, luck is not a limited commodity in Yellowstone.

After we reluctantly tore ourselves away from the Lamar Valley, there was still a waterfall to see: 132-foot Tower Fall, a pounding horsetail just west of the valley. There were still the airplane views over the park's mountainous north side from Dunraven Pass, which we drove over en route to the geyser zone again. Still a stroll through Biscuit Basin, home of rushing springs, small eruptions, and the hypnotically clear-blue Sapphire Pool. One more show from Old Faithful, which this time looked like a smoke bomb going off in the cool, drizzly weather. Still a first-ever look at the Tetons as we headed south to our rented condo in Jackson. Even then, we hadn't tapped out the wonders.

We checked into Spring Creek Ranch, where we could see the Grand Teton from the living room, and John and I volunteered to run back to town to pick up tacos for dinner. We stepped out, shut the front door, and turned to see a giant bull moose grazing just past our parked car. "Get Mom and Dad!" I hissed, so he turned and pounded on the front door. They answered, we pointed, they gasped. Needless to say, you don't see moose where we come from.

The four of us ventured a few steps closer, marveling that there could be a real, live moose so casually close right in town. A few other hotel guests had spotted it, too, and suddenly one of them must have spooked it: Kicking up its heels, the moose galloped straight for us. We darted inside and slammed the door. Family flees stampeding moose, has greatest day ever.

"Where did he go?" John wondered aloud, peeking through the window. He walked around the condo and stuck his head out the back door, only to leap back inside. "Oh jeez, he's *right there*." Our moose glanced up at the four faces lined up at the window, then went back to chewing on the wildflowers edging the backyard. My family had never seen a moose before, and I'd certainly never been this close to one. We could linger over every detail, taking in its chocolate coat, antlers like a polished coffee table, muscled body like a strange cross between a horse and an elk, tiny stub of a tail. The moose chomped away, working its way to the aspen leaves on the other side of the yard.

After fifteen minutes, the moose had wandered back around





FAMILY PORTRAIT AT GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK

front. My dad and I stepped out on the porch, cautiously watching. Someone flashed a photo from a car stopped on the road, and the moose suddenly threw out a few bucking bronco-style kicks. Dad ducked back in the doorway: "Look out—he's doing, uh ... moose things!"

We toasted our good fortune with Montana-brewed Moose Drool beers with our tacos that night.

**W**hen I dropped my parents off at the airport after our final riverside picnic at Grand Teton National Park, I knew we'd just had the best family vacation of our lives. But was it enough to shake off the dark cloud that had been following us around for so long? We had a blast for four glorious days: Perhaps it's too much to ask a national park to provide anything more than that.

My parents had other longstanding dreams, naturally. A big one was buying a camper and touring the country. They'd been talking a lot more about it since my aunt and uncles had died—"Nobody knows how much time they have left, and I'm not going to spend mine in front of the TV," as my dad once put it—but I'd figured the camper was more fantasy than reality, a kind of coping mechanism rather than a real plan of action.

But one week after our trip, my mom texted me a photo of their new 1960s-era refurbished Shasta camper. They'd arrived home, hit Craigslist, and bought it without reservation. Suddenly, they were devouring RV blogs and filling the calendar with road trips across the West. Something had changed: They were happier, lighter. Over the next couple of months, it dawned on me: For the first time in what felt like years, my parents were looking forward, not back.

By January, no single road trip was big enough to contain Mom and Dad's excitement. "We applied for summer jobs at Yellowstone," my mom told me cheerfully over the phone. I was thrilled to hear it, and even more so when they were offered the positions. Going to Yellowstone together once had felt like a luxury, and now we were planning our second annual family reunion.

I can't say our four-day trip did all this. That seems like too much power to give a place, even a place as superlative as Yellowstone National Park. But no doubt it provided a spark.

When the first white explorers came into this steaming, sculpted land in the 1870s, it moved them to invent national parks. So is it really any wonder that Yellowstone would inspire my parents to jump in a camper and start a new chapter? Wild wolves can stroll right into your binoculars. Boiling water can explode from the ground at your feet. And two sixtysomethings from Chicago can shake off their tragedies and finally do what they've been yearning to do for years. Every minute in Yellowstone whispers it: *Anything, anything, anything can happen.*



## Do It Yourself

Gearing up for a family trip of your own?

Experience the author's most memorable excursions for yourself.

### GEYSER TOURING

» Start with Norris Geyser Basin and work your way south to Old Faithful. Time it so you're hungry for lunch or dinner at Old Faithful Inn.

### WOLF-WATCHING

» The Lamar Valley is just

east of the Tower-Roosevelt area. Aim to get in position at dawn or just before. If you see people with spotting scopes, pull over and ask them if they've seen any animals—they may be volunteers working with the park's biologists.

### HORSEBACK RIDING

» Several outfitters run trips in Yellowstone and the Gallatin National Forest. Try Xanterra for in-park trails ([yellowstonenationalparklodges.com](http://yellowstonenationalparklodges.com)) and Johnson Family Ranch ([flyingpigrafting.com](http://flyingpigrafting.com)) for the Gallatin.