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2001: ONE LOON'S ODYSSEY

Two years ago I stumbled across a website that led to a "chat page" that has had a bigger impact on my life than I ever could have imagined. And "stumbled across" is pretty much how it happened. The very first time I logged on to the Internet, I had no idea of how to "surf the net", but was eager to learn. The first thing that popped into my mind to try to "look up" on the net was Yellowstone – a long-time love of mine going back to the mid-70's when I spent two summers working there. Doing a search on "Yellowstone" brought up a long list of websites. The third site on the list was something called "The Total Yellowstone Page". It sounded like what I was looking for, so I clicked on that and my fate was sealed – I was an instant addict! This site was – and IS – remarkable! Full of photos, stories, trip reports, maps, camping and lodging info, hiking info, wildlife info, road info, history, "The Hidden Yellowstone" page which introduced me to new park mysteries, and a "chat page"! I immediately decided that this site is aptly named, as it truly IS the "Total Yellowstone Page". And it has changed my life.

This is my "trip report" of my journey to the "2001 Yellowstone Loonion." But it is also more than that. It is the culmination of a chain of events set into motion when I clicked on that site, on that seemingly uneventful day early in 1999. My obsession with Yellowstone has evolved into an addiction to The Total Yellowstone Page and the "Loon Chat Page" in particular. I have spent thousands of hours laughing, crying, arguing, and debating with, and encouraging, chiding, cheering and loving the countless friends I have made here.

THURSDAY, MAY 24, 2001 – GETCHER MOTOR RUNNIN'

Six PM and I am FINALLY hitting the road! It is Thursday, May 24th, and I have been working towards this departure ALL DAY LONG! If truth be known, I've actually been preparing for this journey for a lot longer than that, but it's all come down to today. My plans have changed a couple of times earlier this week, as I was offered a job :-)) which I have accepted, necessitating my return from Yellowstone a little earlier than I had intended. :-((But now the laundry is all done, the house is clean, the written instructions on how to care for my kitties have been left for my sister, Marcy. I'm all packed and everything's been loaded into my car, including fellow Loon Ross' two suitcases full of suits, which he left behind when he left California to go

Highway 101, I begin to mentally KICK myself: for crying out loud, Allison, you have a friend who is a “Master Agent” in the AMFAC Reservations Department right there in the Mammoth Hotel! Ross KNOWS you have a reservation – SO WHAT if you don’t have your confirmation slip??? SHEESH! I am beating myself up for getting such a late start in the first place, and then for having to double-back, adding another half hour to my trip. But, taking a deeeeeeeep breath, I remind myself that this is my vacation, I’m not on anybody else’s time clock, it doesn’t matter when I get there as long as I GET there. I need to just relax, go with the flow, and enjoy the journey. And so I do. And I am SO PSYCHED!!!

Traffic isn’t too bad, even though it is rush hour on Thursday evening before Memorial Day weekend. An hour and a half later, as I’m approaching Sacramento it occurs to me that I will be passing within a quarter mile of fellow Loon Buck’s REI store. While I have no idea if he’s working tonight or not, I decide I simply can’t drive past without at least looking for his car and leaving a note if I find it! So I pull off the Capital Expressway at the Cal Expo exit, and sure enough – his car is there. I look like WAAAYYYYY too much of a slob to actually go inside the store (hey – I knew it was going to be a lonnnngg drive and I dressed for comfort!). :-)) Besides, I shouldn’t really take the time. But I can’t resist giving him a little “jab” (it’s my job) for missing yet another Loonion. The only piece of paper I can find to write on is a napkin, and I tuck it under the door handle of his car.

Back on eastbound Interstate 80, my car begins the long climb up through the foothills of the Sierras – the famed “Mother Lode” – California gold country. An hour after leaving the note for Buck, I am high in his beloved Sierras. As I drive over Donner Summit I look into my rear-view mirror to see a most exquisite sunset behind me, as the sun sinks to the horizon. The Artist Above has filled His palette with my favorite colors and brushed them across the sky – peach, pink, mauve, lavender, violet, indigo – against a background of robin’s-egg blue. The wispy cirrus clouds are edged with gold, and I catch glimpses of the deepening colors in my rear-view and through openings in the pines on the ridges behind me. I accept this beautiful sunset as I leave California as another “good omen” for my journey.

Up here in the mountains, the music station I have been listening to on the radio starts to give out, so I switch to my favorite “liberal” talk-radio host, Bernie Ward, on San Francisco’s KGO radio. On this day Senator Jeffords has defected from the Republican Party to become an Independent, shifting control of Congress to the Democrats. This is

the big story of the day, and Bernie is absolutely GLOATING about this turn of events. I am amused, picturing Bernie frothing at the mouth as he raves on in his studio.

Darkness falls as I begin my descent of the eastern slope of the Sierras. I stop in Truckee to fill my gas tank. I am the only customer. The young man working points in the direction of the restrooms in response to my inquiry, and as I head for them he reaches for the knob on his radio and asks me if I mind if he "turns it up". "No," I smile back at him. "I like it loud." Gas here is \$2.24 a gallon for mid-grade, 89 octane, unleaded.

As a little girl, I used to come up to Truckee with my family every winter to play in the snow, and every summer to swim in Donner Lake. My Aunt Diane's father-in-law had a cabin up here that we would stay in for a week or two at a time. The cabin was the last one on the left going up a long hill. I have many memories of sledding, tobogganing (is that a word?), snow-disking, and tubing down that hill – solo, tandem, in trios and quartets! My memories are infused with the scent of the soft pine needle carpet of the forest, warmed by the summer sun – breathing in that delicious smell as I scrambled around on the big granite boulders and rock outcroppings on the hill above the cabin. I remember visiting the state park at Donner Lake, my silent awe as I perused the museum exhibits and stood at the base of the memorial to the infamous, ill-fated Donner Party. I remember the time my sister Marcy and I took a rented paddle-boat so far out on Donner Lake that we couldn't hear the lifeguard calling to us over his bullhorn to return to shore! And I remember the "fool's gold" glittering in the chilly waters of Donner Lake, and my childhood fantasy that if I just looked long enough and hard enough, I would surely find a gold nugget down by my toes on the sandy bottom of the lake.

Minutes after paying the young "rocker" gas station attendant for my gas and leaving Truckee behind, I cross the state line from California to Nevada. You don't need a sign to tell you this. The abrupt change from forest to desert lets you know. Up ahead I can see gaudy casino lights – first of Boomtown, then Reno beyond. Reno has grown quite a bit since the last time I passed this way. As I approach the city, I am thinking about my mom. She doesn't trust my car and is worried about me driving all this way alone, so I have promised to call her from my motel along the way, to let her know everything is OK. Only problem is I'm not sure I'm going to stop at a motel. I'm thinking of trying to drive straight through to Yellowstone, as I've heard Buck and Dan M. talk about doing. My plan is to pull over at a rest stop to take

a nap if/when I get too tired. I've got my pepper spray in my purse to help me feel brave. But I haven't told Mom of this plan, as I know it'll just make her worry more. I decide to stop in Reno to call her, because I know it's close to her bedtime.

I take an exit and spend the next 20 minutes wandering around the streets of "The Biggest Little City In The World" trying to find a pay phone that doesn't look too scary to use. It's after 10:00 when I finally reach Mom. I lie to her because I don't want her to worry. I tell her I have just gotten some dinner and now I'm going to go check into a room. "Where are you?" she asks. "What kind of a motel?" "The Days Inn in Elko, Nevada," I ad lib. "Oh, good. That's a good place," she says. I don't tell her I didn't leave Santa Rosa until after 6:00. Elko is where I had hoped to be by now, but it is still another four hours east of Reno. But, Mom is reassured, so if she's kept awake worrying all night tonight, it'll be one of my five siblings, and not me, who's to blame. Mission accomplished, I now spend another 15 minutes wandering the streets of Reno trying to find my way back to the highway.

It's about 10:30 PM, and with Bernie Ward still chortling with glee on my radio, I head out of town on Interstate 80. A few miles out of town, the speed limit goes up to 75 mph, which is very cool! I'm cruisin' now. In California the speed limit is 65 on most highways, including the ones I travel regularly. But before long I am admitting to myself that I don't want to drive all night, and I don't want to sleep in my car. I want a bed, and I want a shower, and I want to wash my hair in the morning, 'cuz I know it may not happen in Yellowstone. If that makes me a "high maintenance chick" then so be it.

After a while I pull into a rest area and turn on my dim overhead light to study my map. A dozen big rigs are parked here, many with engines rumbling, their yellow and orange parking lights glowing in the darkness. I calculate it'll be close to 3:00 AM by the time I can get to Elko. I imagine that my chances of getting a room at that ungodly hour are slim to none, and why bother? I decide to try to get a room in Winnemucca, and I check my AAA Tour Book for motels and rates. I drive on, determined to at least get that far. Bernie (the talk radio host) keeps me company all the way to Winnemucca, and I think I'll have to call in to his show next week when I get back to NoCal and tell him he was coming in loud and clear all the way to Winnemucca, Nevada, the night Jeffords "jumped ship" on the Republicans.

It's 1:00 AM as I roll into town. I look for the motel that my Tour Book says has the best rates. I find it quickly but the "No Vacancy" sign is lit. So I look for the one with the next best rates, according to my book. Its lobby is dark, and while I'm pretty sure they have a "night bell" I could ring, the thought of having a crabby, just-awakened desk clerk assign me a room intimidates me, so I drive on. I finally find a motel with a brightly lit lobby and a conscious clerk behind the desk. A quick peek at my Tour Book tells me that while they're not the cheapest, their rates are acceptably reasonable. The young girl who checks me in is friendly and chatty and asks if I'd like a wake-up call. I decline, having brought my own alarm clock. It's the first time I've ever done THAT on a vacation, but then this is the first time I've ever planned to be in the Lamar Valley at the crack of dawn. She asks if I prefer an upstairs or a downstairs room ("Downstairs"), but tells me the "only problem is" I'll "have to park far away from the door" to my room. "Unless," she says, "You don't mind staying in a 'handicapped' room?" "Of course I don't", I reply, adding that "The less distance I have to haul my stuff, the better."

The room is clean, comfortable, non-descript – a standard motel room with ugly lamps and bad art on the walls. Is it just me, or has anyone else ever noticed how all motels seem to have ugly lamps and bad art? I go get some ice and a couple of cans of Diet Pepsi, and settle into the bed, TV remote in hand. I watch some news and a weather report ("Chance of afternoon thunderstorms"). Then a commercial comes on and at first I'm not really paying attention, but then something "clicks" in me and I stare at the screen, suddenly interested. The "singing cowboy" in the commercial is Don Edwards, selling his 2-CD set of songs of the "old west". I would have NO IDEA of WHO this character is, would never have even HEARD of him, were it not for one of my BESTEST Loon friends, Dan M. This is a good omen, I tell myself. Dan had been incredulous a few months earlier, when I told him I had never heard of Don Edwards. Of course, Dan M. is a just a bit of a history buff when it comes to the old west, and he likes those old cowboy campfire songs. He had even e-mailed Stormygirl and I the lyrics to one of his favorites: "Little Joe, The Wrangler," as well as one of the wonderful short stories he has written – Chaw – which was based on this song. And now here, at 1:30 AM in my motel room in Winnemucca, Nevada, on my way to the Loonion – here is Don Edwards on TV and he's singing an excerpt from "Little Joe, The Wrangler"! I jot down the 800 number to order the CD, thinking that if I get the chance I'll post a message to Dan and give him the info, though chances are good that he already has this CD.

Still wired from the road and not yet ready for sleep, I start reading the little "community guide" left for guests in each room, thinking I might find a good place to have breakfast in the morning. There's something about having a good breakfast when you're traveling that somehow kind of makes it "official" – that you're "on vacation"... I don't know. There's just something about that... In the guide I see an ad for a place called "Global Coffee" (mochas, lattes, pastries) and it's an INTERNET CAFÉ! YAY! "Free Internet Access" the ad says. I decide to go there in the morning and post a "message from the road" on the chat page on my way to the Loonion, and my message to Dan. I turn off the TV, turn off the lights, and sink into my goose down pillows from home. Sleep comes immediately.

FRIDAY, MAY 25th (Part One) – ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Well I'm so tired of cryin' but I'm out on the road again – I'm on the
road again

Well I'm so tired of cryin' but I'm out on the road again – I'm on the
road again

I ain't got no (fella) just to call my special friend

And I'm going to leave the city, got to go away

I'm going to leave the city, got to go away

All this fussing and fighting, man I sure can't stay

You know the first time I traveled out in the rain and snow – in the
rain and snow

You know the first time I traveled out in the rain and snow – in the
rain and snow

I didn't have no fella not even no place to go...

In the morning I awake before the alarm goes off. I have set it for 6:30, but it is only 5:45. I have actually only been asleep for less than four hours. I close my eyes again and go back to sleep for another half hour. But by 6:15 I hop out of bed and into the "handicapped" shower. I take my time washing and blow-drying my hair, re-pack my bag, re-load the car. I return my room key to the front desk. They have a "free continental breakfast" set up in the lobby. I grab a small styrofoam cup of black coffee and a small banana-nut muffin, about the size of half my fist, if that. I ask the East Indian guy at the desk if he could tell me how to find "Global Coffee". He has never heard of it. Far be it from me to have noted the address from the guidebook while still in my room. (That would

have been too easy and too logical!) He doesn't have one of those guides at the front desk, but he tries to find "Global Coffee" in the telephone book. It's not there. In his "sing-song" Indian accent, he says, "Well, if it's in this town, it'll be on this main drag." As I leave, I smile to myself at the incongruity of the vernacular "main drag" being uttered by someone with such an accent. I like it.

It's a mild, sunny morning and as I pull out of the motel onto the "main drag" I notice that the town cemetery is directly across the street, and it's already full of Memorial Day flags. This makes me think about the "Loons' service project": the Gardiner cemetery clean-up we'll be doing on Monday. I cruise up and down the "main drag" a couple of times, not finding "Global Coffee". Just as I am headed back east through town for the last time, giving up and heading for the interstate, I see it! Just a tiny place, a couple of folks sitting at a table out front, sipping their latte's. I go in, and not wanting to use their computer without purchasing something, I order a large coffee mocha. The energetic (java wired?) young woman serving me asks how many "shots" of espresso I want in my mocha, "One, two, or three?" Three. "Want vanilla flavoring?" Sure, why not? "Whipped cream?" Heck yeah. She rings me up and I ask about Internet access. "Of course," she says, pointing to a PC at a desk in a corner. "You're welcome to use it, but it might need to be logged on first." I find it is already logged on and I quickly bring up the Loon page.

It's been a couple of days since I last checked in, so I have to read a few of the new posts. There is one from Ballpark Frank about "early Loon arrivals." THAT gets me REALLY pumped! I am SO looking forward to finally actually MEETING Ballpark Frank!!! I post a quick "from the road" message, and my message for Dan M., telling him about seeing Don Edwards on the TV last night, and letting him know he is definitely "here in spirit", as we say. Realizing I am once again getting a later start than I intended and thinking I have about a 12 hour drive ahead of me, I log off and get back behind the wheel. It's between 9:30 and 10:00 as I leave Winnemucca.

KGO is no longer coming in on my radio – I guess the signal is stronger at night – or there is less other stuff "cluttering up" the airwaves. Back in January when Mark R. and I drove together from San Francisco to the "CaLoonion" in Palm Springs we could NOT – for the life of us – find a decent station on the radio. There were a few country stations (sorry, but I'm not a big fan of country music, although I do like SOME of it...), a LOT of mariachi music (a little o' that goes a LONG way!), and we must have heard Madonna's latest hit

at least a dozen times. The two "oldie" stations we could find seemed to be playing nothing but The Supremes that weekend, and while I generally love "oldies", I generally dislike The Supremes, Diana Ross in particular! There were NO good rock stations to be found on that trip. Unfortunately, I don't have a tape- or CD-player in my car – ironic, considering how much I consider music to be an essential part of my life! But we have numerous GREAT radio stations in the North Bay Area, so I don't really miss it too much – only on trips! And now, crossing the Nevada desert, I don't hold out much hope. I'm expecting to find only country stations – but I am pleasantly surprised! I find several GREAT "classic rock" stations, and a couple of good "alternative" stations.

As I mentioned, the speed limit on I-80 through Nevada is 75 mph. Last night in the dark that was plenty fast enough. But this is a new day. And this is the day that I arrive in YELLOWSTONE – at the LOONION! When I first get on the Interstate, 75 feels like a good speed, and I'm confident I'm going to make good time crossing Nevada. But after what seems like HOURS of driving in a STRAIGHT LINE with NO CHANGE OF SCENERY – nothing but brown desert all around with naked brown mountains way off in the distance – 75 mph starts to feel like I'm NOT MOVING!!! I've got the radio cranked up and I'm singin' along at the top of my lungs (Mark R. can attest to the fact that I really do this) :-)

 "...love me two times
 once for tomorrow
 once
 just
 for
 to-day
(bam, bam, bam, bam, bam)
 love me two times
 I'm blown away!"

