

THE FINER THINGS CLUB

*The Summertime Chronicles
of a Yellowstone Housekeeping Employee*

BY
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The Finer Things Club: The Summertime Chronicles of a Yellowstone
Housekeeping Employee
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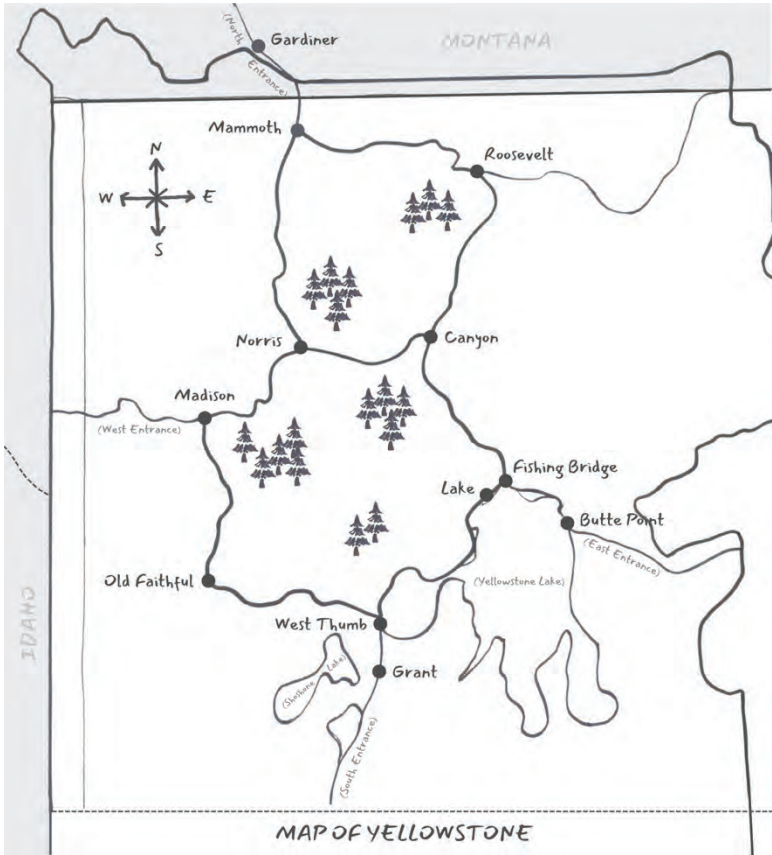
“I went to Wyoming, in other words,
to make a man of myself.”

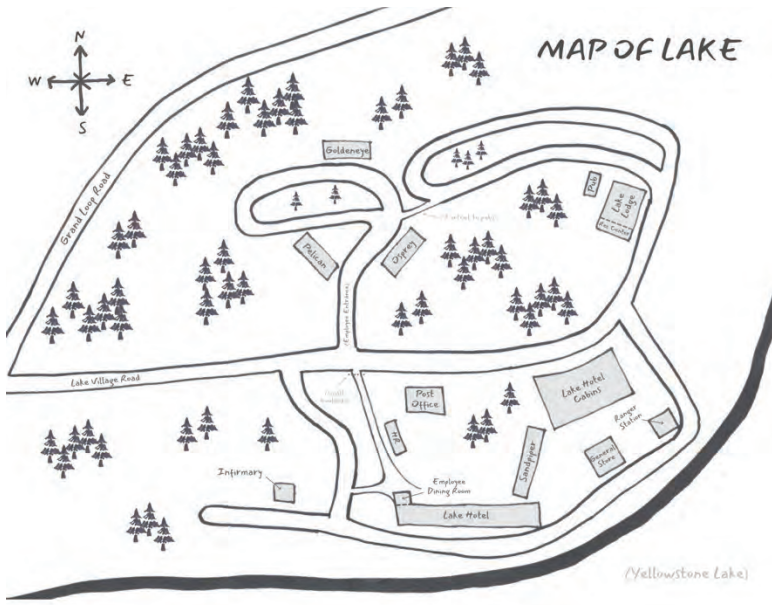
Elizabeth Gilbert, *The Last American Man*

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“Here is your country. Cherish these natural wonders, cherish the natural resources, cherish the history and romance as sacred heritage, for your children and your children’s children. Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches, or its romance.”

