

and I almost backed off. Two years running the Yellowstone had unveiled its power. To be on it again was like being in the company of an old friend after a bout of madness.

It was a strangely tense crossing—the eddy a tricky vortex, green upwellings alongshore, a disquieting murkiness to the water. Over on the island the gravel was all new, immigrant rock uprooted from other lands. Sawyer found a cow's rib. There were hunks of green quartzite and a few agates—all fresh looking, just washed, blinking in the sun.

"This river is such a living force," Ursula said. "It could all change again tomorrow."

Taking the Yellowstone by Storm

EVERY TRIP has its moment of truth. This one had several. First, before the boat is even baptized in the flow, at the sandbar put-in just upriver from the bridge near Reedpoint, we are faced with a daunting pile of gear to fit in our red, seventeen-foot canoe. Family tent, sleeping bags, life jackets, food for two weeks, sacks of diapers, miniature folding chairs, rubber ducks, water jugs—all spills, piece by piece, from the open maw of our vehicle.

Eli, Sawyer, and Ruby, all aged four or younger, busy themselves throwing rocks, eating sand, and wandering off into the shrubbery. All of this—the food and gear, five human beings, the toys and buckets, everything—is to fit inside the sleek hull of the canoe. More than that, once ensconced, we are to move downriver for a couple of weeks, borne along on the burgeoning current of the Yellowstone within months of a hundred-year flood.

Loading the canoe takes us the better part of an hour. Several items deemed essential a short while earlier are returned to the vehicle. Every crevice in the canoe is stuffed

with gear. The children, life vests riding up under their chins, sun hats squashed in place, and full of good questions like "Do you think we'll sink, Dad?" are wedged into their spots between duffels and water jugs.

The Yellowstone is a habit-forming river. For fifteen years I've repeated favorite stretches—the whitewater intensity through Yankee Jim Canyon, mountain-rimmed pieces of Paradise Valley, the weekend meander from Springdale to Reedpoint. In 1992, back when Eli was an infant, our compact family rode down the entire navigable length, from Yellowstone Park to North Dakota, on a twenty-five-day jaunt.

I've even been enticed out of hibernation by freak February thaws to put in at Emigrant and paddle to Livingston, and it isn't every river that can accomplish that. The Yellowstone is more than a watercourse; it is another one of the vices I seem so prone to. My abiding hope is that my children will succumb to the same addiction.

This journey is necessarily open-ended. Flexibility is one of the requirements of parenthood. On a family boat trip, it may be the key ingredient to remaining sane. The starting point is a fishing access roughly a day's float upstream of Columbus and about a third of the way along the river. We have two or three weeks available. The take-out is intentionally uncertain. A friend has agreed to deliver our vehicle, on short notice, to whatever spot we select downstream. Along with every nonessential item in our outfit, we have jettisoned the pressure of deadlines and destinations in favor of a *whenever-we-get-to paddling regime*.

Despite five passengers and our bulging outfit, the canoe does float. Ruby, our mobile, energetic, and headstrong one-year-old, demands the constant vigilance of the bow paddler. She is tethered by rope to whichever parent is in the front, an umbilical cord in case of capsiz. The boys are seated in low-slung director's chairs, obscured from the

shoulders down in the mass of gear. My perspective from the cramped stern seat takes in the sobering overview of the gypsy craft Marypat and I are responsible for.

I remind myself that we could be home, busy juggling the chores in a day and keeping a lid on the frenetic energy now constrained by the hull of our canoe. In short order the Yellowstone begins to unfold its spell. Great blue herons lift off the banks. An osprey hovers, tense and focused, above an eddy. At a sharp bend where the river runs hard into a ledge of sandstone, a mule deer clatters heavily up the near vertical slope. Where the river eddies in the cool shadow of an undercut cliff, we coast beneath the mud-daubed nests of swallows and catch drips seeping from rock seams.

We come to shore often to indulge exploratory impulses. The kids find a sun-warmed pool full of tadpoles and plunge in to terrorize the inhabitants. Eli and Sawyer quickly become expert at scaling rough-barked cottonwood trunks in piles of flood debris. At lunch stops we wade into the cold, translucent flow. The river, pressing downhill, is forceful and muscular. It piles around us, beginning the relentless job of erosion against the pillars of our legs. I hold the boys by their arms and the river pulls them out flat so they are surfing across the top.

Between Reedpoint and Billings the water is frequently challenging. The steady current is punctuated by abrupt drops down ramps of cobbles, tricky chutes with three-foot waves at the bottom, and eddies strong enough to dunk us all if we don't brace for them. There are ninety-degree corners where the river does its damndest to pull our canoe up against the ledgy shore. We try to skirt the sets of large standing waves that crop up every few miles. They would be great fun if we were paddling alone, but a boat full of sloshing water and wet children is pretty far down on the list of our desires.