...and I'm averaging about 90 mph across that Nevada desert! Yes, Photodude, yes Buck – I know that in your book this makes me a "hypocritical environmentalist". Yeah. Right. SO SUE ME. I think I can sleep at night. Lord knows, neither of you EVER contradict yourselves! :-)

At one point, (this is after several hours of straight-line desert driving) I look down at my speedometer and it tells me I'm going ONE

HUNDRED MILES AN HOUR! WHOA!!! I had NO IDEA I was going that fast! That's – like – the top speed on my speedometer! For all I know, I might have been going faster, and the speedometer just couldn't go any higher! Of course, I immediately take my foot off the accelerator and drop back down to a more reasonable 90 mph. :-)
This is probably not a good thing for a Traffic School Instructor to be publicly admitting.

Baby watcha tryin' to do?
Ya' better slow down
Baaayyyybee now you're movin' way too fast
You gotta gimme little lovin'
Gimme little lovin'
OW! If you want our love to last...

I finally reach Elko, and I have to stop for gas. I pull into a station and head for the cashier to tell her I want to fill my tank. A man towards the back of the station says, "Just go ahead and pump it, Ma'am." I tell him I'm paying cash. "That's okay, just go ahead and pump it, Ma'am." In California, if you are paying cash, you have to pay before you pump. And if you want to "fill 'er up" you give them a little more money than you think your tank will take, and then go back afterwards for the change. Or, you just get \$20 worth, but your tank isn't quite full. Whatever. Ross found this to be EXTREMELY annoying during his seven weeks with me in California. Of course, I found his annoyance to be EXTREMELY amusing! ;-P

So, I start filling my tank, and "Mr. Helpful" comes over and leans against one of the pumps, watching me. I feel a little awkward – like "small talk" needs to be made. So I smile and say, "Well, gas is a little more reasonable here than it was the last time I filled up." "How much was that?" he asks. "\$2.24 a gallon last night in Truckee." "Oh, in Truckee," he says, nodding. "And people here complain that this is too high!" "This" is \$1.69 a gallon.

"You've got a bad tire here," he says, nudging my front right tire with his toe. Here we go, I think to myself. He sees a woman traveling alone, from out of state – easy mark! "Don't tell me, I don't want to know," I say, knowing he's going to tell me anyway. I bought four new tires not more than a year ago, maybe less. I didn't even look at them before setting out, because I figured they were new enough to still be in reasonably good condition. If they weren't, I really didn't want to know, because I could barely afford this trip to begin with, and if I was going to have to buy new tires, I wasn't going to be able to

make it. And I'd been telling myself all year – not to mention all my Loon friends on the chat page – that NOTHING would keep me from going to the Loonion this year. It darn near killed me to have missed the first Loonion a year ago.

So Mr. Helpful tells me to get in my car and turn the wheels to one side so he can show me what he's talking about. My heart sinks. I can clearly see that he is right, the tread on that tire is badly worn. He says, helpfully, "You wouldn't want to have a blowout on that highway in this heat." And I think to myself, "Especially not at the speeds I'VE been driving!" He says, "I've probably got a good, inexpensive used tire I can put on there for you." He tells me to go ahead and pay for the gas while he goes and checks on the tire. Surprise, surprise. He has one. "How much?" I ask. "\$35.00," he replies. "I'll take it," I say.

Fifteen minutes later it's ready to go. Mr. Helpful says, "This other front tire isn't looking too good, either." He shows me how its tread is worn, too, though not as badly as the other one was. "My problem is," I tell him, "I'm traveling on limited funds. I think I'll take my chances with this one." Thank goodness the two rear tires are fine. Mr. Helpful is not happy that I'm not buying another tire. I say to him, "If it'll make you feel any better, I'll have my friends take a look at it when I get to where I'm going." "That WILL make me feel better," he says. I pay him – exactly \$35, which includes a new valve stem he threw in at no charge, he informs me – and once again I'm on my way.

And again, the endless miles of straight line driving through brown desert, naked brown mountains off in the distance. Thank goodness for rock 'n roll! After what seems like hours of driving, I start to ascend some of those mountains, and I think, "At last! A change of scenery! Let's see what's on the other side of these mountains!" But then I reach the crest and look down to more of the same: another flat, straight stretch that goes as far as the eye can see, or at least to the next set of naked brown mountains. Occasionally, some of the mountaintops have a dusting of snow, but that's the only change in this monotonous landscape. The Doors' "L.A. Woman" comes on the radio and I crank it up again and sing along with Jim :

DRIVin', DRIVin'
I gotta KEEP on DRIVin'

DRIVin', DRIVin'
I gotta KEEP on DRIVin'!!!

In Wells, Nevada, I turn off I-80 and onto Highway 93, heading north towards Twin Falls, Idaho. Along this stretch of highway are some strange and interesting rock formations on the hills near the road, so for a while I'm a little more interested in the scenery. But it's a brief respite, and before long it's just flat and brown again. I finally reach Jackpot, Nevada, just before crossing the state line. More gaudy casinos, out here in the middle of NOWHERE! And a big parking lot, about a quarter full of Winnebagos, pick-up trucks, and big rigs.

Crossing the state line into Idaho, I find the southeastern part of Idaho is much like Nevada, at least at first. But before too long, the flat brown desert gives way to flat green potato fields. Green is an improvement over brown! I'll take it! I'll take it! Passing through Twin Falls and heading east again on I-84 towards Pocatello, I find myself in Snake River country, and finally the landscape becomes interesting again. I drive past a little town called "Burley" and smile to myself, thinking of my Loony friend "Big Burly Bear," and I find myself wondering if he'll show up at the Loonion "incognito" – as he had "threatened" to do many times in the past year while chatting with me and Kjean and Mark R. on MSN Instant Messenger. Somewhere along the way here I-84 forks off to the south, towards Ogden, but I continue in a northeasterly direction on what has become I-86 towards Pocatello. At Pocatello I head north on I-15, towards Idaho Falls – home of Tim A. and Betsy. Traffic is still amazingly light, to my way of thinking, for a Friday afternoon of Memorial Day weekend.

The sky darkens as the miles roll by and the afternoon wanes. Big, black thunderheads appear, and I can see curtains of heavy rain falling from some of them, off in the distance. I begin to see flashes of lightning – exciting, jagged BOLTS of lightning – the kind we rarely have where I live. I keep expecting a downpour at any moment, but only a few stray drops appear on my windshield. I finally reach Idaho Falls, and just as I pull into a gas station to fill up yet again, the deluge comes! As I open my car door, it is snatched out of my hand by the wind and blown wide open! I worry that the hinges have been damaged, but thankfully I'm able to close the door behind me with no problem. But the strength of the wind catches me by surprise and now nearly bowls me over! I am under a roof, but it is POURING and the wind is blowing so hard it's blowing the rain sideways. It's coming under the roof and I'm getting DRENCHED! I quickly get into my duffle bag in the back seat, looking for a sweatshirt to pull on over my

suddenly inadequate T-shirt that I put on this morning in pleasant, warm Winnemucca. A man takes refuge from the rain and wind between the gas pumps next to my car, and glances at me as I pull the sweatshirt over my head. "I wasn't prepared for THIS!" I exclaim, and he appears to agree, but says nothing. I fill my tank, all the while getting soaked on my backside.

Buckets of rain
Buckets of tears
Got all them buckets comin' out of my ears.
Buckets of moonbeams in my hand,
I got all the love, honey baby,
You can stand.

I make a run for the shelter of the station's "mini-mart". Since all I've had to eat today was that little muffin at the motel, and the Global Coffee mocha, I'm thinking of getting something at the fast-food establishment inside. But once inside, I see that there is a long line, and not wanting to wait, I head for the deserted ice-cream counter instead. With a scoop of mocha almond fudge on a waffle cone in hand, I pay for the gas and prepare to make a mad dash for my car. But as suddenly as that typhoon appeared, it is GONE! The rain has stopped, the wind has died. The ground is very wet and everything is dripping, but the sun is streaming down through a break in the clouds and the air is perfectly still. Of course, it is just my luck that the only real rain of the afternoon happened to fall during the only five minutes that I was out of the car! However, I do NOT take this to be a "bad omen"! :-)) This is simply a late spring afternoon thundershower.

Now, getting back on the Interstate, I find the first holiday traffic of my trip. Partially due to some road construction which has closed one lane, and partially just due to people getting away for the holiday, there is a back-up at the turn-off from I-15 to Highway 20, which goes north and east from Idaho Falls to West Yellowstone. Highway 20 is a 2-lane highway and I seem to be driving the only sedan on it, amidst a conglomeration of Jeeps, SUV's, Winnebagos, and campers. Seemingly out of nowhere, I spot the Tetons looming in the distance to my right. Those peaks are unmistakable, even from the "back" side! My excitement level spikes with the visual evidence that my destination is drawing near. The mountains almost look like a mirage, so amazing and overwhelming is their appearance on the horizon. I imagine what thoughts must have run through the minds of pioneer women, glimpsing such peaks for the first time, as they approached slowly from the east in their covered wagons.

We begin to climb, and though seemingly impossible, my anticipation increases as I enter lodgepole pine forests. A forest rehabilitation project has been ongoing here, and as I drive along the highway there are signs every couple of miles saying things like, "1988 New Trees." I wonder at the seemingly different rates of growth, and I can't help but associate the years on the signs with events in my life: that was the year of my wedding; the year of my divorce; the year of my last visit to Yellowstone. Oh – these trees here were planted the same year that my lovely niece Holly was born, and she's now thirteen. It captures my imagination – this measurement of the passage of time in terms of tree and forest growth. It starts to rain again, and continues to rain lightly off and on.

Suddenly I see a sign that says, "W. Yellowstone – 10 miles," and I am ELATED! YYYEESSSS! I'm HERE! I've made it! Woo hoo! Almost as if on cue, the most incredible DOUBLE rainbow I have ever seen appears! It is the brightest-colored rainbow I ever remember seeing. Black, foreboding clouds provide the backdrop, and the colors of the rainbow against the dark clouds seem like neon in their intensity. The contrast of the spring-green grass in the meadows to the deeper green of the forests is astonishing and is another reminder of why I love this part of the country. Yellowstone appears to be the "pot of gold" at the end of the rainbow, and OF COURSE I take this to be yet another good omen. I pull over to the shoulder to take a photo of this unbelievable day-glo rainbow.

Not too many minutes later, I'm driving into West Yellowstone, and once again I'm amazed at the amount of development since I was here last. I see a sign that says, "McDonald's – 7 Blocks" (ahhh, progress!). I decide I will stop there to use the restroom and to put my yellow Loon flag on my antenna, in case I run into any Loons as I drive through the park to Mammoth. I recognize the old Stagecoach Inn where I stayed with my parents and sister Marcy on my first trip to Yellowstone in 1969. It looks pretty much the same as I remember it. I smile to myself, remembering how much Marcy and I enjoyed having their indoor pool all to ourselves the evening we arrived, way back then. I turn in at the McDonald's, noticing the West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce building across the street. I run inside and find myself wondering if Viki could be in the stall next to me... Yikes!

Back out a moment later, too excited at being here – finally – to waste time now. I grab my Loon flag from the car and begin to pull it over my antenna. Suddenly, behind me, I hear someone say, "That's GOT to be Allison!" I whirl around to greet my FIRST FELLOW LOON of this

trip: unmistakably it is Tim A.! I recognize him from photos posted on the chat page and from the Fairyland video. "TIM A.!!!" I exclaim, arms out, and we greet each other warmly with the traditional Loon hug – my first of MANY.

It is amusing to me how hard it is to address a Loon by anything other than their "chat page name." Like, I didn't say "Tim!", I said "Tim A.!" and it's not "Dan" it's "Dan M." And while I know Buck's name is really Brian and have spent many hours conversing with him, I am still more comfortable calling him "Buck" than "Brian". And yet, now that I'm thinking about it, I have no trouble referring to "Kjean" as "Kelly" and to "Big Burly Bear" as "Ty", and I address "Mark R." as just "Mark" – unless I'm talking about him to someone else – then it's "Mark R.!" And I currently use "Rosser" and "Ross" interchangeably... I guess it's just a matter of habit.

Anyway, apparently Tim and Betsy "A." pulled into McDonald's right behind me, as they are parked in the space right next to me. I ask Tim if they had already left Idaho Falls "when that hurricane struck?" He laughs and tells me they got caught in it too. We chat for a few minutes, then Tim tells me to "wait here" and runs back inside to fetch his wife and his dinner. He returns shortly and introduces me to Betsy. More hugs! She also is very warm and friendly and already I find myself marveling at that Loony phenomenon I first experienced in Palm Springs in January, of meeting people for the first time but feeling like you've known them for years! We visit for a few more minutes, exchanging Loon news, just long enough for their dinner to get cold. They are headed for Slough Creek where they hope to get a campsite for the night. Since it is almost 8:00 PM, we agree that we'd best be on our way. Tim warns me that my Loon flag will most likely not stay put at 45 mph. Ever the optimist, I attach it to my antenna anyway, anchoring it with pieces of duct tape, and decide to give it a go.

I pull out of the McDonald's parking lot first, but having not been here for eight years, and finding the town much changed, I have become disoriented and I go in the wrong direction, towards the "Grizzly Discovery Center." In my rear-view, I see Tim and Betsy turn in the other direction as I realize my error. I make a U-turn, and follow them into the park. Waiting my turn at the gate behind them, I notice the bumper-sticker on the back of their camper: "Real men don't shoot wolves", and I smile my agreement.

FRIDAY MAY 25th (Part Two) – BEEN A LONG TIME

Been a long time since I rock and rolled,
Been a long time since I did the Stroll.
Ooh, let me get back, let me get back,
Let me get back, baby, where I come from.
It's been a long time, been a long time,
Been a long lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely time. Yes it has.

It's been a long time since the book of love,
I can't count the tears of a life with no love.
Carry me back, carry me back,
Carry me back, baby, where I come from.
Been a long time, been a long time,
Been a long lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely time.

At the entrance, I reach out with my \$20 to the ranger, but she is staring distractedly beyond me. She finally snaps back to attention and says, "Oh! Sorry – I was just admiring your 'Yellowstone Loon' flag!" She says, "I've heard of them – the Loons. Are they a club?" I say, "No, not exactly," and ask her if she knows John Uhler. She doesn't. I quickly tell her about The Total Yellowstone Page, the chat page, the Loons. She says she remembers the Loons coming to the park last year. I tell her, "Well, we're baaaacckkk!" and I inform her that the people in the camper ahead of me are also Loons, and that there will be more of us – that this is the weekend of the "Second Annual Loonion" and that many other "mini-Loonions" will continue to happen throughout the summer, and fall, and winter. She laughs and tells me to have a good time.

I AM FINALLY IN THE PARK!!! I think of Wendy and her trip report last year, and I want to pull over and get out and kiss the ground, and do a little dance of joy. But since I'm sorta following Tim and Betsy, I resist the impulse. As it is, I get choked up, and for a moment have to work at swallowing the lump that has formed in my throat. We increase our speed to the 45 mph limit – my flag seems to be hanging on! We approach the Madison bridge where I know from reading the page that trumpeter swans are often seen, and I look, but don't see any. A few miles further and suddenly I see my flag fly off the antenna. I pull over to retrieve it and lose Tim and Betsy. Getting out of the car, I pause for a moment to listen to the silence. I breathe in the fresh and fragrant mountain air. I walk back to where my flag lies by the side of the road. I stoop to pick it up, and notice a pink, plastic disposable cigarette lighter lying on the ground. I pick it up to dispose of properly, and I think to myself, "Steve Torrey would be proud!" Too

bad I don't have a yellow trash bag with "Torrey's Tornadoes" emblazoned on it, in which to deposit this trash.

I get back in the car and continue on, trying not to give myself whiplash as I crane my head this way and that, trying to see everything at once and not wanting to miss any wildlife camouflaged in the shrubs and trees. I pass a large turnout alongside the Madison River – this is the place where my friend and fellow employee, Mike from New York, had a flat tire on the way back from a trip to "The Gusher" in West for pizza back in 1975. I have a photo, taken at this very spot about 26 years ago, of Tonya from Virginia and Debbie from Illinois and myself, "vamping" for the camera as Mike and another friend (whose name escapes me after all these years, God bless him, but I remember he was ALSO from New York) struggle with changing the tire.

A few miles further and I come upon my first wildlife jam. A large herd of bison are in a meadow to the south (on the right) of the road. I turn into the pullout just west of the Madison Campground, and discover the bison are not only in the meadow, they're in the pullout, and on the move! And BABIES!!! I see easily a DOZEN little orange bison calves – cavorting around one moment, hugging mama's flanks the next! They are SOOOOOO CUTE! Searching my memory, I am embarrassed to realize that I don't recall having ever actually observed the little calves before! I guess that it's because I didn't have a car when I worked in the park, and my subsequent visits have all been in the fall. I grab my camera and try to get some shots of the scampering little cuties. I want to stay and stay, but I've got to get checked in to my cabin in Mammoth, so reluctantly I tear myself away.

Leaving the pullout (slowly and cautiously, I might add, considering my car is flanked on either side by several large bison bulls! Their heads are a little above eye level as I drive and their humps are higher than the top of my car!), I turn north at Madison Junction. Almost immediately, I come upon the "construction zone" on the Madison to Norris road. The project is already well under way. I'm surprised and a little dismayed by the number of trees that have already been cleared for this project. A necessary evil, I guess. Thankfully, the work is being put on "hold" for the weekend. I'm glad that I don't have to worry about road construction causing delays. Passing Gibbon Falls I wonder what it'll be like to pass the falls on the other side the next time I visit the park?

