The Windmill

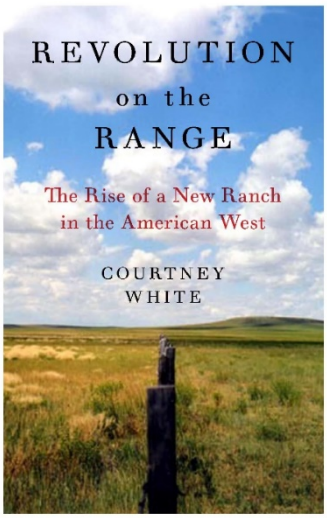
I can recall the exact moment the Windmill struck.

It happened in late July 2008 as I stood in the lobby of the Nature Conservancy's Colorado headquarters in Boulder. An hour earlier, I had given a presentation to a small group of Nature Conservancy employees about ranching and conservation in the West – the subject matter of my book *Revolution on the Range* published two months prior. I was on a book tour and the gathering had been arranged by a friend as a way of helping to get the word out. The previous evening, I spoke at a signing event at my favorite bookstore in Denver, also to a small audience. Feeling disappointed by both events, I lowered my guard as I entered the lobby after my presentation. That's when the Windmill struck, knocking me clean out of my saddle. It shouldn't have been a surprise. I knew that my idealistic desire to change the world ran the risk of a Don Quixote-like charge at the Status Quo, in the shape of a Windmill, but I had managed to avoid its whirling, indifferent blades up to this point. True, there had been a few near misses in the last year or so, but I had turned them into motivation for writing the book – to take the joust to a higher level. As a result, I knew I raised the risk of being struck but I assumed I was up to the challenge.

I was wrong.

I staggered through the next few days, only regaining my senses while cooking breakfast for the family in a campground in Yellowstone National Park. We had scheduled the campout as an interlude in the book tour, a time to relax in our favorite national park and reintroduce Sterling and Olivia to its wonders, first experienced four years earlier. But in my daze, I had miscalculated the timing of the food. Breakfast was ready, but Gen and the kids were still fast sleep in the tent, so I sat down to a private meal of sausage and eggs, my stomach growling with hunger. Seizing the moment, I decided to have a serious conversation with myself while I ate. *What was going on?* I knew I had been badly bruised by the Windmill's blow, but rather than hitting solid ground as I'd expected I felt myself sliding down an incline instead, heading for a dark place that was both distant and unfamiliar. *Where was I?* My body sat at a picnic table in Yellowstone, but my spirit resided in unexplored territory. Whatever the opposite of optimism is, I had found it. Where was the exit, the path back? The food and fresh air, combined with a pot of coffee, had cleared my head somewhat, but when I urged my brain to scan for a map of this new terrain of sinking feelings, it came up empty.

My thoughts turned to the book. After two months of ho-hum sales and low general interest, it was beginning to look like *Revolution* would slip quietly into the Great Pond of Publication without causing much of a ripple. If true, this would be hard to take. It wasn't about money or praise or other conventional bruises to one's ego if your book doesn't sell well. No, my greatest fear didn't involve royalties or reviews. I wanted readers. Sales meant readers, and readers meant impact. I wanted the book to touch hearts and minds, but above all, I wanted it to *change things* in conservation and ranching – to improve the world and our prospects. It sounds both naïve and clichéd, but that was my dream and what motivated me. Of course, having this dream meant tilting at the Windmill. It was worth the risk, I thought.



I took a long sip of the rapidly cooling coffee and looked across the campground as early morning sunlight sliced through the lodgepole pines. Here and there, people stirred at their tents or trucks or stoves. Although the day promised to be warm, wood smoke drifted across the land like a comforting shroud. Through the trees, I could see the outline of National Park Mountain, so-called because it rose above the meadow where in 1870 a party of explorers camped after a soul-stirring sojourn among geysers, hot pools, and waterfalls. According to legend, as they sat around the campfire that final night, one of them proposed the idea of a national park for the area. It was a way, he said, of forestalling the pell-mell rush of developers and speculators that was sure to follow in the wake of their exploratory report. It was a radical idea for the time, but one that quickly resonated with politicians and the public alike, foreshadowing both the rise of the American conservation movement and the devastating exploitation of the unprotected natural world that would take place in the twentieth century. Turns out, the explorers had been right to assume the worst. Fortunately, less than two years after the fateful campfire, President Ulysses S. Grant signed a bill creating Yellowstone National Park, the first in the world, kicking off a conservation strategy that would have significant benefits for land and people around the planet.