Theodore Roosevelt





MAP OF LAKE

(Yellowstone Lake)



SEASON I



CHAPTER 1

I found myself crunched between fourteen people I'd only known for three months, posing for one last picture. I knew it'd be the last time we'd be together for what would most likely be a very long time—if ever again. We agreed to coordinate by wearing our matching imitation-Patagonia pullovers, deemed “jerseys” as if we were a competitive sports team. We might as well have been; we'd seen one another in just about every way we could—sweating against the incline of a forty-five-degree mountain, cursing under our breath while arms-deep in toilets or dishwashing soap, stumbling through the employee pub, staring starstruck at the exposed Milky Way, clutching our stomachs in laughter in our crummy little dorms...

While smiling for that picture, genuinely smiling, I couldn't help but feel something that I rarely ever felt. I was... *proud* of myself.

Every fireplace in the lodge was filled with the warm glow of reddish light. The effect was something I now thought of as *home*. In a matter of months, the simplest ingredients—trees, sunlight, mountains, fresh air—had compensated for my inner deficiencies and *I* made it happen. I took a chance when I left my Midwestern home at just twenty years old to

travel over thirteen hundred miles to the most remote location in the continental US, and then do it all over again a second time. It was, in fact, my higher sense of self that enabled me to become the person I always knew I could be but was afraid to personify—the *real* me.

Thing is, I've always been sensitive, constantly feeling everything everywhere all at once in every shape and form, even as a child. Feeling "too sensitive" can be tricky; you realize early on that it can both burn and cure, break and heal, and believe that, because it's a contradiction, it must be wrong. It doesn't make sense. No one talks about it (or if they do, it's often misunderstood or misrepresented).

People like that are sometimes called chameleons because they learn to blend in—they absorb their atmosphere and take it everywhere with them. Chameleons are not allowed to drop it; they can abandon, disguise, or distract it, but never forget it.

I remember a girl in first grade who liked to swipe extra copies of worksheets from our classroom's recycle bin to play teacher with during after-school care. Each day, she instructed whatever group of kids she could manage to rally (usually no more than three) to read the directions aloud with her and begin solving math problems before walking around and monitoring our answers like a real teacher. If we had a question, we raised our hand. If we had to go to the bathroom, we raised our hand. I always felt kind of bad for her because she could never get as many volunteers as she would have liked. Everyone else wanted to play games, color, talk, or dance to whatever Kidz Bop music was playing through the stereo, but I stayed back to do her schoolwork so she would feel better. Truth is, I never wanted to. I didn't want to play the student and sit on the floor of the cafeteria and solve math problems, but I did it so she

wouldn't feel let down. I wanted her to feel empowered by us calling her *Miss Ashley*, so I sacrificed my own comfort every day to fulfill her goals.

Over the course of my life, I had become fluent in reading people well enough to detect what they needed so I could more readily offer my support. It took me the better part of two decades to realize I did it all for *acceptance*. I would become everyone and me at the same time, perpetually caught in the in-between, belonging everywhere and nowhere.

I was eight when I discovered journaling. Most of the time it was about the drama of school or who had a crush on whom but, even then, I knew my journal was a safe place to make those admissions. By the time I was twenty-one I had accumulated nearly twenty of them, the contents evolving from crushes to important college decisions and onward to my first existential crisis. The quiet expectancy of a blank page always made me feel like I could tell it the truth, so I did. Over and over. For thirteen years.

Often, carrying myself through my own life felt like carrying a dandelion through a windstorm of others' opinions and expectations, and I never knew how to protect that delicate part of me until I learned the obvious: I was allowed to take shelter.

That's when Yellowstone happened.

CHAPTER 2

I was driving east on Highway 90, still two hours from the park, when I broke down sobbing, snot and tears rolling down my face like fat drops of rain on a window. The thought of living and working in Yellowstone was enough to overwhelm me with anxiety and an existential fear of the unknown. I had no connections in Wyoming and knew virtually nothing about housekeeping, apart from occasional trips to my grandma's house from my college dorm for free laundry and food. All I knew was how to go to class, take tests, and scout for jobs. Tomorrow would be the first day of the next three months of my life, and it'd be the longest I'd ever been away from home, from everything I'd buried myself in for so long.