North of Norris I come to one of my favorite lakes in the park, although for a moment I can't remember its name. I love it for its unusual jade green color, which is, I think, due to algae in the lake. A sign reminds me it is called "South Twin Lake." Out of the corner of my eye I see movement. Looking towards it, I see what looks to me like a pair of loons (the feathered kind!) doing a mating dance across the surface of the lake. (I'm later told it was most likely grebes, and not loons, but in this moment they're loons to me, and of course I take this to be another "good omen"!) :-)

I'm remembering having read on the chat page that a mama grizzly – known as #264, AKA "Obsidian" – and her two yearling cubs have been seen a lot in the area of the Roaring Mountain, and I hope for a glimpse of them. My eyes are "peeled" and I'm scanning the meadows, the banks of the streams, the tree-line. I have to make a conscious effort to keep my eyes on the road! At Roaring Mountain I stop in the pullout. No one else is there. I reach for my binoculars and get out of the car, leaning against it for a few minutes scanning the hillsides, looking for movement, hoping against hope the bears will emerge from the woods. There is no sign of them, and disappointed, I move on.

A mile or two north of Roaring Mountain I round a bend in the road and suddenly THERE THEY ARE! And they are MAGNIFICENT! They are only 20 – 30 yards off the road, on the east side of the road (my side, so my view is not obstructed by other vehicles -- not that there are many here, amazingly enough), just south of the Grizzly Lake trailhead. There are only two or three other vehicles stopped here and, thankfully, no one has gotten out of their car. I wonder if Obsidian and her little ones were visible when Tim and Betsy went by, and hope they didn't miss them. The bears are in a green, grassy clearing – right out in the open and so CLOSE! The cubs are being "typical" bear cubs, rolling and tumbling over each other. Mama appears to be calm and seems to be eating the grass, or maybe grubs. She stays pretty much in one place but snuffles the ground with her muzzle, occasionally glancing up at her "audience", making sure we are minding our manners. One of the cubs rolls over on its back and brings its hind feet up to its mouth, much like a human baby. Mama shuffles past and the cub playfully bats at her face with its little paw. This is TOO precious, and I realize what a great privilege it is to be a witness to this intimate moment in Yellowstone.

If you go down to the woods today
You're sure of a big surprise.

If you go down to the woods today
You'd better go in disguise!

For ev'ry bear that ever there was
Will gather there for certain,
Because today's the day the
Teddy Bears have their picnic.

Picnic time for Teddy Bears
The little Teddy Bears are having
A lovely time today.
Watch them, catch them unawares,
And see them picnic on their holiday.

See them gaily gad about.
They love to play and shout,
They never have any care;
At six o'clock their Mommies and Daddies
Will take them home to bed,
Because they're tired little Teddy Bears

I try to take a picture, but my hands are shaking with excitement (or highway fatigue?) the daylight is fading rapidly, and it's the last shot on the roll! Wouldn't you just know it! Not wanting to take my eyes off them long enough to hunt for the bag containing my film and re-load my camera, I tell myself I will have other opportunities in the next four days to photograph bears. But in truth, I have not had a better, nor more picturesque opportunity – ever!

I watch this idyllic scene for a good 15 – 20 minutes, and try to memorize every detail – for my trip report, for cold, rainy days next winter, for my “old age.” Finally, reluctantly, I tear myself away. It is getting dark and I can't remember how late the hotel will hold my reservation.

A few miles further up the road, near Willow Park, I spot a young bull moose moving through the trees, and stop to watch for a few moments, until he disappears deeper into the woods. I can't believe my good fortune! I have been in the park less than an hour and have already experienced an abundance of wildlife!

It isn't much longer before I find myself at the entrance to the “Golden Gate”, and I again feel a lump rising in my throat at being on the “threshold” to Mammoth – a “place within a place” that holds a very

special place in my heart. I am a roiling mass of so many different emotions! I'm in YELLOWSTONE – as "Yelloweyes" says, the "special place"! Every bend in the road brings a rush of memories – from some other lifetime, decades ago and yet seeming like only yesterday... And I'm on the verge of finally meeting a whole slew o' Loons, my main objective for this trip. I am so excited I feel I might spontaneously combust or something! I pull into the turnout at the falls, and take a moment to re-attach my Loon flag to my antenna. I also take a moment to thank God for getting me here, for bringing me this far safely, and allowing me to participate in this special gathering of such wonderful people, most of whom I have yet to meet! I laugh in wonder to myself as I think that even though I haven't yet met them, I feel I KNOW them, some of them INTIMATELY. It's a strange phenomenon, this Loon thing... I give thanks as the first stars are becoming visible, overlooking the falls, the sound of rushing, falling water in my ears – overwhelmed with gratitude at finding myself right here in this spot at this moment in my life.

I slowly descend through the Golden Gate, past the Hoo Doos, past the Upper Terrace Loop Drive, resisting the urge – for now – to turn in. I circle down past the stables and around the terraces into the "village" of Mammoth itself. Not much has changed in 26 years. There is my dorm, there is my dorm-room window – it is dark. No one living in that room yet this year, or maybe they're just not home.

I pull up in front of the hotel, glancing around for other Loon flags, but seeing none. I enter the lobby, walking towards the registration desk. There's that wonderful and familiar aroma of waxed and polished hardwood floors! There is a man and woman at the front desk, writing something, and just at the moment that I recognize him, Rosser turns around and sees me. "AIIIIIIIIIIsonnnn!!! Honeeeeeeyyyy!!!" he says, and hurries across the lobby to me, arms outstretched. "Rossssseeerrrr, honeeeeeeyyy!" I squeal back, rushing to him with my arms outstretched. Writing this, I realize that this scene must seem completely obnoxious to anyone but us! :-)) We don't care. We collide in a HUGE hug. "Where've you BEEN?!? We've been WAITING for you!!!" It has only been about seven weeks since Ross left my place in California, but we had formed a strong bond during his stay, and it is GREAT to find him waiting there to greet me. He quickly introduces me to his companion – it's Lori D., another Loon! She and I had exchanged e-mails, and she had written to me after she had arrived in Mammoth to work in Reservations for the summer. She sent me her mailing address and asked me to keep her informed of the Loonion plans. As it turned out, she was able to access a computer

there, and was actually more informed than me of what the plans were! What fun to finally meet her! She and Ross had been in the process of leaving me a note at the registration desk: "Allison, where the Duck are you? I'll check @ your cabin later, Ross & Lori." And the desk clerk says I have another message: "Hi Allison, I am at Mammoth camp site #75. We are meeting Lew & Deb to hike to the petrified forest at 11:00 on Saturday at the Yellowstone Picnic area. Meeting at Peggy B's campfire at Silver Gate on Saturday nite. Joette." Wow – is that really TOMORROW night? What a welcome!

I get checked in, get my key, give the extra one to Ross. He and Lori have already "scoped out" my cabin, so they lead the way. My cabin is exactly as I remember the Mammoth cabins to be, and I'm happy to discover that I have a "free-standing" one (as opposed to a "duplex"-type). Ross and Lori help me unload my car.

I've brought photos with me that Ross hasn't yet seen of the "road trips" we took together to Mt. Shasta and Lake Tahoe just before he left for Yellowstone. We spend a few moments looking at those. Then they ask me what I want to do, and I tell them I want dinner. All I've had since the little muffin this morning in Winnemucca (OK, I'll admit it – I like saying the name of that town!) is the ice-cream cone this afternoon in Idaho Falls. Ross says he thinks everything is closed in Mammoth. I ask if there's a place in Gardiner where we can get a pizza or something. "Yeah – the K-Bar," he replies. Oh great. Not even in the park for TWO HOURS yet, and I'm already headed to the K-Bar!

Ross says he'll drive – his boss has flown home to Ohio for a week and has left her car with him. Lori declines to go to Gardiner, since she has to work early in the morning. Ross and Lori leave me to unpack and "freshen up" while he goes to get the car. He returns shortly to pick me up, this time with another friend and co-worker of his named Wendy. Our plan is to bring the pizza back to Mammoth, but Ross warns me that the K-Bar will be busy, being Friday night, so it might take a while.

The place is crowded and noisy. Wendy and I stop to pet a couple of friendly dogs that are lounging on the sidewalk outside the entrance to the bar. By the time I squeeze my way through the crowd of cowboys and AMFAC employees to where Ross is standing, he has already ordered the pizza and has spotted a table at the back of the room. We squeeze our way back to the table, but Wendy and Ross want to play the Keno machines, and they're off again.

I am overwhelmed with nostalgia for my twenty-first summer – summer of '75 – spent in Mammoth and a good part of it in Gardiner. I am content just to sit back and people-watch, and reminisce. I am again reminded of how “the more things change, the more they remain the same.” I watch a young woman a couple of tables away – she could've been me 26 years ago – laughing and joking with her friends, flirting with a nearby cowboy. (Well, OK, I would've flirted with the guy in the bandanna and with an earring in one ear, but you get the picture!) Apparently there is a rodeo in town this weekend, and most of the cowboys seem to be in this room tonight.

The waitress brings the pizza to our table and I notice it's not boxed “to go”. I glance over at Ross and Wendy. They're engrossed in their games. I say to myself, “Ahh, to heck with it,” and pick up a slice of pizza and take a bite. MMMmmm! Better than I remember! Ross comes over. “Are you okay?” he asks. “Yeah! I'm fine!” I say. “Here. Have some. Ask Wendy if she wants some.” He tells me he's winning, takes a slice, and returns to his game. The familiar opening strains of a song come booming out of the jukebox. I can name that song in two notes. Dan M's spirit makes its presence known once again, as Mary Chapin Carpenter belts out “I Feel Lucky”. She is another favorite of Dan's, and I'm reminded of the drive from Palm Springs to the Wolf Mountain Sanctuary at the CaLoonion in January. I rode to the sanctuary with Dan and we listened to Mary Chapin Carpenter much of the way. Dan and I have had a long-running, ongoing debate regarding MCC's sexual orientation. This “debate” – as do most of my debates with Dan – has deteriorated to the level of: “She is TOO!” “She is NOT!” “Is too!” “Is not!” “IS!” “ISN'T!” We have fun. Hearing MCC now, singing that particular song in this particular place (Yellowstone, not the K-Bar!), at this particular time makes ME feel lucky, and I chalk it up as yet one more “good omen”. Ross and Wendy return to the table and help me finish the pizza. Ross tells us he has won \$50 playing Keno – he has a voucher for \$15 and one for \$35. He hands them both to me and says, “Here, I'm giving it to you!” He instructs me to use the \$15 voucher to pay for the pizza and to give Wendy the change, and he says the \$35 is for me! See why I love him??? He PAYS ME TO!!! :-)) We pay for the pizza, cash in our winnings, and squeeze our way out the door.

We stop again to pet the dogs “guarding” the door as we leave, and one of them starts to follow us. The guy in the bandanna and earring comes out and calls to the dog, “Windy! Come back here!” and Wendy thinks he said “Wendy.” “Is your dog called ‘Wendy’?” she asks him. “Windy,” he answers. “'Cuz my name's Wendy, and I thought you

said, 'Wendy get back here!'" she laughs. "No, it's Windy," he says again. Driving back up the hill, Wendy talks about "that cute cowboy at the table next to us" and I talk about that cute guy in the bandanna, but even more about what a long, strange trip it's been.

"...Lately it occurs to meeeeeeeeeeeeeee....
What a looooooonnnnggg, strange trip it's been..."

On the way back up the hill to Mammoth, passing the mall-sized parking lot at the 45th parallel, I regale Wendy with tales of the "hot pots" (Rosser's already heard them), before they came to be called the "Boiling River." I recall the time on a September night in 1975 when "Tommy from Chicago" and I walked back to Mammoth from the hot pots at 3:00 AM on the very road we're now driving. My wet hair had frozen into icicles, and I could hear the frozen strands of my hair clicking together as I walked! Having lived most of my life in California, it is an amazing thing to me, to have your hair freeze into icicles. But I suppose for those of you living in places like Minnesota and Wisconsin and North Dakota it ain't no big thang... Looking back, I can't believe that I had no fear of encountering a bear in the dark as we walked up that road in the wee hours of the morn.

Ross has to be at work at 7:00 in the morning, and I want to be in the Lamar by then, so after a quick tour of Ross' dorm and a peek at his room, he drops me off at my cabin. (By the way, as I entered Ross' room, I noticed that ONE side of the room was IMMACULATE while the OTHER side looked like it had been hit by a SCUD MISSILE! LOL! And I said to Ross, "Gee, I WONDER which side is YOURS???" -- The "immaculate" side, just in case you wondered!) But again, I'm too wired for sleep. In my cabin, I unpack my stuff into the dresser drawers and the closet, and spread out my other stuff on the tabletop built into the corner next to the sink. I hand wash some clothes in the sink and hang them up over the wall-heater to dry. Ross laughed at me when I said I wanted to get out to the Lamar Valley by 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning (he knows me too well!). It's close to 2:30 AM when I set my alarm for 6:00 and finally crawl into bed. [[Today I met three new Loons: Tim A. and Betsy, and Lori D., and reunited with one Loon: Rosser. Today I saw: a few dozen bison and a couple dozen bison calves, Obsidian and her two cubs, a bull moose, a dozen or so elk, and a pair of what I identified as "loons" (the feathered variety).]]

SATURDAY, MAY 26th (Part One) – MORNING HAS BROKEN

Morning has broken, like the first morning
Blackbird has spoken, like the first bird
Praise for the singing, praise for the morning
Praise for the springing fresh from the world

Sweet the rain's new fall, sunlit from heaven
Like the first dewfall, on the first grass
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden
Sprung in completeness where his feet pass

Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning
Born of the one light, Eden saw play
Praise with elation, praise every morning
God's recreation of the new day

Miraculously, again, I'm awake before the alarm goes off. I'm excited at the prospect of meeting Loons for the first time in the early morning mists of the Lamar Valley. But yesterday's driving took its toll on me (not to mention the fact that I've only been asleep for THREE HOURS), and I'm slow to get up. I burrow under the covers and decide to wait for the alarm. I have a vague awareness of having been awakened an hour earlier by the sounds of the people in the cabin next to mine getting up and out before sunrise. I was in cabin #C37, so if one of you "lurkers" out there was in #C38, you woke me up! :-) I fall briefly back to sleep, but the anticipated alarm goes off as scheduled. Pressing the switch on the back of the clock, I fall out of bed and cross the floor to peer out through the curtains, hopeful of finding an elk on my porch, but no luck – at least not yet.

I dress quickly after a cursory "sponge bath", and in minutes I'm in my car. Driving away from my cabin I stop as an elk crosses the road right in front of me, right between the hotel portico and the entrance to the restaurant. This reminds me of a "stupid touron trick", er, a "stupid YP Co. employee trick"? that I pulled 26 years ago, right here in this exact same spot. There's a little "triangle" of grass here, with the NPS "Mammoth Hot Springs – Hotel, Restaurant, Visitors' Center" sign. Within a few days of my arrival for my summer of employment in Yellowstone, I was out walking around Mammoth one morning, checking things out and snapping photos. There had been snow a day or two before, and the remains of a snowman stood near the "Mammoth Hot Springs" sign, keeping company with a large bull elk, antlers in velvet, munching the grass. I wanted that photo – it told a story: the sign, the snowman, the elk – my family back home would

love it! The elk seemed very relaxed, barely noticing me. I edged closer and closer, YOU KNOW – wanting that CLOSE UP photo... The elk, facing toward me, looked up into the camera and I clicked the shutter. And then he charged me! I ran, and I guess it was what you would call a “bluff charge,” because he stopped almost immediately and went back to tearing up the lawn in front of the hotel. Fortunately, there were no witnesses to my stupidity (at least none that I was aware of), just my confession to you all here.

I shake my head at myself now, remembering this incident as I drive past the Albright Center and the row of military-style buildings you pass on the left as you leave Mammoth heading east. My friend Dave, from Cal State Santa Barbara, lived in one of those buildings that summer, while he was employed for the season with the NPS. I remember baking him a birthday cake in the funky little kitchen of one of those buildings. I wrote “Happy Birthay, Dave!” in red icing on the top of the cake, not even noticing that I’d left the “D” out of “birthday”! (Sorry, all you “D” Loons!)

I can’t believe I am here, and actually on my way to the Lamar Valley and my first ever experience of the roadside rituals practiced there. Crossing the Gardner River bridge, I notice a thick fog bank up ahead in the distance, blocking the rising sun from view. The fog hangs low over the northeastern part of the park, distorting the early morning light. Burnt black trunks of trees suddenly emerge, their ghostly silhouettes like “tree phantoms” marching up the ridgelines, only to dissolve again into nothingness – swallowed up once more by the fog. It lends a “primeval” feel to the landscape, but even as I am being seduced by the desolate feel of it all, the fog seems to be lifting, however slowly. I round a bend and reach the crest of a hill and I am stunned by the vistas revealed and both the enormity and the intimacy of the beauty around me. I spot what appears to be a kestrel perched atop a post alongside the road, and he takes flight as I approach. I slow to watch him soar and hover for a few moments before continuing on.