Change, in other words – big change – began only yards away from where I sat sipping coffee. It wasn't a dream. It happened. Could it still? I studied the sunlight on the mountain for a while. Feeling calm for the first time since Boulder, I cautiously asked myself a question: *What had I intended to change?* I thought back. The book had begun as a series of profiles of ranchers,

conservationists, scientists, and other westerners I had met who were doing fabulous, progressive, collaborative things for the land and its people. The process of learning their stories had been a revelation to me in the early years of my conservation work. Raised in the environmental movement, I had been told repeatedly by my fellow Sierra Club activists that extractive use of the land, especially logging and livestock grazing, was a zero-sum struggle, meaning that conservation could only advance as far as chainsaws or cattle retreated. I believed them at first but then my college-trained skepticism of orthodoxy kicked in and I began to ask questions. Was it really an either/or situation? Was there no common ground for the environment and local economies? And why, I wondered, did every solution to an environmental ill proposed by activists always seem to carry the maximum penalty for rural people?

A national Sierra Club referendum in 1996, for instance, passed by the members required the organization's Board to adopt a policy opposing all logging on public lands, even small-scale forest thinning projects. It was a protest vote against the U.S. Forest Service, but one with not well-thought out consequences. Dubbed "Zero Cut" by its supporters (and its critics), this uncompromising policy caused a stir across the West among loggers and other members of the working rural poor who correctly saw themselves as bearing the brunt of its intended effect. Hispanic woodcutters in villages across northern New Mexico vigorously protested the Club's new position as racially discriminatory, economically destructive, and anti-rural. Things came to a boil when the Forest Service decided to suspend all woodcutting on the Santa Fe National Forest in response to a lawsuit over the Mexican Spotted owl by two local environmental groups. In protest, a small band of Hispanic loggers descended on the state capitol one sunny day and hung in effigy the two leaders of the groups. The anger of the loggers and other Hispanics caused a great deal of hand-wringing among Sierra Club members, as I witnessed firsthand. Our Santa Fe group didn't support 'Zero Cut,' but our hands were tied by the Club's national policy. We objected formally but were rebuked.

My questions turned into objections: Why a ban on all logging? Why hurt poor people? Wasn't there a small-scale sustainable way to cut trees in a forest? Don't most scientists insist that our forests are overgrown and in need of thinning for their health? Can't we find a way to employ local people in this work? Speaking up with these objections in the Club's statewide newsletter and in meetings, I received a series of nasty attacks from my fellow activists. One cornered me at

a meeting and accused me of "caring more for people than the environment." One publicly accused me of being a stooge for the wood pulp industry. Another tried to get me evicted from the Club. I was stunned. I had joined the Sierra Club in 1994 and accepted a leadership position with the Santa Fe group so I could help defeat the Newt Gingrich-led Congressional assault on bedrock environmental legislation taking place at the time in Washington. Getting attacked by take-no-prisoner activists on our side of the ledger wasn't part of the plan. Apparently, I had charged a Windmill I didn't know existed.

Jim Winder

After a pause to sort out my thoughts at the time, I decided to take the risk and keep asking questions, this time about cattle. I had met a rancher named Jim Winder through the Club who did things differently on his land; he moved his cows around in a way that mimicked the behavior of wild herbivores. He insisted cattle and wildlife could get along. He supported the reintroduction of the Mexican wolf to New Mexico – to the intense anger of *his* tribe. He wanted to find common ground with environmentalists. These were great ideas, I thought, and so we decided to explore them by cofounding the Quivira Coalition. By doing so, I deliberately stepped away from the bitter, decades-long brawl between environmentalists and ranchers over public land and looked around. What I saw was a great deal of progressive, collaborative, and regenerative work taking place across the American West. It was exciting and hopeful.