Near Park City we encounter a piece of fast water with big waves that we can't avoid. Right at the start Eli tosses out a rubber duck that he thinks is tied to the thwart but which, to his horror, has come unmoored. It goes bobbing downstream to the tune of his keening. Just then we dive over the first wave and take on a slug of river that douses Ruby to her armpits. More water slops over the side, wetting the boys. Eli is still mourning the lost duck, and now Sawyer responds loudly to the unexpected shock of cold river.

"Get to shore!" Marypat yells.

"Everybody shut up!" I counter.

There is a second set of waves before we can make for the safety of the near bank, more water in the canoe, and a rising crescendo of children crying and high-decibel spousal interaction.

The summer flood has rearranged the Yellowstone, providing a fresh set of surprises. There are new channels cut through some islands, and other islands have washed away completely; rafts of trees have come downriver to settle on gravel bars; chunks of bank have sloughed off. Some entire trees, green leaves fluttering in the current, are dangerously aground in the middle of the flow.

In a ten-mile stretch upstream and downstream of Laurel, the river spreads through a series of shallows where flood-borne trees litter the watercourse. Time after time we slide around a bend on the cantering flow and find trees jamming half the river's width or hanging up in the precise spot where the Yellowstone most wants to push us. We pick channels between gravel bars with the ominous feeling of playing watery roulette. The children pick up on our tension and sit quietly. Even Ruby gets the message. Paddling alone, the obstacles would be unremarkable. With children aboard, the strain makes me struggle for air, in the same way driving on icy roads with a carload of kids makes me sweat.

For the first week the sky is blue and the days hot. We slide through Columbus and under the new bridge construction at Laurel. Besides an occasional drift boat and one or two motorboats, there is no one else on the river. The tent goes up on a shady island below Columbus, on cobbly shoreline at the outskirts of Billings, and along a quiet, unmarred side channel where I wouldn't be surprised by a herd of buffalo at sunset or the silhouette of a Crow rider on the bluff.

Across from the power plant in Billings and upstream from the interstate bridge, our canoe coasts through the shadow of Sacrifice Cliffs. When natives of the Northwest were being decimated by the smallpox plague during the 1830s—legacy of fur trapper, explorer, cavalry scout, and early settler—some threw themselves off the high yellow escarpment and into the river in an attempt to appease the Great Spirit.

Our daily mileage varies with the mood in the boat—as few as ten miles when the kids are fussy and bored, as many as twenty-five when Ruby naps and the boys entertain each other by creating wildlife dioramas on the packs with their plastic animals. The children are all at high-maintenance ages. Much as they'd like to pitch in, the fact is that Marypat and I stuff every sleeping bag, tie every shoe, clean every dish, load every pack, cook every meal, paddle every stroke, and put toothpaste on every toothbrush.

In theory, after we put the kids down at dusk, the two of us could return to the fire for a quiet interlude of stargazing, with the river whispering past: camp life the way it used to be. In fact, it's all I can do most evenings to outlast the kids long enough to jot a few notes in my journal. Often as not I am asleep before they are.

Truth is, there are moments when we wonder if it is worth it, but then we coast past a flock of white pelicans and Ruby

is holding herself up by the gunwale, literally dancing with excitement. Then I see the two boys, barely three feet tall, running across their sandbar kingdom in the waning light. Not one of them is five years into life, but they don't bat an eye at sleeping outside, sitting on rocks to eat their dinner, or listening to a great horned owl hooting above the tent.

Conscious memories they may not keep, but a marrow-deep knowledge—of a river on the move, summer winds, sand under bare feet, yellow cliffs rising sheer out of the water—will lodge somewhere as primordial and formative as their first sensory grappling with the universe.

Two days downstream of Billings we climb to the top of Pompey's Pillar. In 1806, William Clark stopped here long enough to etch his name in the soft sandstone and immortalize the squat pillar in honor of Sacajawea's son. He and his contingent were traveling fast for St. Louis, paddling a crude catamaran of two lashed-together twenty-eight-foot dugout cottonwood trees as many as eighty miles in a day.

The sandstone landmark also stands as a kind of gateway to the land of Indian wars. From the top, looking across the river and up a broad valley bordered by low, dry hills, it doesn't require much of a leap to imagine the ranks of cavalry horses, and the creaking artillery carts, the supply wagons that camped there two generations after Clark mapped the valley. The Yellowstone may have the singular distinction of being the river most heavily adorned with town sites named after military men of that era: Custer, Terry, Miles City, Forsyth.