There are very few other cars on the road. Between Mammoth and Roosevelt I only pass one or two going the other way. It is not quite 6:30 AM (so THERE, Ross! PLLLLTTHHTTT!), but I hurry along, worried that I am LATE! I’m thinking of trip reports I have read in the past – particularly those of Loons like Wendy and Doug Dance – in which they talk of being up at 4:00 and in Lamar by 5:00. I worry that I’m too late to catch “the morning show” of the Druids, and that the Loons I

hope to find in the valley will have already scattered in search of breakfast, hikes, geysers, bears...

Driving along this road from Mammoth to Roosevelt I am holding my breath, hoping for a repeat of the experience I had the last time I drove this road: my friend Nita and I had to stop for two bighorn rams in the road with big, full, curling horns. They casually walked along the shoulder of the road for a short distance before crossing, then strolled along the opposite shoulder before scampering up the embankment on the south side of the road. Another of many great Yellowstone memories. But I have no such luck this morning.

At Roosevelt I turn left, and venture northward to the Lamar Valley for only the second time in my life, the first having been during a visit in 1978 – nearly 23 years earlier – as a friend and I headed for Glacier via the famed Beartooth Highway. The last time I visited Yellowstone was eight years ago, in September '93. There were no wolves in Yellowstone then. Back then, the Lamar Valley was known for being prime grizzly habitat, but beyond that, for most park visitors it was just a scenic but remote part of Yellowstone that one might pass through on the way into or out of the park, via the Northeast Entrance (unless, of course, one happened to be a wildlife photographer or a backcountry hiker...). But crowds were not something to be found in the Lamar Valley. I find myself thinking about the names of places along this road: Specimen Ridge, Little America, the Yellowstone Picnic Area, Footbridge, Soda Butte, Bison Ranch, Hitching Post, Wolf City, Dead Puppy Hill, Dorothy's Knoll – picturesque names, names I've become so familiar with from the chat page – and realize I've only a vague notion of where any of these places are!

Up ahead, I see my first Lamar "crowd". Several vehicles in a small turnout on the left, a group of people with scopes. I slow to look for yellow flags, recognizable license plates, familiar faces. I see none, and suddenly I'm feeling shy! A few people glance at me as I slowly drive by. I think of stopping, but I ask myself, "What are you gonna do? Walk right up to a crowd of total strangers and ask 'em 'Are any of you folks Loons?'" Yeah, right! Feeling foolish, I drive on. Not too much further on, in a larger turnout, is a bigger crowd. More scopes. I muster my courage and pull over and park. I still don't see any yellow flags nor recognize anyone. I "mingle" through the group, eavesdropping, listening for clues about what they're watching (though at the moment nobody really seems to be watching anything – the scopes are set up, but nobody's looking through them). I scan the license plates – not an "OLDTYMRS" or "N2YSTON" or "WOLF21M"

among them! I'm hit with another attack of shyness and head back to my car without asking anyone if they're a Loon or if they've seen any Loons, or even what they're seeing through their scopes.

Approaching the road to the Slough Creek campground I see another group of people and scopes. Oh! There goes Tim and Betsy in their camper, headed in the direction of Mammoth. Seeing them causes me to again fear that I'm late and I've missed the Druids and all the Loons who are now headed for breakfast or other areas of the park. I continue northward, passing a couple of smaller groups along the road.

I spot the Yellowstone Institute up ahead, though until this moment I wasn't exactly sure where it even was! Here is the largest gathering of "Valley People" yet. The side of the road and the Institute entrance are lined with vehicles. Across the road from the Institute clusters of people stand behind a row of scopes. I slow down, looking for a safe place to pull off the road. Still no sign of any yellow flags. But now as I turn into the entrance to the Institute, here is a tall blonde woman, with "sit-on-able hair", standing on the side of the road smiling and waving at me! I instantly recognize my e-friend Peggy B., AKA "Yelloweyes" from Dallas! I nose my car in behind the Institute sign, and leap out of it, all shyness now fading from memory! "AAALLLison???" she asks, the Texas drawl adding emphasis to the first syllable. "PEBBY!" I shout with glee, ready for my hug. This spelling -- "Pebby" with "B's" instead of "G's" -- was a chat page "typo" (of HERS, I think! LOL!) which has become my "pet name" for this remarkable woman. We exchange tales of our trips, and our arrivals, and we ask each other if we've seen any "Others"? I am her first Loon of this trip, and she is my first today, my first in Lamar. As we are visiting, a car with a yellow flag, by golly, turns in to the Institute. The attractive woman behind the wheel rolls down her window. "Allison? I'm Cathy," she says. "HI!" I gush back. "Cathy W.?! " "No -- Cathy Montana -- you know -- Ballpark?" "OH!!! Yeah! Of course! Hi, Cathy! This is Peggy B.!" Peggy rushes over and hugs Cathy through her car window. She asks if we've seen Ballpark. "No -- but I'd sure LIKE to! He's one of the people that I REEAALLLY want to meet!" We ask if she's seen any other Loons yet this morning. "No, not yet." Cathy is going to head up the drive to the Institute in search of Frank, but I decide if Pebby can give Cathy a hug through the car window I can too, so Cathy doesn't get away before getting a double-whammy of Loon hugs.

I ask Peggy if she knows what any of these people are looking at through their scopes. "Well, WOLVES, of course! 21M is out there!" "21M?!?", I practically shriek, having never seen a wolf in the wild before. "Well, come look," Peggy says, leading me across the road and towards a couple of gents who have apparently already shared their scopes with her. And sure enough, they let me look. I don't see anything. One of the men says, "Here, let me take a look – he might have gone out of range." He looks for a moment. "Yeah, he's hiding in the sage right now... Oh, wait! Here he is! He's running, right to left. Here – look again." And I do. And I SEE HIM! Clear as day! MY FIRST EVER WOLF IN THE WILD!!! He's loping along in the open, and he's GORGEOUS! He seems to look right at the scope I'm looking through, and I can't believe I'm looking at 21M, the alpha male, king of the Druids, reigning over this valley with such majesty! Right here, right now, right before my privileged and grateful eyes! He looks so confident, so powerful, so FREE! I'm in awe! And I'm elated! I try to do my own version of a Druid dance, and gleefully I sing the first thing that pops into my head:

"Do a little dance
Make a little love
Get down tonight!
Get down tonight!"

One of the men asks me if this is my first wolf and I tell him "yes" and ask, "Can you tell?" I am SO excited. I mean, talk about "spontaneous combustion"!

Then the other man shows me that one of their two scopes has a little screen on the side of it, which displays an image of what the scope is focused on. As his friend looks through the scope, the other man shades the display screen with his hand to cut the glare, and invites me to look – and there is poor 21M in a MOST UNdignified position! One of the men says something about how "It looks like the alpha male might be a bit constipated this morning..." Peggy and I are startled into laughter. I ask if either of these two men are Loons, by any chance? "Noooo..." they say. "But I know what a loon is," one of them says, and I'm thinking, "AHA! A lurker!" Then he asks if it isn't some kind of a bird? Uh, no. We take turns watching 21M for a while. At one point, he walks out onto a sand spit that juts out into the water at a bend in the river. He takes a drink from the river as I watch. I feel like pinching myself. This isn't a Bob Landis film I'm watching on PBS. I am REALLY HERE in the Lamar Valley and this is REALLY 21M – live and in person! I feel like I'm seeing a kind of "celebrity" – I'm ALMOST as excited as I was when I got to see the

Beatles in person as a young girl! Peggy and I finally decide to walk up the drive to the Institute in search of more Loons – the human kind – and thank the men for sharing their scopes.

At the top of the Institute drive, near the little cluster of buildings, we find Cathy again, and lo and behold -- there's Ballpark Frank, trademark baseball cap on his head! We visit some more with Cathy, but Ballpark is engrossed in a conversation with some other folks across the "yard", and I don't want to rush over there and make a scene, gushing and hugging and making a spectacle of myself in front of these people, so I wait for him to finish his conversation. While we're waiting, Peggy and I are amused by the gazillions of little ground squirrels that inhabit these grounds. They are so comical to watch, sitting up on their hind legs to stare at us, dashing in and out of their holes – each pose they strike more "fetching" than the last! Peggy calls my attention to a coyote that has wandered around from behind one of the buildings. He is trotting along the fence line of a fenced-in area of the Institute's "yard". He reaches the corner of the fence and is about to step out of the sagebrush and into the open area of the yard, when he takes stock of the assembled crowd and goes back from whence he came.

Ballpark finally moseys on over to see who his wife is talking to, and the gushing and hugging begin again! Ballpark has got a twinkle in his eye to match that personality of his! And he and Cathy compliment each other in the way that great couples do. I ask Frank if he's seen any other Loons, and he hasn't yet this morning. He informs me that Tim and Betsy are taking Wendy on a backpacking trip today! Over my howls of protest and exclamations that Wendy is another one of the Loons that I REALLY want to meet (AS IF there is any Loon that I DON'T "REALLY want to meet!"), Frank says that they are only going out for one night and are returning tomorrow. WHEW!!! While we're standing there visiting, we suddenly hear a whole pack of coyotes howling and yipping behind one of the other buildings! I'm grateful that I can say that at least I've heard one pack of canids howling in Yellowstone this trip!

A truck pulls into the yard, and Frank leans toward me to point out Rick McIntyre as he gets out of the truck. They exchange greetings, but Rick is obviously busy. Not long after, another pick-up heads down the drive and Frank tells me, "That's Dr. James Halfpenny," and I know the name, having been to his website and printed out and studied his "Wolves of Yellowstone" charts of the various packs in the greater Yellowstone area. Frank tells us that Dr. Halfpenny has just

updated his wolf chart, and that the update is available at the Albright Center. Duly impressed, I dub this “my brush with greatness” in Yellowstone -- 21M, “Yelloweyes”, Mr. AND Mrs. Ballpark, McIntyre, and Halfpenny all within an hour! (Fans of Letterman will recognize the “brush with greatness” reference...)

We comment repeatedly on what a glorious morning it is, all traces of fog having burnt off by now. The sky is a brilliant blue, the mild air like a gentle kiss on my skin. After a while, I mention to Peggy that I wouldn't mind going in search of breakfast and she enthusiastically concurs. We decide to “hook up” for the day, following each other to Mammoth where we'll ditch my car. We also agree to stop along the way if we see yellow flags or other Loons, or wildlife other than elk or bison. I comment on my fear that my Loon flag will not “stay put” on my antenna. The manufacturer of the flags made them so that the “sleeve” that slides over the antenna is closed at one end, causing the flags to ride at the top of the antenna. As I mentioned previously, I have, somewhat pitifully, attempted to further secure my flag by taking thin strips of duct tape and winding them around the antenna and over the bottom edge of the flag, which works to a limited extent. But before we set off, Peggy presents me with one of her own specially handcrafted Loon flags! Made of canary yellow felt, with black lettering, the side seam is open at both ends. This allows the flag to slide all the way down the antenna, rather than clinging to the top of it. I switch flags, and as Buck would say: “Voila!” Actually, he would say, “Wah LAH!” But same difference! I put my original flag in my rear window and I'm set. The new flag makes me feel like I'm some sort of “ambassador” or “diplomat” driving along the park roads, the way it flaps from the base of my antenna! People stare curiously as I pass them on the road, and it makes me feel a bit self-conscious, but I don't care! If it makes it possible for me to meet more of my internet friends, it's worth it!

We leave the Institute, headed for Mammoth, me in the lead. Driving along, I again have to make a conscious effort to keep my eyes on the road. I've discovered there's a certain freedom in traveling alone, but one of the trade-offs for that freedom is that it's a definite challenge to DRIVE and LOOK FOR WILDLIFE at the same time. This is yet another observation that probably should not be made publicly by a traffic school instructor! Approaching the Wraith Falls trailhead, I spot a car with some kind of strange contraption attached to its antenna – but the fact that it's yellow is what catches my eye. I pull into the turnout, followed by Peggy behind me in her van. Closer to the car in question, I now see the Loon flag taped up in the rear side window. And then I

spot Joette and her handsome son Ryan, just returning from the half-mile hike to Wraith Falls! What timing! Courageous Joette, my enthusiastic "roommate" at the Palm Springs CALoonion, and having gone through such a major life's event since then. I am so happy to see her here. Introductions are made (Ryan to us, Peggy to them), hugs are exchanged (all of us to each other!). The "strange, yellow, sponge contraption" that Joette had attached to her antenna turns out to be a pair of those funny "moose antlers" that you're supposed to wear on your head! She picked them up at the Mammoth Ham's store to use as an "emergency Loon flag," having lost her flag last year. As we chat, we notice an extremely habituated coyote circling around the turnout. This fella has no hesitation whatsoever, and is obviously looking for a handout. He poses for us atop a boulder at the trailhead, but as picturesque as he is, he gets nothing from us. He trots over to try his luck with another park visitor who is sharing the turnout with us, and who is also snapping photos of the critter, but thankfully he gets no handout there, either. He continues to loiter around the cars though.

Joette and Ryan are headed to Lamar, to hook up with Lew and Deb for a hike to a petrified forest. We explain that we are on a quest for "a sit-down breakfast." (Peggy agrees with me that there's something about having breakfast when you're on a trip...) We agree to meet them this evening in Lamar, if we don't run into them somewhere else first! While we are standing there discussing our plans for the day, my eye is drawn to my left rear tire. "Oh my gosh!" I exclaim. "Look at my tire! It's almost flat!" This, mind you, is one of my GOOD tires!!! I can't believe this! The tire appears to be half inflated still, and being only a few short miles east of Mammoth I decide to try drive it to the Mammoth service station, where I can put some air in it and inquire about getting it repaired.

We say our "See ya' later's" to Joette and Ryan. Peggy follows me, and arriving at the station I find the air and water hoses and put air in the tire. But the one employee working there is busy with another customer. Peggy suggests that I ask if they have any of that flat tire repair/sealant stuff that comes in an aerosol can, and I manage to get that question answered ("No, we don't carry that stuff, you might try Ham's") in between his interactions with the other customer. I also learn that yes, they do repair flats there, but I decide that I'll deal with this problem LATER. Peggy follows me to my cabin where we ditch my car.

SATURDAY, MAY 26th (Part Two) – PEBBY & ALLI'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

Now, on to breakfast! We agree that we'd like a "real, sit-down, cooked-to-order breakfast" rather than fast food. We park and approach the dining room. Once again I am flooded with memories – so many experiences and friendships connected to this building. But we are met at the door by the – what? Maitre d'? Manager? Host? A youngish man in a suit who informs us the dining room is closed. I then notice the hours posted on the door – breakfast from 6:00 to 10:00 (gosh, I remember those hours!), and it's five minutes after ten! Just missed! Looks like it's the Terrace Grill ("McMammoth") for us. We both get a "#1 Breakfast 'Special'": scrambled eggs, sausage patty, hash browns and a biscuit. Orange juice and – oh boy! – They have espresso! A large mocha for me, please. I follow Peggy to a table in the corner next to a large window. "This looks ALMOST good enough to eat," I observe, scooting in my chair.

I look out the window and, "Oh! There's Rosser!" walking by, on his morning break from Reservations. I rap on the window to get his attention, and wave to him to come in and join us. A moment later I'm introducing him to Peggy, and he pulls up a chair to visit with us for a few minutes. Rosser, God bless him, knows how "precarious" my financial situation is – that I could barely afford this trip, and having had to buy a tire in Elko made things that much "tighter." Not only that, I had brought a "Union 76" gas credit card with me, but after Truckee, had not been able to find a single 76 station – not in Nevada, not in Idaho, not in Montana – requiring that I spend my limited cash on gas. Now, this NEW tire problem has me even more worried. He takes me aside for a moment and tells me that he spoke to the woman in charge of his dorm, and says that he thinks I can stay one night (my last) in one of what they call "transient" rooms for only TWO DOLLARS, and that I can get a refund from the hotel for that night, which will help, tremendously. See why I love him? :-P We agree to meet up when he gets off work at 5:00, and he heads back to work.

Peggy decides to go for an "espresso" drink too, and we take our coffees to the van, ready to hit the road. First, however, Peggy needs to get ice for her well-stocked cooler, and to go to the Post Office to mail a postcard to Fred – or should I say, "The Male"? I want to stop in at the Albright Visitor Center to see if we can find Mr. John Uhler. Entering Albright, I immediately recognize "Ranger Bill", having met him in January in Palm Springs at the CaLoonion. He is busy giving advice to a couple of backcountry hikers, going over a topo map with

them. Peggy and I busy ourselves, looking at the exhibits and the many books available for purchase. We each also remember to pick up the updated, laminated Halfpenny wolf chart. Finally Ranger Bill is free, and I approach the desk, "Hi, Bill" I say, tentatively, "I don't know if you remember me...I'm Allison, we met in January in Palm Springs..." He smiles warmly, "Of course, Allison! How are you?" and he comes around the end of the counter for a big Loon hug. I ask him if John is working today? He's not sure, goes to inquire, comes back. "No, it doesn't look like he's here today." We chat, I introduce Peggy, I tell Bill of my "first ever" sighting of a Druid in Lamar – my sighting of 21M earlier this morning. "Well, you sure picked a heckuva wolf for your first sighting!" he exclaims, and I concur. Grinning, he asks if I've seen his new car. A little confused, I reply that I'm not sure. I say that I remember his car from Palm Springs and that he has a personalized license plate that says, "WOLF21M". He says that he still has the plate, but that he has a new vehicle, and that "it looks just like 21M!" He describes it as being big and black and grey and silver, and I realize he is to a certain extent kidding with me. He becomes busy again with more backcountry hikers, and Peggy and I decide it's time to head out.