It was also news. I quickly realized why – it wasn't being reported in the media, which preferred to publish stories about conflict, not collaboration. So, in early 2004 I approached the editor of an online daily news service that focused on the Rocky Mountains, proposing to write an irregular column about this "other West." He agreed, and I began crafting profiles. Two years later, I retreated to a cabin on the James Ranch, north of Durango, Colorado, to knead a pile of essays into a book. Working by intuition, I shaped a loaf out of my scribblings and then sent it on to a colleague for his opinion. His advice came quickly: send it to a publisher he knew. I did so, and to my amazement, they accepted it, assigned an editor, sent me a contract, and set a tentative date for publication. The whole episode blew past in a blur. I was going to have a book published! Readers awaited.

Mt plate clean, I took a long sip of coffee. A slight breeze picked up, ruffling the branches above my head. I could smell wood smoke drifting across the campground. I glanced into the tent, but Gen and the kids were still asleep. What was I trying to change with the book exactly? Many things: the sour relationship between ranchers and environmentalists, poor grazing practices, the trouble with us-versus-them thinking, conflicting ideas about use of natural resources, persistent urban-versus-rural divides. I tilted, in other words, at a lot of Windmills with a lot of whirling blades. They were eminently chargeable from the same horse with the same lance, I was certain. Apparently, I was wrong. There weren't a lot of little Windmills; there was just one – the one that struck me in Boulder. It goes by various names: the Status Quo, Business-as-Usual, Tradition. Whatever its name, it was far more invincible than I had imagined. In fact, at that moment, sitting at the picnic table in Yellowstone, staring at sunlight, it looked downright monolithic and unyielding.

I cleaned up the remains of breakfast, refilled my coffee mug, and decided to go for a walk along the nearby Madison River. Shortly, I came to a spot where a small side channel of the river cut a curve in the bank. Looking down, I saw concentric circles of stones in the water, marking the location of hot pools. A memory came rushing back. I knew this place. I had soaked in one of these pools. Teleported suddenly back to the summer of 1977, I was sixteen years old again, visiting Yellowstone as part of a backpacking odyssey through a series of national parks that culminated with a hike on the John Muir Trail in California, named after the Sierra Club's famous founder. It was a life-changing experience, and when I returned home I embarked on a lifelong adventure in conservation. It felt like a million years ago.

The steam mingled with a thin mist above the pools, giving the scene an ethereal feel, like a postcard or a scene from a travel documentary. I lowered myself carefully to the riverbank, not wanting to spill the coffee. I studied the mist, knowing that when the sunlight reached the vapors they would quickly dissipate. I took a sip from the mug. *Sixteen*. Yellowstone blew my adolescent mind. Four memories stood out: sitting on the front steps of the General Store at Old Faithful eating an ice cream cone while watching a fascinating parade of fellow visitors ebb and flow; hiking past smelly Turbid Lake at the start of our four-day backpack into the upper Lamar Valley; enduring an intense lightning storm while huddled in our exposed tent overnight near Frost Lake; and soaking in one of these hot pools upon our return, worn out but exhilarated.

It was the start of a love affair with Yellowstone. This was my eighth visit. In 1980, three years after my hiking adventure with Mr. Hoffman, Gen and I camped here as part of a memorable

drive together from Albuquerque to Portland to start our junior year at Reed. Yellowstone was part of a world that was fresh and alive with possibility. Camera in hand, I was eager to go exploring. Six years later, I returned to Yellowstone in a darker mood. I had bailed out of graduate school the previous year and felt both dispirited and adrift professionally. Making a long, lonely drive from LA to Helena, Montana, to see an aunt I stopped in the park to soak up its spirit, but nothing felt right. I was caught in emotional meander, not knowing what to do. In contrast, my next visit was highly purposeful. In 1990, I embarked on a major photographic project to investigate the modern West on the centennial of the frontier's famous 'closing' – at least according to the 1890 U.S. Census. I roamed all over Yellowstone, taking black-and-white images that tried to capture the region at the height of its so-called 'New West' period.

After a fourteen-year absence, I returned to the park in 2004, this time with Gen, our five-years old twins Sterling and Olivia, two dogs, and a boatload of responsibilities. I was now a parent, a homeowner, an executive director, and an activist. Social change was my goal. I had left the Sierra Club seven years earlier to search for a mythical land called *Quivira*, embarking on an adventure that gave me the opportunity to see the American West in a whole new light. But it also gave me migraines. Earlier that summer, I took Sterling and Olivia to the cabin on the James Ranch in an attempt to relax and make the migraines go away. It worked. We walked, read, and ate together, far from the daily stress of fundraising, administration, and world-saving. The ranch felt like an oasis, which led to a thought – let's all go to Yellowstone!