Between Pompey's Pillar and the mouth of the Bighorn River we camp along a stretch of fast water where Marypat and I take giddy turns swimming, with our life vests on, through the waves and riffles. The boys hang on to our shoulders while we whirl ponderously in a broad eddy. It is both a fun ride and an important lesson in the curriculum of river knowledge. Eddy Currents 101.

There, for the first time, we start finding chunks of river-weathered petrified wood and moss agate in the gravel. Eli and Sawyer are transformed from tree climbers and sand excavators into rock hounds with respectably keen eyes. By morning the canoe weight we'd lost by consuming ten days' worth of food is more than replaced by their bucketful of "keepers."

The river, now, has a more sedate feel to it. We coast along for miles under circling red-tailed hawks, letting the current do the work. Occasional diversion dams, some with warning signs and others without, are the most pressing danger. The land has, more and more, the feel of eastern Montana—pastel badland colors, short-grass prairie, arid buttes, and horizons of quiet.

In 1807, when St. Louis marked the western edge of the American frontier, Manuel Lisa built the first of a succession of fur-trading posts near the Yellowstone's confluence with the Bighorn River. His was the first stab of exploitation and settlement along the river. He ushered in the era of trappers, steamboat commerce, military campaigns, and the early waves of permanent settlers. Well downstream, near Sidney, an old railroad bridge across the Yellowstone is still outfitted with the drawbridge section that steamboats passed under.

Almost two weeks out the next moment of truth strikes our expedition. As usual, camp is on an exposed bar below the high-water mark. There are billowy thunderheads and distant lightning in the west when we retire.

Sometime later, the night as black as the inside of a box, the storm pounces. Marypat and I jerk awake to a wind that is collapsing one side of the tent. Rain hammers down, loud as hail. Half naked, we brace ourselves against the windward wall, holding up the taut, straining nylon and bent poles. My face is pressed to the mosquito-netting window. Outside, the night alternates between purple blackness and stabs of

searing brilliance. Lightning strikes across whole quadrants of the western horizon, forks with hot vengeance to the ground, and fills the clouds with its monstrous wattage. In the moments of illumination I see the canoe turned over onshore, our stash of gear wrapped in a tarp, the ghostly trunks of cottonwood, and the dim outline of cliffs across the river.

Eli wakes up, whimpering. Ruby starts to wail. Between gusts of wind that feel like body punches we comfort them, telling them it's just a rainstorm. Sawyer slumbers through the whole thing. His sleeping bag is the darn soaking up a stream of water pouring into the tent and the wall above him is collapsing on his face, but he never wakes.

By morning the tent is a sodden, sandy mess, all the sleeping bags are wet, and we emerge into the mist like earthquake survivors climbing out of the rubble. Fortunately, the day clears and warms up. Dry clothes and several rounds of hot chocolate restore a measure of cheerfulness. By mid-morning the sleeping bags are dry enough to pack away. A couple of hours' worth of bright sun reduces the trauma of the storm to a good story. Our only worry is that Marypat is battling a mysterious foot infection that seems to be getting worse rather than better.

Two days later it happens again. Summer warmth is swept away by an abrupt cold front—scudding clouds, a cold upriver wind, plummeting temperatures. In the course of an hour we go from shorts and T-shirts to coats and wool caps.

This time we are smart enough to locate camp in a sheltered thicket, but the storm is, if anything, worse than the first. Rain is a constant, drumming sheet, hour after hour. Eventually the tent succumbs. Trickle in, then streams and pools. All the bags are damp, and several get soaked through. One of the kids wets the bed for good measure.

Dawn is, not cheering, only more of the same dismal stuff cast in gray light.

Marypat's foot is painful and swollen enough now that she walks only with difficulty. When the rain eases off to a steady drizzle, we assess our position. The small town of Hysham is a mile or two away. If we don't stop now the next reasonable access will be several days' travel downstream, at Forsyth.

In light of Marypat's condition, not to mention the scene in the tent, the decision isn't much of an intellectual challenge. Suddenly this point along the riverbank seems as good a place as any to negotiate the end of our journey and call for our car. Within an hour I have camp battened down and everyone in rain gear. We begin what becomes known as The Hobble to Hysham, down a rain-slick farm road full of promises of pancakes, bacon, and cocoa at the café we feverently hope will be waiting.

Behind us the Yellowstone rolls on through the drizzle toward the Missouri. I play a game with the kids, walking backward and looking across the valley so that the next time we turn around, the grain elevator in town will seem closer. What I don't tell them is that I am also indulging in my own final embrace with the river.