We head south towards Norris, our only plan thus far is to look for Obsidian and the cubs. Peggy tells me she would like to see a moose – that's the only large mammal in the park that she's not seen yet. I tell her that we are coming to Willow Park – a good place to look for moose. Since she is our "designated driver" she appoints me the "official spotter" and I'm afraid I fail miserably in my first efforts in this regard. Just before reaching the Willow Flats area, I see something moving on a pond – it's a large bird with a big body and a long neck, and with great excitement and absolute conviction in my voice I gasp, "A SWAN!!!" -- slapping my palm against the dashboard – RIGHT at the exact moment that I recognize that it is actually a CANADIAN GOOSE I am looking at! LOL!!! Well, at least I didn't identify a sandhill crane as a grizzly!!! LOL!!! Peggy decides that we have actually discovered a NEW species altogether – a "swoose"!

Laughing, we reach Willow Park, and we creep along, searching the willow thickets for hidden moosies. How DO you pluralize moose? It's just moose, isn't it? Meese? Anyway, on this morning we are disappointed. I tell Peggy about the one I saw near here last night, and we're hopeful of spotting him this morning, but either our radar's on the blink, or there are no moose to be found in Willow Park today. We continue towards Norris.

Before long we come to the place where I saw the bears only about 16 or 17 hours before. We are both hopeful of finding them. There are three or four vehicles stopped at the turnout across the road from where I'd seen the bears last night, just south of the Grizzly Lake Trailhead. These people are obviously "bear people" – hanging out, camp chairs and scopes set up along the roadside, waiting for the "stars of the show" to make an appearance. We stop and scan the nearby slopes – but nothing. Disappointed, we start to drive on. Peggy pulls the van up alongside a couple of friendly-looking men – a couple of the "bear people" – and I lower my window and ask them if there has been any sign of the bears yet today. They have not seen them, but say that there is a kill near the Grizzly Lake trail. Apparently Obsidian took an elk calf there, and was seen near the trail earlier this morning. I tell them of my great sighting last night, and thank them for their information. We continue south.

I tell Peggy about my affection for that "little jade-colored lake" and how I think I saw loons ("real" loons – the feathered variety!) there last night. When we come to it a short time later, Peggy pulls off the road. We get out of the van and walk down a short path to the lake shore, and we see the "loons" again. They are closer to the far shore than to us, and even with our binoculars it is difficult to identify them, but Peggy concurs with me that they LOOK like loons. We breathe in the glorious air. There are several varieties of wildflowers in bloom here. There are lots of tiny yellow flowers, sort of "shooting-star"-shaped. Peggy lies on the ground on her stomach to photograph some of them. Sunflower, your spirit is there with us as I think of how I know that you would know the names of these exquisite botanicals!

Peggy has this totally cool digital camera that Fred gave her for Christmas. It lets you look at the photos you've just taken on a display screen, and either save them to a diskette, or delete them and re-take them on the spot! Peggy got some "beauts" of those delicate yellow wildflowers at South Twin Lake. Except for the occasional passing car, this setting is so quiet, so peaceful – so spirit-renewing. After spending some reflective moments here, we get back into the van and continue on.

Somewhere not too far past Norris, a large, flat meadow opens up, and it is here that we observe our first "stupid touron trick" of this trip. A herd of buffalo are grazing just across the Gibbon River, maybe 75 yards from the road. The river is narrow and shallow here, and strolling along the nearer bank are some people – two or three adults and their young child! And, adding insult to injury, they have three

dogs, off leash, and these dogs are racing around, GOING CRAZY!!! They are actually CHASING the buffalo, tearing up and down the banks of the river! The bison are obviously agitated, some of them are running and “bucking”, and it would be nothing for them to cross that river where that child is with his parents. The adults seem unconcerned with their dogs’ behavior and make no attempts to control or subdue them. Peggy and I are both stunned and distressed by this flagrant disrespect for park regulations and safety and the glaring lack of common sense! Being somewhat less “pro-active” than our Wendy, but nevertheless feeling that we have to do SOMETHING, I jot down the descriptions and license numbers of the only two vehicles stopped here, and we set off in search of a ranger to whom we can report these fools.

We reach the Madison Junction and figuring there must be a ranger at the “Information Station”/Bookstore, we pull in there. I give the information to the woman behind the desk and as I listen she phones it in to someone – a dispatcher? There is a good-sized herd of bison down in front of the Information Station/Bookstore on the banks of the river – Firehole or Madison? I’m not sure which, at this particular point, as these two rivers come together, along with the Gibbon, right near here. This is the herd I saw last night as I was coming into the park, in the turnout just west of the Madison Campground, nearby. All those frisky little orange calves are still raising a ruckus. I find a seat on a bench outside the bookstore that overlooks this bucolic scene, and watch Peggy as she walks down the gentle slope, looking for a better angle from which to photograph the fuzzy little tricksters, kickin’ up their heels. I watch as a pair of them appears to be playing a game of “tag”. Peggy keeps a safe distance, and a wary eye on the big bull moving lazily in her general direction. The sun glitters on the river and the mild spring air is soft and warm. I could sit here for the rest of the day and be perfectly happy. But I overheard the lady in the bookstore say that Great Fountain Geyser – just down the road a bit – is predicted to erupt at 1:30. Peggy tells me it’s about 1:15. “Do ya’ think we can make it?” I ask. “We can sure try,” she says, and we hurry back up the hill to her van in the parking lot.

Fifteen minutes later we are turning onto the Firehole Lake Drive, and we reach Great Fountain in time to catch the end of its eruption. We get out and walk a ways along the boardwalk, watching the remains of the eruption and snapping a photo or two. Standing just east of the geyser and looking in a northwesterly direction there is a beautiful view that is pure Yellowstone. We are silent for a few minutes, just taking it all in. After a bit we walk back to the van, and continuing

along Firehole Lake Drive, we find ourselves on the opposite side of Great Fountain. The steam clears momentarily, and we can see two "vents" – side by side areas near the center of the geyser that are bubbling and boiling and spouting and spurting in an interesting display. I am entertained by Peggy as she tries in vain to command the steam of the geyser to blow AWAY from her. She would like to try to take a picture of this "display", but neither the steam nor the breeze is cooperating, and Peggy and I are both enveloped by the sulfurous dampness. This is strangely "prophetic" of events to take place much later this evening, at Peggy's campfire at the Silver Gate Cabins... But, of course, I have no way of knowing that at this point.

We decide to head back up to Norris and over to Canyon. On the Norris to Canyon road we notice little "blotches" of snow off the road, in the trees – the last traces of a rare mild winter in Yellowstone – still hanging on. We turn onto the road that takes you past the Virginia Cascades – Peggy having never seen them. I remember visiting them on my last trip to the park, eight years ago, and my friend Nita and I stopped for a picnic lunch just upstream from the cascades, on the bank of the Gibbon River. Lovely spot for a picnic.

Arriving at Canyon, we decide we MUST have ice cream. Peggy is also confident that there are items that she NEEDS in the Hamilton Store. She doesn't know what they are yet, but she knows when she finds them they will be things that she NEEDS. I laugh, remembering this strange precognition of hers from her last year's "Yelloweyes" trip report. We agree to meet back out in front of the store in approximately 10 minutes, and go in different directions in search of NEEDED items. I purchase a notebook in which to record my thoughts and impressions and experiences of this trip, and then make a B-line for the ice-cream counter. I get a great big scoop of the much bally-hooed "Moose Tracks" on a waffle cone. It is decadent, delicious, MUCH better than the brand of "Moose Tracks" available at Walgreen's in Santa Rosa, CA. I perch on a bench in front of the store and wait to see what much-needed items Peggy has found. I agree with the Oldtymrs that an "Ice Cream Cam" is needed at either the Canyon or the Tower Ham's. Anyone watching now would have a good laugh at my futile attempts to keep my Moose Tracks from dripping all over the front of me. A few minutes later Peggy joins me, and we sit there, both of us trying in vain to lick fast enough to prevent the drips.

Our ice cream "hoovered", we decide to head back towards Mammoth, via Dunraven Pass. It's been a pleasant, leisurely day with Peggy so far, and we've discovered we have MUCH to talk about and share

many common interests, BESIDES our love of Yellowstone! As we've traveled through the park we've talked about all our many Loon friends: ones we've met, ones we hope to meet during this trip, those who we know to be here in the park now, those who we regret we will be "just missing" this time around. I again lament the "disappearance" from the chat page of one of my first Loon friends, "DBIII", and we exclaim over the number of "new" Loons to the page this year.

We talk about how much we're looking forward to the campfire tonight, and seeing so many Loons all together in one place at the same time. Peggy says she hopes Photodude will be there, but she doesn't know if he will be. "Photodude?" I ask in disbelief. "HE might come?" "Well, he SAYS he 'wasn't invited'," she says. "WHAT?!" I ask. I must have missed this thread on the chat page. I had been so busy in the last two or three days before leaving on this trip, that I had not had a chance to get to the library and check in on the page, my internet access at home "on the fritz" at the time. Now Peggy tells me that somebody on the page had asked Photodude if he was going to be at the campfire on Saturday night. She said his response said something like, "First of all, I'm not a Loon. And secondly, I wasn't invited." I tell Peggy that I'm not surprised at his assertion that he's "not a Loon" because I've seen him say that on the page before. But as far as his not being "invited" goes – well, for that matter, neither was I! I only learned of the campfire upon my arrival in the park last night, in the note from Joette. I suspect that Steve knows that anyone from the page who is in the park today is welcome to the campfire, but I don't really expect him to show. We both, however, express our hope that he DOES come, and we begin to tally up who we think WILL be there.

As we drive over Dunraven Pass we express our surprise over the amount of snow found here – two days before Memorial Day! All the while, of course, acknowledging that this has been a MILD winter! Being from Dallas, Peggy can't resist – she pulls over and an impromptu snowball fight ensues! We take pictures of each other in the snow, lobbing snowballs at each other's cameras. While we're playing, being silly, some old Scrooge in his road-hogging motorhome yells out his window at Peggy as he crawls by, "You're blocking the road!" I am indignant because of course she ISN'T – she is pulled completely off the road into an admittedly narrow turnout! But, narrow or not, her van is OFF the road! She tosses the snowball in her hand at his rear bumper as he passes (playfully, of course) and he makes a "rude gesture" as he drives on! Well, yaaah – have a nice

VACATION, fella!!! He must have been from the EAST Coast! (Just kidding! Just kidding!)

Back in the van, we head northward, stopping once before reaching Tower to photograph a particularly beautiful view, looking eastward from somewhere north of Mount Washburn, snow-capped Absarokas in the distance. We proceed back to Mammoth where Peggy drops me off at my cabin and heads back out to the Lamar where we know we will hook up again a little later, prior to the campfire she is hosting.

SATURDAY MAY 26TH (Part Three) – SINGIN' ROUND THE CAMPFIRE

It is just past 5:00, and I go in search of Rosser, who I know has just gotten off work. We find each other quickly, and in Ross' boss' car we stop at the Mammoth Ham's for "snacks" in lieu of dinner as we head out to the Lamar, too. Five miles east of Mammoth we come upon what I think is that same bold coyote, right next to the road. I realize, to my dismay, that I've left my binocs back at my cabin! THEN I realize to my even GREATER dismay that I have ALSO forgotten my camera!! After listening to me whine and moan and groan for a minute or two ("I can't BELIEVE I could be SO STOOPID!!!"), Ross whips the car around in a U-turn and heads back to Mammoth. But, here's the "good" news: on the way back we see a group of four young people watching something down an embankment on the north side of the road – it's a black bear! One of the young men is halfway down the slope towards the bear when the bear suddenly reverses direction and heads straight towards him! The young man has enough sense to be afraid, and retreats back up the slope. The bear changes course again, and we watch it amble away through the woods, until it becomes too difficult to see through the trees and brush.

Back at my cabin I grab the bag containing my binocs, camera, extra film, etc., and we head out again. The bear is gone (or out of sight) on our return trip, but the bold coyote is right where we left him. He trots along just off the road in the same direction as us. Suddenly he doesn't look so bold, as he seems to be trying to run away from us. Trouble is, he's following the road, and going in the same direction we are, so it seems as if we are pursuing him. He finally turns away from the road and makes his getaway.

We are soon turning north from Roosevelt, and Ross and I together are caught up in the same ritual I had performed just this morning:

that of searching for Loons among the clusters of people gathered at the turnouts of the Lamar Valley. Only now Ross is even MORE anxious to meet Loons than ME (if that's even possible!) – each time a car passes us going the other way he slows, staring, and says, "Loons?" We pass one group where we don't recognize anyone, but at the next turnout there is a large group of people and I spot a yellow flag or two. As we pull off the road, I recognize the Oldtymr's silver and gray Dodge Dakota with their personalized (OLDTYMRS) license plates. Ross is out of the car and meeting and greeting people while I'm still scrounging for my camera and binocs. But I quickly join the group, and here are Geri and Bruce -- the Oldtymrs – and the King and Queen of Loon hugs!!! I get a great BIG bear hug from each of them. And oh my GOSH! – a few feet away I recognize the Grand Poobah Loon of All Loons – Mr. John Uhler himself!!! I want to rush up to him and THROW my arms around him, but he is in the midst of a conversation with someone so I stifle the impulse. While waiting for my turn to meet John, I introduce Rosser to Joette and her son Ryan who are here. I spot Pat whom I met at the CaLoonion in January and we exchange hugs. She introduces us to her friend Judy, who is quickly enfolded into the Loon Family. And here, too, are Ballpark Frank and Cathy Montana – "Mrs. Ballpark"!

When I finally meet John, Mr. U, I find myself doing my best imitation of "Wayne and Garth" (of "Wayne's World" fame from SNL), repeatedly bowing down while exclaiming, "We're not worthy! We're not worthy!" John introduces me to Carlene, his most gracious wife, and Joseph and Rachel, their son and daughter. Joseph is polite, and quiet – and I'm thinking it's the shyness typical of young adolescents. Or maybe just boredom with all these goofy "old folks"! LOL! Rachel is also polite, and anything BUT shy! I'm amused by her precocity as she readily converses with all the adults. There is a very tall man in a baseball cap and a maroon shirt-jacket standing near John, and I keep catching him (I think!) looking at me in a funny way – with a kind of bemused look on his face. He obviously knows John, and I assume that he is another "Lamar Valley regular" and that John knows him from spending so much time here himself. This man looks strangely familiar to me, like someone I knew back in high school maybe, or perhaps in a "former life."

Geri and Bruce both have scopes set up, and ask me if I'd like to have a look. "What are you looking at?" I ask. "#103 and her pups," Geri says. "WOULD I?!" Their scopes are trained on the den site of 103, and Geri tells me she has three pups, all black. I look, and I look again. I can't see her. Bruce tells me to try his scope. He points out

some landmarks on a far ridge – a tree, some rocks below it, in trying to show me where to look. I look through Bruce's scope, and I think I see #103, but I'm not sure. I'm not sure if I WANT to see her so badly that I'm IMAGINING I see her, or if I really SEE her! "The pack has abandoned her, you know," Geri tells me. "What?" I ask, incredulous, "No – I didn't know!" The saga of the Druid Peak Pack has been filled with more drama than a whole season of "As The World Turns"! Geri and Bruce tell me how none of the other Druids have been seen at #103's den site, and are not bringing her or her pups any food. She has been left to fend for herself for the past two weeks, and must protect as well as hunt for and feed her pups on her own. I am saddened and distressed to hear this, as it greatly reduces the pups' chances for survival. As I'm thinking about this, Geri – looking through her scope – says she (103) has put the pups to bed. Then "Mom" goes into her den too, and we think she may have "turned in" for the night. But no – Bruce says she's come back out. And now one of the pups is back out too! Bruce tells me to look again, and again explains where the den is. I look through the scope again and HALLELUJAH!!! I SEE HER!!! Quite clearly, too! No doubt about it! And, OHHHH, there's one of the pups!!! It's playing with its mother! It is SOOOOO adorable! A little black fuzz-ball! I am thrilled! And again I try to improvise a Druid dance, but I haven't met Wendy yet, and I don't yet know the steps.

I step back to give someone else a chance to look. I am in Seventh Heaven! It is SO GREAT to be surrounded by all these LOONS and LOOKING AT DRUIDS – FINALLY!!! Geri asks me if I've met Chloe yet – I haven't – and points her out in another group of people a short distance away. I catch the eye again of that tall familiar-looking man, and start to wonder again where I know him from. Maybe I saw him somewhere else in the park earlier today? I just don't know. While I'm pondering this, a woman approaches me. "Allison? I'm Chloe." "Chloe! Hi!!!" Another hug! I remember asking her about her name on the chat page – whether it is a family name and how she pronounces it. Only having ever met one other "Chloe" I wasn't sure. The "Chloe" I knew pronounced it "Cloey" (like Joey), and it was short for "Chlothilde" (which she pronounced "Clo-teel"). This Chloe pronounces it "Clo" (like Joe). How fun to meet her now, here in Lamar, spotting Druids! Having read many of Chloe's posts on the TYCP, I know her to be quite knowledgeable about the park and its wildlife and I've come to respect her style and grace on the chat page.