Our journey to the park that summer reflected my optimism at the time. On the drive, we stopped at progressive ranches, talked with conservation and political leaders, visited an inspiring farmer's market, and cheerfully explored a region in transition. We discovered Missoula's famous carousel, which we rode endlessly. We had a grand time camping and sightseeing in Yellowstone. A bison wandered through our campsite! In mid-October 2004, I blew through the park in a rental car on my way to Montana to give lectures, participate in meetings, and prospect topics for essays, which I had begun writing. My mood matched the season. It was an election year, but the chances of replacing President Bush were dim. I also looked at the park differently. The national park idea of 1870 now felt anachronistic. The world had changed. Working landscapes were more innovative and relevant, I had come to believe. I didn't stop for photographs.

My next visit to Yellowstone, in June 2005, took place in a downpour – which fit my gray spirits. The reelection of George Bush as president meant four more years of Business-as-Usual at

the federal level, blocking needed reforms on public lands. Progressive change seemed to be stalled at other levels as well. After a decade of hard, hopeful work by many people among the grassroots, it felt like the collaborative conservation movement had lost some momentum as the Status Quo refused to budge. It had also been a tumultuous year at Quivira, resolved only by the contentious departure of a cofounder. That unhappy episode was followed quickly by a bleak cancer diagnosis for Gen's mother Connie (who would die in late November). I needed a break. When I was offered a speaking gig at the annual meeting of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, arranged by a rancher on their Board, I jumped. I brought Sterling and Olivia along, but the park responded with a wet, gray presence, confining us to our cabin, the truck, park buildings, and short hikes. We did manage to see a gray wolf – Olivia's favorite animal – but only behind a fence in a wildlife pen. My talk was a dud. The environmentalists that filled the room clapped politely. Apparently, making friends with ranchers, even progressive ones, still wasn't on the agenda. I felt dejected. Looking back, I'm pretty certain I heard the swooshing of the Windmill in the rain.

I took another sip of my coffee and glanced at the small circle of rocks in the river. 1977. That *was* a million years ago. No computers, no cell phones, no Internet, no 24/7. Just disco music and Jimmy Carter. Social networking meant going for a hike with friends or attending a party, not sitting alone in front of your laptop "friending" other people who sit alone in front of their computers. Isolated, controlled, tethered, safe, inside, and virtual – it's become a world far different from the one I knew when I soaked here all those years ago. The Windmill didn't exist in 1977, at least not to me, though it was likely under construction. Certainly, its blades had not been attached. When did the Windmill become fully operational? 1994? 2000? No, it had to be sometime during the 1980s. I suspect President Ronald Reagan presided over its Grand Opening ceremony. 1984? That sounded right.

I glanced at the forest across the river from where I sat. It looked young. In the summer of 1988, Yellowstone exploded into fire. An unusually hot, dry summer had primed the forests for a record-breaking conflagration that burned over a third of the park and caused it to close for the first time in its history. In an ominous coincidence, the first of the fires ignited not long after Dr. James Hansen of NASA testified in front of the U.S. Senate in Washington, D.C., on a sweltering June day. He declared climate change to be real and underway – and it should be taken seriously. His testimony marked the start of the international effort to stop global warming. The United Nations would establish the scientific Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that

winter. Journalist Bill McKibben's best-selling book on the perils of global warming *The End of Nature* would be published the following year. But the Windmill was already picking up speed by then, I realized. Was it already too late? Was my quixotic adventure doomed from the start? Feeling blue, I rose to my feet and headed back to our campsite. My head had cleared, but a mist had settled on my heart.

For the next two days I went through the motions of Yellowstone, visiting visitor centers, inspecting geysers, eating hamburgers, and driving endless miles. The mist lifted a bit when the kids completed the Junior Ranger program, earning a coveted plastic badge, but it descended again when we lost my new digital camera, left accidently on a bench near a bubbling mud pot. We went for ice cream at the General Store as a consolation. The next day, the mist lifted unexpectedly. It happened during supper at historic Roosevelt Lodge, located in the less-visited northern portion of Yellowstone. We had driven into this part of the park in search of wildlife, wolves specifically. Sterling wanted to see a moose. A kindly ranger told us that both could be found, maybe, near the Northeast entrance, so off we went. We saw crowds of bison in the lower Lamar Valley, but no wolves though we did spy a moose at a distance. No one was disappointed, however. It had been a beautiful day with loads of fresh air and great views.