Six months earlier, before the start of my sophomore year, I was reading on the back porch of my family's home in the sweltering Missouri heat, when I received a lecture from my dad on the importance of finding a summer job.

"I told you," I reasoned, despite my growing irritation, "the library doesn't have much work in the summer and it's a forty-five-minute commute from here. The dorms are closed too, unless you want to pay three thousand for me to stay there, and they're not even that nice."

“Find something local, Lauren,” he said, standing by the back door of the porch, drenched in sweat and dirt from the early afternoon yard work he’d occupied himself with.

Easier said than done. “Dad, I’ve already reached out to four places and haven’t heard back from them. Plus, by the time I get accepted, it’ll take a week or two to get trained with whatever it is, and even then, I’ll only be there for a month or two.”

“Follow up with them. Reach out. Ask about the status of your application. Take the initiative.”

Take the initiative. He didn’t know how much anxiety fueled the opportunities I *had* taken the initiative with—personal athletic records, orchestra concerts, piano competitions, a 4.0 GPA, graduating with honors, scholarships, collegiate enrollment. Whatever it might be, I always acted out of fear. Fear and the need for acceptance were what drove my accomplishments—not wanting them for their own sake. And then, in the heat of the summer and our disagreement, I got an idea. “What if I worked in Yellowstone next year?”

“Yellowstone?” He seemed surprised.

“Yeah. You did that, didn’t you?”

My dad nodded. “I did. I worked in housekeeping in my twenties. Had to’ve been back in the eighties.”

“So why don’t I do that next year?”

I could see the gears in his head turning before he ultimately agreed. “You know, I think that’s a pretty good idea. And you know what, if you do end up working there, I’ve got a bunch of camping gear you can take with you.”

I nodded, grateful to be relieved of the immediate pressure and now intrigued by the thought of working there. I didn’t know why I hadn’t thought of it before. I’d heard plenty of

his stories and he'd always spoken of them so fondly, so I knew that suggesting Yellowstone invited minimal resistance. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized it would solve three problems: (1) It would make up for my lack of employment now if I didn't get hired last-minute. (2) It would resonate deeply with my dad, thus diffusing any hesitation around it. And (3) I could do something by myself for the first time in my life.

I considered the possibility of doing something that I wanted, to taste a bit of freedom from who I portrayed and allowed myself to be—pristine, uncomplicated, and agreeable. Though that begged the question: why did I only feel comfortable doing what my parents themselves had done before? I started cross-country in seventh grade because my dad grew up running. I pushed myself into debate freshman year of high school because my mom told me how much she enjoyed it when she was my age. I planned to become a teacher because my whole family was made of them. I always had their support, especially with that, so when news broke that I'd be spending May through August working as a housekeeper in the middle of Yellowstone, just a few months after that sweltering conversation with my dad, I was—for the first time—met with silence, hesitation, worry, and fear, emotions I made a point to avoid at all costs.

Part of me felt like I had ruined my extended family's perception of me by making a choice to do something new and different, and that weighed on me. But now that I was here, driving toward the next three months of my summer, I didn't know what to expect or who I would become; I was afraid of being my own ideal, of the real me who would emerge from the false persona I had sheltered behind for so long.

As much as it scared me, I knew this was the time to take risks. I had always wondered what it would be like to be all of myself all at the same time without fear or reservation. Now I had the opportunity to find out. After all these years, who really *was* I?

From the driver's seat, my face sticky with drying tears, I stared ahead down the straight Montana highway, unblinking and meditating on these feelings of intimidation, uncertainty, and even a smidgeon of auspiciousness. I occasionally glanced at the clusters of pronghorns prancing up and down their golden hills with their signature white butts and long, curved antlers. Some stood looking out at the vast mountainous prairie before them, like kings on their thrones surveying their land. I wanted to be one of them, at least for a while, grazing, dancing, and feeling the warmth of the sunlight melting into my back.

Instead, I straightened up, sniffing myself back into place, and turned on the radio in search of a decent station.

The only direction left now was forward.