As we're chatting, I hear someone introducing two other Loons who have just joined the group – Jakeman and his girlfriend Leslie. They

are both working in Canyon for the summer and have driven over to meet up with the Loons in Lamar on this fine evening. I recognize Jake immediately from the Fairyland video, and introduce myself, greeting him and Leslie both with the customary hug. I'm excited to meet Jake, another of the infamous "Basin Boyz." Having met Tim A. yesterday, I've now met all of the Boyz except for one. Ironically, the only one I have NOT met yet is the one who set off a storm of controversy which raged on for several days (weeks?) on the chat page, when he made a cell phone call to me from the Fairyland Basin within minutes of the Boyz' arrival there! I posted this great news on the chat page, and according to John the controversy sparked by that cell phone call from Jim S. to me still holds the record on the page as the thread (actually it was NUMEROUS threads!) with the highest number of posts! I forget exactly how many (but I printed them all out and they filled a 3" 3-ring binder!).

Now, standing here at a turnout in the Lamar Valley with all these Loons, it occurs to me that "2001: A Loon Odyssey" is in FULL SWING!!! Suddenly, I overhear John say "Photodude" as he introduces the tall familiar-looking man to someone else! PHOTODUDE??? Oh my gosh!!! He's HERE??? FAR OUT!!! I cannot suppress this impulse, and I turn to him and say, "You're PHOTODUDE?! Oh my gosh – I'm Allison!" He smiles and extends his hand, but I'll have none of that! "Nope!" I say, "It's tradition – you get a hug, whether you want it or not!" And I give him one, whether he wants it or NOT! "But I'll make it a quick one," I add, and pulling away I say, "OK, dun huggin'!" ;-P I tell him he looks VERY familiar to me but I can't figure out why. He says, "I know – it's 'cuz I look like Glen Campbell when he was younger, right?" "Well, yeah, you sorta do..." I agree, "But that's not it." "Or how 'bout Nick Nolte?" he asks. "Oh yeah," I say, laughing. "That's it!!!" He does, but it isn't. It's something else, but I still haven't figured out what. Or who. We are all having a great time, laughing, joking, telling stories, taking turns looking through the scopes. I feel so "at home" here, with these people. It is a remarkable feeling.

Suddenly Bruce points out a trumpeter swan taking flight, and I stare in silent wonder as it flies across the valley, its long neck stretched out in front, feet trailing behind. I've never seen a swan in flight before. For a bird that looks so graceful on the water, I have to laugh at how awkward it looks in flight. Yet the longer I look, the less awkward it seems, and I am finally left speechless by the power of the beauty – and the love and acceptance – all around me.

I keep wondering where all the others are. Peggy B. is not here in this group, and I KNOW she is somewhere in Lamar! And Lew and Deb are supposed to be here somewhere too. Not to mention Mark R. and Quickcarl, and Charles. Where are they? I know that tonight is the night that Tim and Betsy have taken Wendy into the backcountry, so their absence is excused, but only JUST BARELY. :-) Ross and I decide to drive up the road to find the others, and let them know that everybody else is back here. Back in the car, we drive further north, past the Institute where I started this day. We come to another large group of people on the side of the road. I spot Peggy, and we pull over and get out. I suddenly recognize Lew and Deb – the Demlers! (How could I not? The BEARD! The HATS!!) More “Loon Royalty”! Another round of hugs and introductions, and while we’re telling this group of Loons that the rest of the gang is back at that other turnout, a caravan of Loons pulls up! They must have decided to follow us.

Now we are a big, boisterous group of Loons (as if we weren’t before!). Lew and Deb and Peggy have been watching another wolf, a grey, but have lost sight of him now. There is a lovely Lamar Valley sunset, and several of us attempt to capture it on film. The light is fading fast, and some of the group speculates that our spotting is over for the evening. But Bruce scrambles up a hill for a better vantage point, and sights another Druid. We all scramble up the hill to get a look. I believe this is the place known as “the Exclosure Fence.”

As we climb up the trail, Photodude is behind me. “See Allison?” he says, quietly. “I think it’s overused.” For a moment I don’t understand what he’s talking about. But then I think to myself, “DUH, Allison – this is PHOTODUDE!!!” And I point to the “trail” we’re on and say, “Yeah, I think you may be right – just LOOK at this erosion problem here!” “I think we need some more regs,” he says, grinning. “Here’s a man who can laugh at himself,” I think to myself, and I am greatly amused! I have always suspected that I might actually like Photodude, were I ever to meet him, in spite of the fact that I have disagreed with him in the past, and most likely will disagree again in the future. But this exchange confirms it. I can’t NOT like a guy who doesn’t take himself too seriously even while making a political point.

We reach the crest of the hill, joining the others. John has apparently gone ahead to Silver Gate to get the campfire started. Rachel has stayed behind, riding with Jake (whom she is obviously QUITE taken with!) and Leslie. Rachel has gotten Jake’s trademark hat away from him and is wearing it proudly. Photodude sets up a tripod and on top of it mounts the BIGGEST pair of binoculars I think I have EVER

seen!!! They remind me of the Loon logo printed on the Loon T-shirts! From this vantage point, Bruce has spotted another Druid. We take turns looking at him/her. Photodude lets me look through his HUGE binoculars, and I can clearly see the wolf. In fact, it almost seems I can see him more clearly through these binocs than through the scopes, but I don't know. I am still in the same state of disbelief I was in this morning as I watched 21M. The light is almost gone, and it's time to climb back down the hill and caravan out through the Northeast Entrance, to Peggy's campfire at the Silver Gate Cabins.

Back in the car, Ross points out Icebox Canyon to me as we drive through it, and the chunks of ice clinging to its walls, hence the name. We reach Silver Gate and turn in at the cabins. A roaring fire is already blazing in the large fire pit, and several people I don't recognize are already seated beside it. We Loons have always believed in "the more the merrier" and welcome newcomers, and these folks seem friendly, so I figure before long we'll have some new Loon "converts."

I turn to see another "Loon-mobile" turning in, and we are trying to figure out who it could be. I guess, out loud, that it's "Cathy W.?" right before recognizing Mark R. and his dad, Quickcarl! FINALLY!!! I have been WONDERING where they were ALL DAY and ALL EVENING! Mark is my "bud" and it's SOOOO good to see him again after the great time we had in Palm Springs in January! I get the biggest and best hug yet of this trip from Mark. A few moments later, Quickcarl steps over and says "Miss Allison," to me in greeting. "Master Carl!" I reply, and I'm tempted to curtsy and extend my hand for him to kiss – ala Scarlett O'Hara – to elaborate on this southern-style greeting. But I decide a Loon hug is the only thing to do. It is immediately apparent to me where Mark gets his impeccable manners, undoubtable charm, and wicked sense of humor! It is also immediately apparent to me that Mark is high as a kite! He is grinning ear-to-ear and his excitement is almost PALPABLE! The Little Georgia Boy is TURNED ON at being "home." That's what I like – genuine, unbridled enthusiasm! It turns out that some of the "strangers" who were already at the campfire when we arrived are part of Mark and Carl's family and not "strangers" at all! It is Mark's sister Diana (Carl's daughter), her husband Jerry, and their three children, Logan, 8, Katherine, 6, and Marlee, 2.

Everyone is gathering around the fire. Bruce is bringing out his "infamous" "high tech" marshmallow roasting "sticks." There is no describing these monsters. They have to be seen-to-be-believed! At

LEAST six feet long, metal tubing with two or three heavy-gauge wire fork-like “tines” at one end on which to “skewer” whatever food item is to be roasted – a small goat, perhaps? :-). Hot dogs and marshmallows are being simultaneously thrust into the fire. I spot a “low tech” willow stick which is currently not being used, so I push a marshmallow onto the end of it and hold it above the flames, slowly turning it, waiting for it to turn a golden brown. Peggy is passing out mugs of freshly brewed coffee and cocoa that she has prepared in the kitchenette of her cabin. I opt for a “cup o’ joe” and it is the best cup of coffee I’ve had in a LONG time! I find a stump to sit on, a little outside of the inner fire circle. Photodude, nearby, says, “Hey Allison – you hear that?” I’m not sure what he means, so I listen, but I hear nothing. “It’s a plover,” he says, and just then I hear its wild-sounding call. “There it is!” PD says, “Did you hear it that time?” “Yes, I did,” I reply, and I continue to notice its lonesome cry throughout the evening.

I can’t resist (trouble-maker that I am!) giving Photodude a hard time about his saying he’s “not a Loon” and he “wasn’t invited” to this campfire. Someone suggests we call him a “Non-Loon” and I say, “No – he’s the UN-Loon” (as in “UN-Cola”)! He takes this ribbing good-naturedly.

Deb tells the group about a “man-eating grouse” that’s been seen hanging around these cabins. Apparently when Lew and Deb arrived, as they were unloading stuff from their truck to their cabin, this grouse “attacked” Deb and kept trying to “peck” at her ankles! Someone else in the group says that they saw that same bird and it was behaving aggressively with them also.

Now Jakeman brings out his guitar and begins strumming softly. This adds the perfect touch to the gathering. He is quite good, and soon I recognize some of my favorite old songs. Mark’s brother-in-law, Jerry, recognizes them too, and before I know it we’re singing duets – well, we’re both singing, anyway! Snippets of songs – everything from the Beatles’ “Let It Be” to Neil Young’s “Heart of Gold.” I’m having a good ol’ time, and at one point I see Geri point across the fire at me (I think Peggy has just asked her if she would like some coffee or cocoa) and she says, “I want some of what SHE’S having!” LOL!!! (I had one STRAIGHT, black cup of coffee, and that’s ALL, I swear!) I know I’ve met a “man after my own heart” in Jerry as he joins me in a rousing chorus of “The Who” classic, “Won’t Get Fooled Again”:

I'll tip my hat to the new constitution
Take a bow for the new revolution
Smile and grin at the change all around
Pick up my guitar and play
Just like yesterday
Then I'll get on my knees and pray
We won't get fooled again!

Ross brings me a hot dog that he has roasted for me and I accept it gratefully, both of us having skipped dinner and having only had some Triscuits and Cheez Whiz (aptly named) that we picked up at the Ham's store and ate as we drove out to Lamar. The hot dog is cold in the middle, and the bun has nothing on it, but I gobble it down anyway, and it tastes good in this place, in this company! We are having a wonderful time, trading stories, getting to know one another better, gazing into the leaping flames. There are at least twenty adult Loons present, and five children. We make a feeble attempt at singing John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High," but nobody really knows all the words (we ALL know SOME of the words). Peggy, who has had some operatic training, treats us to a couple of songs, and a hush falls over the group as we listen. One of the songs she sings for us sounds like a hymn, or an old spiritual, and is sung to the tune of "House of the Rising Sun." (I recently had seen a group called "The Blind Boys of Alabama" on the David Letterman show, singing "Amazing Grace" to the tune of "House of the Rising Sun" and was surprised at how it fit – it was beautiful! – but Peggy is singing a different hymn to the familiar tune.) Peggy's voice is clear and strong and beautiful and her songs are a perfect addition to the evening. We all sit and listen in silent awe of her talent.

It's a mild night, not really cold at all, stars are out, plovers are calling. Jake's strumming makes me feel nostalgic (actually, just BEING HERE makes me feel nostalgic!), and the easy camaraderie among the new friends gathered here feels as natural as all of Yellowstone! Finally, around 11:00, Joette and Ryan get up to go. They have over an hour's drive ahead of them through a dark, wildlife-filled park. It sets off a chain of departures, and soon only the "hardcore" Loons remain: sitting round the fire now are Photodude, Lew and Deb, Peggy B., Rosser, and me. Lew decides to stir the pot a little, and soon we are discussing the complex issues of Yellowstone that have been discussed often on the chat page. I don't know that we discover any of the solutions this night. But I do know that I see five other people around that fire who have a great love of this place and the life that inhabits it, and who care deeply about the issues and

the decisions to be made and policies to be adopted that will shape the future of Yellowstone.

The campfire is now just a pit of glowing embers, and around midnight Ross says it's time for us to head back to Mammoth, too, at least an hour away. We bid everyone good night. Peggy says she'll pick me up at my cabin in the morning before the Loon breakfast in Gardiner.

Driving back through the Lamar Valley there is thick fog, and I am reminded that this is the way my day started – with the fog-shrouded ghost-trees in their funereal march up the ridgelines. As we carefully wind our way back the sudden looming hulk of a bison on the shoulder of the road gives us a start. Around another bend an elk materializes out of the darkness and fog – an apparition in the night, and just as quickly disappears into the darkness behind us. It fascinates me to think of all that teeming LIFE out there – all that WILD LIFE – still out there doing its thing. Just because we go back to our tents and cabins and hotel rooms – and eventually our homes – doesn't mean that the geysers stop erupting or the mud stops boiling or the wolves stop hunting or the bison stop grunting – it all goes on whether we're watching or not. [[Today I saw: 4 wolves, 1 pup, 1 black bear, 1 moose, many bison and calves, some elk, 1 trumpeter swan, 1 kestrel, loons (feathered and human) and/or grebes, and 1 swoose! Today I met: 16 new Loons: Peggy B., Cathy Montana, Ballpark Frank, Ryan, John and Carlene Uhler, Judy, Chloe, Jake and Leslie, Photodude, Lew and Deb Demler, and Quickcarl, Diana and Jerry; 5 new Loonlets: Joseph and Rachel, and Logan, Katherine, and Marlee; and reunited with 7 Loons: Rosser, Joette, Ranger Bill, Bruce and Geri, Pat, and Mark R.]]

SUNDAY, MAY 27TH – INTO EACH LIFE A LITTLE RAIN MUST FALL

This morning the alarm wakes me. Considering that over the last TWO nights I had not gotten more than eight hours' sleep TOTAL, I set the alarm for much later and slept in today. Getting dressed, I remember that yesterday I was too warm in the sun in my lightweight pullover sweater, so today I put on a short-sleeved T-shirt with another short-sleeved shirt worn open, like a jacket, over that. Peggy arrives promptly at the appointed hour (9:30), and we set off for Gardiner. Peggy has never been to the North Entrance before, and remarks that we are exactly half-way between the North Pole and the equator as we drive past the 45th Parallel sign, near the Boiling River. I point out to

her the trail to the Boiling River (in MY day known simply as the “hot pots”). We keep our eyes peeled, watching the cliffs and ridges for pronghorns or bighorns, but all we see are a couple of shaggy-looking elk.

Driving through the ranger station at the gate, and approaching the town, I point out the large warehouse-like buildings now bearing the AMFAC name, but with the same Yellowstone National Park “logo” on them (the silhouette of a bear within red and blue circles) that was there 26 years ago when the name on the buildings was “Y. P. Co.” One of these “warehouses” housed the Y. P. Co. Personnel Dept. where I reported for duty on April 23, 1975. I had flown from SFO to Salt Lake City, changed planes, and on to Bozeman, where I caught a Greyhound to Livingston. There, I was met by a Y.P. Co. bus, which transported me and only two other new employees to Gardiner. I still have the first employee ID card they made for me – it had a photograph that was a “double-exposure” – the photo of me was superimposed with a photo of Skip from Denver! Now, driving through the town of Gardiner, Peggy comments on the beautiful lilac bushes blooming in a few yards. She wants to take a photo of them – they don’t have lilacs like this in Dallas she tells me.

We easily find The Yellowstone Mine and it appears that we are the first to arrive for the planned 10:00 breakfast. The smell of coffee and bacon wafts out onto the porch where we wait for the others to arrive. Peggy spots “Outlaw’s Pizza” across the street and we are both amused by their marquee-like sign boasting of a “Daily Pest SpAcial” which she photographs for posterity. We can’t decide which is funnier: the “Daily PEST Special” or the fact that “Special” is spelled “SpAcial” (causing me to wonder if that’s a phonetic spelling or what?). Joette and Ryan arrive soon after us. I had overheard someone mention last night that Mark R. had taken care of making reservations for a party of fifteen, so we go inside to see where they are going to put us. The place appears to be fairly busy on this gorgeous Sunday morning of the Memorial Day weekend. The employee who greets us at the hostess station knows nothing about a reservation for a party of fifteen, but seems unruffled as she tells us that they can set us up in a little side room. Mark, Carl, Diana, Jerry, and the kids arrive, and I can’t resist giving Mark a little “flak” (it’s my job!) about the apparent lack of a reservation. His defense is, “Well, we didn’t have reservations here LAST year!”

We settle in, taking up a couple of tables. Jerry, Diana, and the three kids fill up one table. At my table are Mark and Carl, Joette and Ryan,

and Peggy and me. Geri and Bruce arrive soon after to begin a third table. The breakfast is a buffet, and we all go quickly through the line, filling up our plates with anything and everything you could possibly want for breakfast. Peggy tells us that Photodude and Lew and Deb kept the discussion going at the campfire last night until 1:00 A.M.!!! We're enjoying our breakfast and sharing our plans for another day in the park when the waitress comes over and says, "Is there someone here named Bruce? You have a phone call." Bruce goes to take the call and returns a few minutes later saying it was Dan M. on the phone! Dan knew from the chat page that we would all be there having breakfast together and called to say "Hi" and "Wish I was there!" Geri tells us, laughing, that when the (waitress? hostess?) answered the phone and Dan M. said he needed to speak to Bruce Conard, the (waitress? hostess?) said, "How am I supposed to find him?" And Dan said, "Look for a tall bald guy!" She came right over to our group! Now Bruce is back in his seat, but he's dialing his cell phone, and in seconds he has Dan back on the line. He passes the phone around the table and we all get to talk to Dan – almost like having him there at breakfast with us, only the cell phone doesn't give hugs as good...