Feeling hungry at the end of our long day of driving and not in the mood for the hot dogs waiting for us back at the campground, we decided to have supper at Roosevelt Lodge. We arrived just in time to watch the sunset from the Lodge's magnificent wooden porch, whose rocking chairs beckoned invitingly. This was my first ever visit. Built in 1903, the building exuded a 'woodsiness' that immediately appealed to something deep inside, something that was missing in our helter-skelter, plugged-in, and stressed-out modern world. I went inside and ordered a round of Shirley Temples. We settled in on the great porch along with half a dozen other visitors and soaked up the remains of the day. I rocked for a while in my chair silently, determined to think of nothing in particular when the "something is missing" feeling returned. It happened as I caught snippets of conversation among our neighbors in their chairs, chit-chat about their fishing adventures, close calls with wildlife, next destinations, the weather, and so on. Their comforting words blended

Roosevelt Lodge

together. The soft sounds of their voices and laughter wrapped me in a blanket of companionship, warming my heart. I closed my eyes as the daylight slipped into evening glow, and I felt the mist begin to lift.

By the end of supper, it had evaporated entirely. The comforting blanket of human voices gave way to an energetic vitality as the four of us talked and laughed our way through hearty meals of BBQ pork, spaghetti, and hamburgers in the Lodge's restaurant. We told stories, recounted adventures, made plans, and acted silly. The world shrank to a circle the size of a dining room, filled with strength and joy and love, warming my bruised heart, melting the mist. It wasn't just Gen, Sterling, and Olivia – the whole room, which was full of people and their happy noise, had the feel of a large family gathering, as if we had all just attended a really great wedding. Although we were all complete strangers, undoubtedly representing a wide spectrum of states and nations, for a brief moment we were united by food, drink, and conversation. As I listened to the laughter and the clink of glasses, I felt my wound begin to heal a bit. I felt like I could move my arms again and, perhaps, if I wanted, stand on my feet. The shock of the blow still reverberated, however, so I decided to take things slow and try to steer clear of the Windmill for a while.

■

I returned to Yellowstone exactly a year later. I needed to.

It had been a rough twelve months on the save-the-world front. Although I had largely kept my vow to leave my lance on the ground, the Windmill still managed to lacerate my optimism, repeatedly reopening the wound from its previous blow. It ached painfully, despite my attempts at self-doctoring, so I thought a visit to Yellowstone's healing waters would lift my spirits again. Gen had recently started a new job and had not yet earned enough vacation time for a long trip, so I packed up Sterling and Olivia, announcing to them that we were off on a new search for wolves and moose, kissed Gen, jumped in the truck, pointed it north, and hit the road. I secretly crossed my fingers, hoping that somewhere among the geysers and mud pots I would find the bottom of the trench I had fallen into. The emotional slide that began with the Windmill's blow in 2008 had accelerated over the year as I watched the Status Quo prevail in a number of dispiriting ways, especially at my day job on the ranching and conservation front where I absorbed two big disappointments.

The first was the idea of a "grassbank," which is a physical place, such as a ranch, where grass for livestock can be exchanged for tangible conservation work – the subject of a chapter in my book. Beginning in 2004, the Quivira Coalition directed the Valle Grande Grassbank, located on 36,000-acres of Forest Service land near Santa Fe, making it one of a dozen similar projects across the West. The Grassbank had been founded a few years earlier by Bill deBuys, a well-known writer and conservationist in town. Bill was an energetic supporter of the 'radical center' which he described as a place where ranchers and environmentalists can come together to explore what they had in common rather than argue their differences. The term originated among members of the Maplai Borderlands Group, a rancher-led collaborative conservation nonprofit located along the Mexican border in Arizona and New Mexico. Instead of arguing, they wanted to get things done, particularly the reintroduction of fire on public lands where bureaucratic gridlock had become the norm. Grassbanks bucked Business-as-Usual in a number of important ways with their collaborative and progressive goals, injecting innovation into sclerotic federal land agencies and provoking ranchers and conservatists to rethink us-versus-them paradigms. Early signs were hopeful. In 2000, an introductory conference in Santa Fe that I organized drew hundreds of people from all over the Southwest. Former Interior Secretary Stewart Udall gave the keynote. Meanwhile, grassbanks began popping up all over the West. There was even talk about starting a National Grassbank Network. Change was in the air, I was certain.