While we're enjoying our breakfasts, Quickcarl, who is sitting next to me on my left, tells me he's come up with something, and he'd like to see what I think about it. He tells me that he has a computer that they don't really use much anymore. "It's an older one, but it works," he says. "I'd like to have Mark fly it out to you, if that's OK, and install it for you." IF THAT'S OK?!?! IF THAT'S OK?!?! ARE YOU KIDDING??? They actually want to GIVE me this computer, but not only THAT – Mark is going to FLY to California (from GEORGIA, mind you!) to INSTALL it for me! Carl begins to ask me what kinds of applications I would like to have on it! I am so overwhelmed with the immensity of their generosity I can't even think! What applications do I want on it? What's an application??? This is just too much, and I notice that Mark is grinning at me from across the table. I struggle for a moment to keep from bursting into tears as I realize what truly wonderful people these Loons are, and how fortunate I am to have such kind, interesting, generous, caring people to call my friends.

Today is the day that Dave Monteith, geyser guy extraordinaire, is going to lead a group tour of the Upper Geyser Basin. Those wishing to join the tour are supposed to meet at the Old Faithful Visitor Center at 1:00. So, breakfasts finished, folks begin departing for Old Faithful. But Ballpark Frank and Cathy have just joined Geri and Bruce at their table, so I ask Peggy if it's OK with her if we stay a little longer

so we can visit with them for a bit. Ballpark is a born storyteller, and I could listen to his tales of daily life in Yellowstone all day long. But after about 20 minutes Peggy reminds me that if we're going to make the geyser tour at all we'd better get going.

As we leave Gardiner though, we have to drive through the magnificent and historic stone arch. You know – the one inscribed, "For the benefit and enjoyment of the people." (I wonder if that's the most often referenced quote on the chat page?) Of course, we have to stop for the requisite photos. Peggy offers to take a photo for a young couple with both of them in it. She and I then take turns trading cameras and taking photos of each other standing in front of the arch.

Driving the five miles back up the hill from Gardiner to Mammoth I again scour the cliffs and bluffs looking for horns – big or prong – and again I'm disappointed. The two elk cows are still there though. Coming into Mammoth we stop for ice for the cooler. Peggy is well-prepared with bottled water, sandwich fixin's, and she shows me the coup de grace: a big basket of chocolate-dipped fresh strawberries! We head south again from Mammoth, circling the travertine terraces, winding through the Hoo Doos, climbing up through the Golden Gate.

We drive through Swan Lake Flats, noticing a few elk in the distance. Rounding a curve in the road, we suddenly "hit the moose jackpot"! Just before Willow Park, there's a handsome bull moose standing in the middle of a small pond just off the road to our left. He has attracted quite a crowd, many of whom are out of their vehicles, and waaayyyy too close for comfort. This bad boy should win the "Mr. Photogenic" award. He periodically dunks his head below the surface of the pond, and comes up with a wet mouthful of aquatic plants and grasses, hanging out of his mouth and dripping. He chews methodically, glowering at the encroaching crowd, then takes a half step, and dunks his head again. We take several shots of this guy – me handing my camera to Peggy – without getting out of the van. The scene is crazy, cars are blocking the road and more and more people are getting closer and closer. After a few minutes we worm our way through the moose jam and head off, hopeful that maybe today we'll see Obsidian and the cubs.

But there is no sign of them as we pass the area where I'd previously seen them. The "bear people" are still gathered there, though. We stop in the turnout at Roaring Mountain and Peggy takes a few photos. Further on, we decide to take the Firehole Canyon Drive and view the Firehole Falls.

A few miles further on and we realize how late it's getting and begin to fear that we're not going to make it in time. But we go for it, and it's already a few minutes after 1:00 as we turn off the loop road to enter the Old Faithful complex. As many times as I've been there, and having worked there for three months in '76, I am STILL always astonished at how BIG an area this is – first the freeway-like overpass that you drive over as you enter and exit the area, and then the many buildings, directional signs, enormous parking lots! It's like a little metropolis! It's always confusing. I now see the exterior of the "new" Snow Lodge for the first time, and I am "underwhelmed" to put it politely. Granted, it's an improvement over the "old" Snowlodge, but it looks to me like the result of "design-by-committee." We search first for the Visitor Center and then for a nearby place to park, and are rewarded with a fairly decent parking space. We are worried that the group has already departed on the tour, but I feel that they can't have gotten far and we should be able to catch up to them. Peggy – always well-prepared – is gathering up rain gear, camera, binocs, water bottle. I tell her I'm going to run ahead to see if I can catch them, not wanting to "just miss" them. I hurry towards the front of the Visitor Center and am met in front of it by Mark R. Whew! They haven't left yet! Inside, the group has gathered. I meet Dave, our very knowledgeable tour guide, and here are Sandi and Rick – Iowa Loons! Peggy joins us as another round of hugs is in progress.

Dave calls this meeting of Loons to order and informs us that much to his and our dismay, virtually all of the major geysers in the Upper Geyser Basin have already erupted. He has an alternative tour to suggest. "The Fountain Paint Pots area is nearby, and has a wide variety of different types of geothermal features, not the least of which is the bubbling mud pots, so I think the kids will enjoy it." The kids he's referring to are Mark R's nephew and nieces, Quickcarl's grandkids. "The walk around the boardwalk isn't very long. So, for those adults who would like to continue on a longer hike, we can go up to Fountain Flat Drive where I can take you to an off-trail thermal area with some interesting mudpots. Sound good?" We all agree that this sounds like a good plan, so after finding the Old Faithful Cam in the window of the Visitor Center and maniacally waving to it, we head for our cars, agreeing to meet at the beginning of the Paint Pots boardwalk in 15 minutes. On the way to the van, Peggy and I run into Lori D., another late arrival hoping to "catch up with" the tour! Good timing! I introduce Lori to Peggy, and we inform her of the change of plan – good thing she ran into us!

Just north of Old Faithful, Peggy and I spot Lew and Deb heading south, towards Old Faithful. Peggy tells me to look up their cell-phone number in her "trip binder" and we try to call them a few times, but to no avail. Their phone must be turned off.

Peggy's "trip binder" is a TRIP, in every sense of the word! She's got posts printed out from both the "original" and the Loon chat pages, she's got schedules and "Loonion stuff" printed out from the "secured" Loon site, she's got her flight schedule and itinerary, her rental car agency info, lodging reservation info, all the photos of Loons from the secure page, lists of Loons and their cell-phone (and other) numbers! All organized into divided sections with color-coded tabs! This is one organized, well-prepared Loon! Flipping through her binder I am reminded of one evening when I was "chatting" online with Peggy and Mark R. on Instant Messenger, and they were debating which of them was the more "anal-retentive" in preparing for a trip! Even though I know that Mark begins packing for his trips to the Stone a month before departure, looking at this binder now, I might have to give Peggy the edge.

We pull into the Fountain Paint Pots parking area, and second only to Old Faithful this is the busiest area to which I've been on this trip. The parking lot is crowded, but we find a space without too much ado. In spite of its crowds, the Fountain Paint Pots has always been one of my favorite areas in the park. There is just something about the plop-plop-plop of that pinkish mud that is mesmerizing to me. Of all the thermal features I saw, it is the area that left the biggest impression on me when I first visited the park as a fifteen-year-old.

Dave proves to be a first-rate tour guide, knowledgeable not only of the geothermal features, but also of park history and folklore. He starts us off by pointing out a remnant of the old road and old parking lot for the area, explaining the constantly changing nature of many of the park's features – both natural and man-made. He points to the meadow across the loop road from the Paint Pots area where the old Fountain Hotel once stood. He asks how many of us have read "Death In Yellowstone" by Lee Whittlesey, park archivist (nearly everyone in the group has), and relates a story from that book of a park visitor who wandered out from the hotel one night, never to be seen again. It isn't known what became of him – if he stumbled into a hot pool or was the victim of a bear attack, or some other unknown fate. Dave suspects that he fell into a hot pool, as they are numerous in this area, and the crust here is very thin.

Dave explains the difference between a hot spring and a geyser and a fumarole and a mud pot. He describes the “plumbing system” of a geyser and what makes them erupt. At Silex Spring he points out the algae and bacterial mats, and explains that the different colors indicate different water temperatures. He points out some flies feeding on the algae, explaining how some of these organisms can be found nowhere else in the world, and how they fit into the food chain and affect the balance of the ecosystem. He talks about some fairly recent major scientific discoveries made by studying the geothermal features and the microorganisms inhabiting them, not the least of which was the unraveling of the mystery of DNA.

As we proceed to the mud pots themselves, I watch Mark’s nieces and nephew, and I see that they, too, are enthralled by the plop-plop-plopping mud. At Leather Pool, Dave talks about the Hebgen Lake earthquake of 1959. He explains that Leather Pool was a warm pool, named for the leather-like brown algae that lined the bowl. But after the earthquake the water temperature rose to boiling, killing the algae and leaving the pool named for something it no longer resembles.

We move along the boardwalk to an overlook west of the mudpots that looks out over the rest of the geyser basin. Dave lets it slip that his personal favorite geyser is in this area – Fountain Geyser – and it is predicted to erupt possibly within 45 minutes to an hour. He’s unsure how willing the group is to linger in hopes of seeing an eruption, but he forgets – this is a group of LOONS he’s dealing with here! Of COURSE we’re game!

Having never been aware of the “geyser gazer” community before I found the Total Yellowstone Page and chat pages, I am now fascinated at listening to Dave communicate with other “gazers” and GOSA members via radio, as they relay info to each other regarding predicted eruption times, indicators going off, etc. We linger at the overlook, and Dave explains Fountain’s indicators and how there are frequent false indicators. We experience this first-hand as one of Fountain’s pools begins to fill, indicating that an eruption may be imminent, then it recedes. We watch numerous other smaller geysers erupt – Jet, Clepsydra, seemingly almost continuously. Finally, after several false indicators, our patience is rewarded and Fountain erupts with a splendid display! By now, we have moved down from the overlook so that we are “up front and center” to witness this amazing display of the power and beauty and mystery of Mother Earth.

Throughout our tour, I've noticed several times that people passing by our group have stopped to listen as Dave explains what we are seeing. It is truly a privilege to not only be able to bask in all of Yellowstone's glory, but to be in the presence of someone so knowledgeable and so willing to explain the phenomena we are witnessing as it is happening. The Fountain eruption is long (a typical eruption can last for 30 to 40 minutes), but never boring. Just when you think all of the geyser's energy is spent, another strong, high blast of steam and water proves you wrong.

Finally, though, it does subside, and we move on along the rest of the boardwalk, looping around and back towards the parking lot. I am dismayed and a little surprised by how winded I become as we head back. The boardwalk has a very slight incline as it loops back up towards the parking lot. As much as I enjoyed our tour, I had to stop a couple of times to "catch my breath". I don't kid myself about my physical condition by any means, and my lack of fitness obviously is the main factor in how quickly I become winded. But I also know that an incline this slight would not affect me this much back home. I am touched by the chivalry of Quickcarl and Mark, as they hang back and patiently wait with me when I have to stop, expressing their concern that I not push myself too much.

I had begun a walking regimen last fall, as part of a weight-loss and fitness program, and was doing fairly well with it. But, at the beginning of April – right when Rosser left California to go back to Yellowstone for his Reservations job there – I came down with the worst case of bronchitis I think I have ever had! It held on for over six weeks! During that time, I stopped the walking, because I was experiencing severe shortness of breath, and any level of exertion started an uncontrollable coughing fit. The weekend before Rosser left (just before I got sick) we had driven up to Lake Tahoe for a day. Ross had never been there, and I wanted to show him one of the prettiest parts of California before he left. We went to Emerald Bay on the west shore of Lake Tahoe, and got out of the car and clambored around on the rocks and paths in the area, overlooking Eagle Falls and Emerald Bay and its little island. This is where the trailhead for the Desolation Wilderness Area is, where Buck frequently backpacks on weekends. Climbing around on these rocks and taking photos of Ross with Emerald Bay in the background, I noticed how easily I got winded and was amazed at the difference in my stamina at this altitude as opposed to at home. It had been a few years (!) since the last time I had been up to the mountains, and I had forgotten how the altitude can affect you. It was only a hint of what I was to experience here in

Yellowstone. And again, I had six weeks of bronchitis and no walking between that trip and this one.

Back in the Fountain Paint Pots parking lot, we clambor back into our vehicles, and those who are interested in continuing caravan up to Fountain Flat Drive, following it to the parking area at the end of the road. As we drive, we observe some ominous-looking storm clouds moving in our direction. Along the way, I say to Peggy, "I hope this doesn't upset you, but I don't think I'm going to join this hike. I'll hang out at the trailhead, maybe walk around the area a little, and wait in the van for you to get back." Thankfully, Peggy doesn't protest but graciously accepts my decision to sit this one out. I am disappointed, because I really want to go, but as winded as I got on the simple walk around the Paint Pots, I know that I will hold up the group if I go along, and I'm not sure how advisable it is for me to keep pushing myself in my attempt to keep up.

I watch as the remaining members of our group assemble, rain ponchos and hats coming out: Dave M., Peggy B., Lori D., Mark R. and Quickcarl. I watch them walk up the trail until they are no longer visible. Mark has given me his copy of the first (and so far ONLY) Loon Bookclub book, "A Chorus of Buffalo" by Ruth Rudner, and I open it up and start to read. After a while, I decide to get out of the van and stretch my legs a little. I climb out, and wander around the immediate area a bit. There are lots of people here fishing the Firehole River, and I watch them for a while. But suddenly the sky opens up and the rain pours down. I run for the shelter of the van. It is raining hard, and I can see lightning and hear very loud thunder, and suddenly I am not so sorry that I didn't join this hike. I am simultaneously startled and amused to see that most of the people fishing just keep fishing – not letting a little rain or thunder and lightning get in the way of their plans for the day!

There is a group of men and one young boy – it looks like three generations of a family – I have been watching. They had been fishing, and now I watch them load their gear into the back of a camper. I watch as a cooler comes out, and they have an impromptu tail-gate picnic in the rain. I go back to my reading, but am suddenly startled by a racket – and look up to see that it has suddenly started hailing – big, chickpea-sized hailstones! And I am amused to see that the men are continuing to eat their sandwiches and chips, sipping their beers, seemingly unfazed by this turn of the weather! We Yellowstone Loonatics enjoy our park, come hail or high water! HAHA!

I continue reading, but continue to be distracted by the storm. I am just a little worried about my friends as the thunder and lightning seems to grow nearer, louder, and more frequent. I remember now that in my bag containing my camera, binocs, film, etc., I have an inexpensive little set of two-way radios. Rosser and I had purchased them back in March, on the day that I took him and his friends from Flagg Ranch on a tour of San Francisco. We had taken two vehicles, so the radios helped us to stay in contact when we got separated in city traffic, to make sure that we didn't lose each other in the city. I had insisted that Ross take the radios with him when he left for Yellowstone. And he had insisted that I take them this week, while I'm here in the park, in case I should find some need for them. I remember that we were able, on occasion, to hear other people's conversations on these radios, and in a couple of instances to actually speak to them, and I'm thinking that maybe I might be able to hear Dave communicating on his radio. So I take one of the radios out, and listen for a few moments. I try all three channels, but to no avail. I hear nothing.

It has grown noticeably colder, and of course, even though I have, over the past couple of years, repeatedly advised people to "be prepared for anything" weather-wise, and to dress in layers, do you think I could take my own advice? NOOOOooooooooo, of COURSE not! But yesterday had been so beautiful and warm! Now I find myself shivering. Peggy has left behind a shirt-jacket draped over the driver's seat, and I pull it over me like a little blanket. Snuggling beneath, it helps me to start to warm up, and I pick up the book again and start to read some more.

Suddenly I hear a sharp rapping on the van's window, and with a start I realize that I have fallen asleep while I was reading! Laughing, I discover that the group, looking like a bunch of drowned rats, has returned. Mark comes over and teases me for being asleep when they got back. I tease him back for looking like a drowned rat. I make the observation that perhaps I made the better choice in staying behind, judging from everyone's appearance! Most of the group has inches of thick mud clinging to their shoes or boots, but their enthusiasm is not dampened. It sounds like they had a great hike, and on a sobering note, they tell me that they saw the pool where the three young AMFAC employees were so badly burned last summer.

Peggy, leaving for home in the morning, hugs farewells, knowing she may not see any of these Loons again before she departs. She climbs

into the van, and we wave good-bye to the others as we pull out of the parking area.

I have no idea what time it is, but I know that it's getting late in the afternoon. Peggy says that we should head back to Mammoth. She needs to drop me off and return to her cabin in Silver Gate to begin to pack and get ready to leave early the next morning.