Bringing cattle to the Grassbank

In the end, however, the Windmill would not be denied.

By 2009, every grassbank except one had fizzled, including ours. Enthusiasm waned as bureaucratic, cultural, and financial obstacles refused to give way despite our hard work. Partners dropped out. Bills stacked up. A rancher on Quivira's board observed wryly that our grassbank had "all the costs of a ranch and no income." He was right. In 2006, to make ends meet we began to run our own cattle on a portion of the Valle Grande Grassbank, thrusting us happily into the local food movement as producers of grassfed beef. It was exciting and new. In the fall of 2008, I had the honor of attending the biennial Slow Food/Terra Madre gathering in Turin, Italy, as a food

producer, which was very cool. Our grassbank continued to struggle, however. When the national economy crashed in the fall of 2008, money dried up. We were forced to sell our cattle herd. By mid-2009, the handwriting was on the wall. We decided to sell the ranch, ending our grassbank experiment for good.

The other letdown involved the Valles Caldera National Preserve, a stunning ninety-five thousand-acre private ranch near Los Alamos, New Mexico. After a great deal of wrangling, it had been purchased by the federal government in 2000 for many millions of dollars and given the novel mandate by Congress to try to make money while (1) maintaining itself as a working cattle ranch, (2) providing recreational opportunities for the public, and (3) preserving its natural beauty. It was a tall order. In fact, it was supposed to be a new model of federal land management, one that broke through the deep paralysis on public lands by blending conservation and natural-resource use into a sustainable whole. It was an exciting idea (another brainchild of Bill deBuys). We were very pleased when Quivira was chosen to lead the grazing team on the Preserve in 2007. We promised both sound stewardship and a financial return to the American taxpayer for the privilege of operating livestock sustainably in such a beautiful and productive landscape. Our effort was successful too. But only for one year. It had been too stressful to manage both the Grassbank and cattle on the Preserve, so we declined to apply for a grazing permit in 2008. It went to an old-school rancher instead, stoking the usual criticism of cattle among some environmentalists. Meanwhile, it had become clear that the overall management of the Valles Caldera was slipping into Status Quo mode and would not be providing a new model of public lands at all. Rumors circulated that legislation would be introduced in Congress to turn the Preserve over to the National Park Service effectively ending the experiment. If true, it meant that a golden opportunity for reform would slip away.

Sterling and our cows on the Valles Caldera

I had invested a lot of time and emotional energy in the Valles Caldera going back nearly a decade when I joined a group of conservationists to advocate for its purchase by the government. Working closely with Bill deBuys, we made a case to the group for working lands and the radical

center. My job was to talk about cattle and good grazing, herding in particular (we employed a herder to move the cattle frequently when we became the permittee in 2007). I thought we had made progress, but I was mistaken. As soon as the ranch was purchased, goal posts began to be moved by the conservation community. I wasn't naïve – I suspected it would happen. I just prayed that the new model would succeed and stave off the 'let's-give-it-to-the-Park-Service' crowd. In my opinion, public lands needed new ideas to meet new challenges, including climate change. In 2007, global warming had become big news, thanks mostly to Al Gore and his documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. Hurricane Katrina had sown the seeds of concern for me, but suddenly, climate change jumped onto my agenda – and Quivira's. We added the word *resilience* to our mission statement, reflecting our new direction. As a society, we needed to move forward, not tread water. Time was short, I suspected. We needed to be bold, proactive, and innovative. The visionary plan for the Valles Caldera intended to do that. But it didn't happen. It all added up to a big desire to return to the rocking chairs at Roosevelt and order another round of Shirley Temples.

There was another reason to go back to Yellowstone, however, that did not involve headlines, politicians, ranchers, bureaucrats, or book sales. It did involve tilting at a Windmill, but not the one that had struck me in Boulder. This one was different, though no less implacable. Instead of representing a resistance to change, it stood for the impossibility of slowing change down. Gen and I had built it ourselves, at our house, where the whoosh from its blades grew louder by the day.

Our children were growing up.

At ten-and-a-half, Sterling and Olivia were fast approaching the point of no return for childhood. I wasn't ready. I didn't want them to leave the land of Honah Lee yet, abandoning poor ol' Puff the Magic Dragon to his cave. And why was it happening *now*, just as my saving-the-world spirits had sunk? It didn't seem fair. In weak moments, a bad case of sentimentality would come over me as memories of the kids at five, the trips we took together in those heady early Quivira days, and our adventures of discovery tumbled together in my mind unproductively. I loved every minute of our time together as a family, and I wanted it to go on and on, knowing

On the road to Yellowstone

perfectly well it was impossible. Hardest of all was watching the kids grow out of their wonder and amazement, out of the world of Harry Potter wands, pirate battles, LEGO fortresses, fairy wings, and unicorns. For ten years, Gen and I had the deep privilege of sharing and nurturing that wonder and marveling at its effects. Lately, however, Puff had started to feel lonely as Sterling and Olivia came around less often, making him sad. Apparently, they had new adventures to pursue in a more grown-up land. One day, of course, they would not return at all. I was on Puff's side. So, if nothing else, heading back to Yellowstone meant I could hit the pause button for a week or so in Sterling's and Olivia's fast-evolving lives, make some new memories and enjoy their gosling-ness for a while longer.

We entered the park via its Northeast entrance. It had been a long day of driving, so we zoomed right to Roosevelt Lodge, vowing to stop only if a moose or a wolf actually trotted across the road in front of us. Once we were settled into our rustic cabin, I headed for the lodge's big wooden porch and the rocking chairs. The moment my feet went up on the railing, the peaceful feeling I had sought for months descended upon me like a spring shower. It was good to be back. After a short while, Sterling and Olivia wandered over, knowing perfectly well where I could be found. They settled into adjacent chairs, rocking quietly. Each had brought a book and a stuffed animal. I asked about appetites, but they shook their heads no. They wanted to read. I rocked idly for a while, thinking. It had been a long journey to get here, miles and months and years and diapers and dollars and worries and memories – all hard earned and all too quickly left behind. Something didn't seem quite fair about it. The kids kept reading, so I decided to watch people come and go. Cars came and went. Time rolled on.

Waiting for Old Faithful

The next day, an amazing thing happened – we saw a pack of wolves! Sunning themselves on a hillside, they were the essence of canid cool, stretching lazily in the bright light, completely ignoring the horde

At our cabin – with wildlife!

of gawkers and well-wishers who lined the road nearby. One watcher let Sterling and Olivia peer through a spotting scope, which made their day. Mine too. I looked briefly, not wanting to take any precious time away from the kids. They looked and looked. The thrill subsided after a while, pushed along by the nonchalant attitude of the wolves. No matter, the discovery had been made, a threshold crossed. We had seen wolves! We thanked the owner of the scope and pushed on to Mammoth Hot Springs, where Sterling and Olivia made a beeline for the gift store. I knew what they wanted: more stuffed animals. One wolf and one moose. I happily pulled out my wallet.

For the next six days, I reveled in parental heaven. We:

Visited Old Faithful.
Swam in the Firehole River.
Waded to a log in a river.
Laughed at waves on a lake shore.
Listened to Marty Robbins sing Western ballads.
Piloted a boat across Yellowstone Lake.
Held our noses among stinky mud pots.
Hiked to a waterfall by moonlight.
Gave each other lots of hugs.

On the morning of our last day, I rose early and went for a predawn stroll among the geysers in the Old Faithful Basin. Not wanting to leave, we had decided to stay an extra day, but Roosevelt was sold out, so we shifted to a cabin near the Old Faithful Inn, which was both lucky and a blessing. It was a lovely spot, right next to the murmuring river and a stone's throw from the great geyser itself. We walked a big loop through the basin the previous evening, timing it so we could catch Old Faithful once more going off just as we approached from a less-crowded direction. Later, after a supper of spaghetti and garlic bread in the cafeteria, we wandered out again to watch the eruption once more, this time in the bewitching light of late evening. We stood in silence for a long time in front of the sublime sight, marveling at the power and mystery of nature. I held Sterling's and Olivia's hands.

My predawn stroll the next morning was shrouded in fog. A thick, cool mist had settled on the basin, giving it an otherworldly feel, as if I were walking on the moon of a strange planet

(though with information signs). The wooden walkways were perfectly discernable, however, so I relaxed as I walked and let my mind wander in the mist. How did I feel? Better. The sliding feeling that had started a year earlier was gone. I stood on solid ground. This was good. However, tall walls loomed all around, telling me that I was still standing in something deep. And I could hear the whoosh of the Windmill's blades far above me, turning relentlessly. Climbing out of wherever I had fallen would be difficult, I knew, fraught with the risk of more blows. Staying down here wasn't an option, however. For my sanity's sake, I had to find a way out.

I saw a way. I perceived it on our last night at Roosevelt. Walking back to our cabin after a lovely supper together, Sterling and Olivia suddenly bolted to the top of a small hill, feeling spunky. I watched them as they horsed around in the amber light. They did a little dance together, spontaneous and childish, as if they were listening to a happy tune that was beyond the range of my adult ears. I envied their ability to hear it, and to pirouette about like that, so carefree. For a moment, the wound where the Windmill's blade had struck began to throb painfully, as a surge of sentimentality rose. I missed the early years and the optimism they represented, a lot. Back when things were fresh. I pushed it all away. I was holding onto things that needed to be let go, I realized, holding them fast to my chest, making myself sick. It wasn't just about my goslings. My health, I saw, was up to *me* – not to news headlines or Congress or bureaucrats or stuck-in-the-mud ranchers and conservationists. None of them had a cure for what ailed me – only I did. The first step was to release things that I couldn't control and let them sail away on an evening's breeze, like music I could no longer hear.

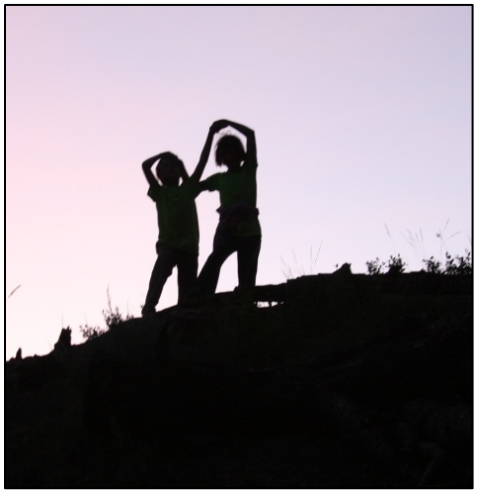
My heart ached suddenly in the fog. Letting things go, childhood most of all, is a lot easier said than done, especially when the future looks so uncertain. I detoured into an educational pullout and gazed down at the sign in front of me, covered with incomprehensible symbols. I think I stood in front of another geyser, but my eyes weren't focusing properly. Looking up, I thought I could detect the outline of the Windmill among the vapors, spinning silently. I closed my eyes. The Windmill wasn't going away, I realized, not now and probably not ever. Did I want to find a new steed, climb on, and continue my quest? *Yes.* I wanted to continue. For Sterling and Olivia, I needed to keep trying. I needed to push on, explore new country – carbon country, as it turned out. To get there, I knew I would need a new map. I'd begin right away, I decided.

I opened my eyes. The fog had thinned a bit, and I could tell that dawn wasn't far off. The hour had flown away. It was time to head back to the cabin, rouse my fledglings, and head home.

I hesitated, however, in the turnout. Pivoting here meant taking my finger off the pause button. Sterling and Olivia would commence growing again, pushing on rapidly to adolescence, adulthood, careers, relationships, bills, and their own Windmills. I wasn't ready. I leaned on a railing, peering into the past. Puff was out there somewhere, in the gray-white mist, his great-horned head resting nobly and sadly on the floor of his cave, waiting. Words of comfort were useless. He knew the rap and was inconsolable. I was consoled, however, by the light, the fresh air, and the love I knew was waiting for me. I felt better, much better. I decided: you do what you can, you push on, you pray, you light a candle, and you give hugs to friends and family. Be a positive force, have a heart, and don't forget the music.

Time is the great leveler, poets tell us, the ultimate arbiter of our fates. It rolls on as relentless and unfeeling as erosion, and as mighty as a thunderstorm. Tilting at time's merciless current, I now understand, is like trying to keep your children from growing up. You can hold on for a while, but eventually you have to let go.

Just ask Puff.



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All photos by Courtney White.
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