Along the way, north of Willow Park, we again see that same bull moose that we had seen in the roadside pond on our way to Old Faithful earlier today (and that I had seen coming into the park on Friday night). We turn in at the entrance to Indian Creek Campground (which isn't open yet and has a locked gate across the roadway), and find a place to park. The moose is across the creek, munching on the willows and grasses. He has again attracted quite a crowd, though not as bad as the one this morning. Or maybe it just seems so, as they are all spread out throughout the woods and along the edge of the creek, everyone trying for the best angle to shoot a photo. Peggy and I are no better than the rest, walking down the path to near the water's edge. The moose is about 20 – 25 yards away, on the opposite side of the narrow stream in a marshy area. We watch and take photos for quite a while. The crowd is subdued and fairly well-behaved (better than the one this morning), and it is a pretty, peaceful spot, and I just try to soak it all up. The majority of the crowd is congregated to my right, and the moose moves to the left, wading into the stream. He seems to be largely unconcerned with the people, yet is gradually moving away from them. We finally pull ourselves away, and walking back up the path towards the van, I find myself in spirited conversation with another park visitor and obvious Loon, but a total stranger. The magic of Yellowstone -- total strangers talk to each other like they've known each other for years. We climb back into the van and continue on to Mammoth.

Peggy delivers me to my cabin, and I thank her for providing me with transportation and excellent company for these two days. We say our good-byes, and of course give and receive big hugs, and promise to do it again next year. We say, "See ya' on the chat page!" and as a parting gesture, she reaches into her cooler and pulls out the forgotten basket of golf-ball sized chocolate-dipped strawberries and gives them to me. Dinner! I wave as she drives away, headed for a last visit to the Lamar, on her way back to Silver Gate.

It's a little after 5:00, so I decide to go look for Ross, and as I approach his dorm he leans out a second floor window and tells me

he'll be right down. He decides it's time for us to do something about my flat tire and asks me if I have a jack. "No." He says, "I think Kim does" (his boss) and goes to get the car she's left with him for the week. He returns with her car, and I help him unload the stuff that's in the trunk so he can get to the jack. He gets right to work, trying to jack up my car. But, after a couple of minutes, he says, "I can't figure out how these fit together," showing me the two parts he has – the jack and it's handle. I look at it for a moment, and say, "I think this fits in here...." And voila! ("Wah Lah!") What a team! He jacks up my car. He removes the flat. "Do you have a spare?" "No – it's flat." We discover that the Mammoth service station is already closed. Being Sunday evening, we doubt that anything is open in Gardiner. He decides that this should be our plan of action: He removes the flat and props it against the car. If we can find them, we will ask Joette's son Ryan to help me get the flat over to the Mammoth service station in the morning for repair, before we're supposed to meet all the other Loons in front of the webcam for our big day of Loonion events. Sounds like a plan to me.

While he's been unscrewing lug nuts, he has informed me that there is, in fact, a "transient room" available for me in one of the dorms tomorrow (Monday) night, and that he'll take me sometime tomorrow to get "signed up" with the dorm supervisor (or whatever they're called these days!). We walk over to the hotel and ask at the front desk about my getting a refund for Monday. Rosser has spoken to the supervisor here earlier today, explaining the situation, and they say that a refund is no problem. I tell them about the morning's Loonion events, and that I'll be busy trying to get my tire fixed before that, and ask if I can have a slight "extension" on the check-out time. They are very accommodating, and I am so grateful to them and to Rosser for his assistance!

Neither of us having had any dinner, we now head to the Mammoth Hotel Dining Room for some appetizers. "They have great buffalo wings!" Rosser informs me. As we head that way, we run into Joette and Ryan. Ross immediately hits up Ryan, asking him if it would be possible for him to help me get my tire to the service station in the morning, and of course, both Ryan and Joette graciously agree to come at 9:00 and assist me with my problem.

While we're chatting, here comes Pat and Judy. We tell the four of them that we are headed into the restaurant for appetizers, and ask them if they'd like to join us. Everyone seems to be in the mood for a nice, "laid-back" visit, and we move as a group towards the entrance.

As we approach the door, a young woman – a waitress – comes bounding out and breathlessly asks, “Are you from that tour bus that just pulled into the hotel?” “No,” we reply. “Whew! Thank goodness! I hope we’re not getting a bus-full of tourists now!” “No, no,” we reassure her, “We’re just coming in for some coffee and maybe some appetizers, if that’s okay...” “Sure!” she says, bounding off across the street to check out the bus situation, calling back over her shoulder, “Ask for Station #1, I’ll take good care of ya!”

We enter the dining room, asking for Station #1, and are seated at a large, round table in the front (northeast) corner of the room, with a view of the front of the hotel as well as the meadow out in front of the restaurant. It takes a little while for the waitress to return from “checking out the bus situation,” but in the meantime her busboy is setting us up with menus and water and additional place settings. They are both friendly, chatty, and funny. And while seeming to be a little disorganized and taking a little longer than it should for the type of service we require, we are enjoying chatting with them. The waitress asks if anyone would like to see the dessert menu. “Sure, why not?” several of us say. Ross has his heart set on the buffalo wings, but all of the rest of us – most having ostensibly only intended to have coffee or tea – decide to go for dessert. The desserts described on the menu all sound so DECADENT! I order the huckleberry sundae, and it is the most DELICIOUS concoction I’ve had in a LONG time!

Sitting here in this room I have a heady mix of emotions: tremendous nostalgia for this place. It’s almost as if I can feel the “spirits” of my younger self and all of those dear friends of so long ago, floating around in this room. Some changes have taken place over the years, mostly cosmetic (for instance, the cocktail lounge used to be between the coffee shop (the Terrace Grill, now) and the main dining room, and you could get from the coffee shop to the dining room by walking through the lounge. Now the lounge is at the north end -- the entrance -- to the dining room, and the two ends of the building are blocked off from each other.

I remember “setting up” the dining room before the season started: getting the waitress and bus stations set up with condiments and silverware and bus tubs and trays, setting up and arranging all the tables and chairs, figuring out which tables made up which “sections”, and scrubbing EVERYTHING – including the walls – from floor to ceiling. A slow start to the season, me starting out as a busser, having no previous food service experience. The place gradually

getting busier and busier as the season progressed. The night the Asst. Manager came to me and said, "Allison, we're short-handed and busier than we expected and we need you to be a waitress tonight." Then finding out that my FIRST EVER party that I am going to serve (and my ONLY party that night) consists of the Prime Minister of Kenya and several Members of Parliament, and the head of Kenya's National Parks system! They were touring the National Parks of the United States, learning about our National Parks system. What an experience!

I remember the tremendous amount of staff turnover throughout the summer season (people would quit without giving much notice, some would simply walk off the job mid-shift!) as some employees became disenchanted by how hard we had to work and how little we were paid. I didn't care – I was so thrilled just to BE in Yellowstone! I remember the strong bonds quickly formed, and the difficulty of saying good-bye to those friends as they left the park, knowing we might not ever see each other again. And now, 26 years later, sitting here in this same place with a NEW group of friends – some of whom I've only JUST met, yet feeling I've known all of them for a long time already. And all of us so happy to be here. The bonding between us Loons is remarkable, tangible, overwhelming, gratifying.

Sitting here now, we talk about the park, our adventures of the past couple of days, wildlife sightings, Loon sightings. We talk about last night's campfire, and Ross and I tell them about the political discussion Lew started with only Deb, Photodude, Peggy, Ross and I still there. Ross says that he "doesn't care about all of that stuff" – it doesn't interest him, he just loves Yellowstone and just wants to enjoy it without being "bothered with all that political crap." And I say, "But Rosser, if you truly love Yellowstone, then you HAVE to care about 'all of that crap' because the way these issues are resolved is going to determine the future of the park!" He knows this, and he actually DOES care, but he gets impatient with the seemingly endless debates. Pat is amused with this thread of the conversation and says, smiling, "Rosser – we need to find you an issue!" Ross laughs and says in his typically sardonic way, "Oh, I've got ISSUES, honey, trust me!" Partly because the waitress seems to keep "disappearing" for long periods of time, and partly just because we are relaxing and enjoying each others' company, we sit there chatting for a couple of hours. Later, I learn from various trip reports that this is the night that Wendy (whom I haven't met yet) and Photodude "got engaged," and many Loons were again in the Lamar. Besides the "betrothed" I think Tim A. and Betsy, Frank and Cathy, Mark and Carl, Jake and Leslie, Charles,

Sandy and Rick, Peggy, and who knows who else were scoping wolves and griz, and I get a little "tinge" of regret that I didn't get out there with them. But the six of us – me and Ross, Joette and Ryan, Pat and Judy – had a lovely time getting to know each other better and I discovered that the BEST thing to eat in the park is the huckleberry sundae at the Mammoth Dining Room.

We finally all depart, ready for bed, looking forward to tomorrow – Joette and Ryan return to their campsite at the Mammoth Campground, Pat and Judy to their room in the hotel, Ross to his dorm, me to my cabin. It's cool but not cold and I sit out on the front porch of the cabin for a while with my CD player headphones on, listening to some quiet music. From there I can see what I guess to be the employees' pub, judging from the rowdiness of the young people hanging around the door – and the fact that last night I noticed some young rowdies in the same area. I'm kind of surprised they're allowed to make as much noise as they do, considering the proximity to the cabins and the hotel and the lateness of the hour. There were no "employees' pubs" when I worked in the park – we just hung out in the lounge in the restaurant on the evenings we had nothing better to do (and perhaps that explains why they now have employees' pubs!).

I step off the front porch and look to the sky, and even with the lights of Mammoth all around me the sky is ablaze with stars. I go back inside and hand wash a couple of articles of clothing in the sink, write some notes on the events of the day in my notebook, and decide to turn in and get a half-way decent night's sleep for a change. Tomorrow is the "official" Loonion day. I can't wait!

MONDAY, MAY 28TH, "MI TAKUYE OYASIN" – Part One

I sleep till 8:00, throw some clothes on and stroll over to the nearby bathroom for a shower. I only have to wait a few minutes for a stall, and enjoy the hot shower. Returning to my cabin I open the curtains to let in the light, open the windows to let in the air, and "tidy things up" a bit. Included in the information provided by AMFAC to visitors in the cabins is information on the recycling program implemented park-wide by the employees. They request that you set empty aluminum cans and glass and plastic bottles NEXT to the trash can rather than IN it. They are happy to supply fresh towels as often as you would like (and sheets), but ask that if you don't need a fresh towel, that you fold and hang your used towels on the rack to dry. This conserves water and energy by significantly reducing the amount of laundry done

each day park-wide. I notice that they make my bed each day, but don't change the sheets unless requested to do so. They use biodegradable products for cleaning and biodegradable detergent for the laundry. Numbers are given, showing the benefits of this program. I fold my towels and hang them to dry, and place my empty soda cans on the floor next to the trash can.

Joette and Ryan will be here at 9:00 to help with my tire. We're to meet the other Loons in front of Albright at 10:00. I have a few of Peggy's chocolate strawberries for breakfast. As previously described, the front porch of my cabin faces a little "common area" with green grass and a small, meandering trickle of a stream through the middle of it. There are stepping stones for crossing the stream (which are not really needed) to get to the restroom. I am returning from brushing my teeth when I notice Joette on my cabin's porch, knocking on the door. "Over here, Joette!" I shout, waving my arm in greeting. I see Pat and Judy come around the side of the cabin. Joette tells me that they have just watched a coyote come through this "common area," hunting the little ground squirrels that live under the porches and in holes dotting the lawn. They just saw him gulp one down for breakfast. GULP. I must have JUST missed it, because I only just walked over to the restroom five minutes before – DARN!

Ryan appears, and immediately starts to walk my tire up towards the service station, rolling it with his hands. Joette and I follow him, but he arrives well ahead of us – that boy has ENERGY! The service station attendant already has my tire in the back, and takes me inside to fill out some paperwork. Paperwork completed, I wait out front with Joette and Ryan, enjoying the sun and mild morning air. A few minutes later the attendant comes out and informs me that the tire is not repairable. Apparently, when I drove on it from the Wraith Falls pullout to Mammoth on Saturday, I damaged the sidewalls of the tire. The attendant doesn't even feel it is safe to use as a spare. They do not have tires for sale at Mammoth. He calls the service station at Canyon, but they do not have my tire size. He suggests a place in Gardiner, but reminds me that it is the Memorial Day holiday, and they are closed. He says that they will come out for an emergency, but that there will be an extra charge because of the holiday. Frustrated, I decide that I'm going to have to "rely on the kindness of strangers" for my transportation again today. And I'll just have to wait until tomorrow – the day I'm supposed to depart – to get my tire fixed. Ryan rolls the flat back down to my cabin and leaves it propped against my car.

Joette and I stroll on over to Albright. We're the first to arrive, Ryan shortly after. But before too long, the Loons begin to flock! One of the first to arrive after us is WENDY! I smile as first she greets Joette with a warm hug. Having met at last year's Loonion, and also at the Demler's Pennsylvania Loonion, these two are old friends. After a few moments Wendy turns to me, grins maniacally, reaches out her arms and LITERALLY SCREAMS: "AAALLLISSONNNN!!!" I adopt a similar posture and scream back, "WWWEEENNNNNDDDDYYYYY!!!!!" Laughing, we hug, and then excitedly tell of our adventures thus far. Wendy shows us her pop-top "engagement ring" from PD as she tells us the story, and we laugh and tell her of our own PD encounters in Lamar and at the campfire the other night. Here comes Geri and Bruce, Lew and Deb, Mark and Carl. Here are two MORE Loons that I haven't met yet: Miked and the lovely Alice! I am thrilled to finally be meeting one of the "D Bruddahs" and between Mike and Alice I'm not sure which of them is the loveliest! :-)) (This is not meant as a "slam" on Alice! She is, indeed, QUITE lovely, but SO IS MIKE!!!) Also arriving are Tim and Betsy, Ballpark Frank and Cathy – and here comes Charles, Druid Fan #1! I met Charles in January at the Palm Springs Loonion and liked him at LEAST as much as I knew that I would! He has a sly wit that just sneaks up on ya' and GRABS ya' with that slow Texas drawl of his. It's GREAT to see him again now, here in the park! And now I finally get to meet Cathy W. – one of my fellow "Liberal Lady Loons" (though I know she doesn't like labels!), and the "champion wildlife spotter" of the Loons. She tells us of watching a griz feeding on a carcass in the middle of the river at Le Hardy Rapids this morning, and as they watched, the carcass broke loose. Soon she has us all laughing as she tells of watching that grizzly "SURF" the carcass down the rapids! Only Cathy W. would be lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time to view something like that!

Bruce now gets a big laugh as he presents Wendy with the "Second Annual Bruce Conard Good Driving Award" as we are all told the story of Wendy getting her rented 4WD SUV stuck in the mud last night at the Silver Gate Cabins, because she didn't know how to shift into 4WD!!! Apparently Lew and Deb returned to their cabin shortly after Wendy did, found her stuck and spinning her wheels, and Deb strolled over and showed Wendy how to shift into 4WD. She THEN pulled right out of the mud! Bruce is THRILLED to be "passing on" the title of "good driver of the year." Some of you might remember he earned this title last year when he locked his keys in their SUV in a pullout in Lamar, something he may NEVER live down, whether the "title" is passed or not!

I realize that since we're having such a great time just standing around here visiting, we should move over to the picnic table so that we're sure that we're all on the webcam, and hopefully there are Loons at home watching us! (Were any of you? I never heard anything about it, and never saw any "captured" Webcam shots?) I go sit on one of the table's benches, and soon the rest of the Loons follow. The lovely Miked calls his brother JohnD, and passes the cell phone around and we all get to say "hello" to JohnD, Board Heavy! He is watching us on the webcam as we speak to him on the phone! How cool is that? We're waiting for our fearless leader, John Uhler, and Carlene to arrive, and in good time they do. John apologizes for keeping us waiting, blaming it on Carlene, who rolls her eyes heavenward, but stays tolerantly silent. There is much joviality, horsing around, laughing, joking, story-telling and chatter. Just like on the chat page! I survey the faces, recognizing the radiant smiles and relaxed happiness on each face – happiness that we are "home" and with friends who share in the joy of simply being here! There is a "knowing" that I feel, that we all share – of what it means to each and every one of us to BE here. And in that knowing there is also a "forgiveness" of the ones that are here in the park, but not here in Mammoth – as each of us knows that sometimes that "pull" of the park is so great that all else must fall by the wayside.

We group together to take the "official" group photos. Everyone wants to have a group shot taken with their camera, but we decide that we'll just take the shots with a couple of the cameras, and those folks will make sure that whoever wants a copy of the shot will get it. So, OK – Demlers? Oldtymrs? How do I get a print of that group shot? I want one! I'd like a copy of the one taken in the cemetery too! Who's got that one? I'll pay for printing and mailing, just let me know to whom I should send my \$\$ and SASE!

John then goes over the plan for the day. We're to head down to Gardiner, following him, to the old cemetery just outside the North Entrance, where we'll clean up litter and place flags at the graves of veterans. Afterwards, we'll return to McMammoth (the Terrace Grill) for lunch, followed by a group hike led by Ballpark Frank around the Beaver Ponds Loop. We'll wind up the day with a big campfire in the evening at the fire ring up on the hill behind the Mammoth Hotel (actually, behind the dorm I used to live in!).

We divide ourselves up into carpools, and I ask Wendy if I can ride down with her. The caravan sets off, and Wendy and I are chattering away, telling of our experiences so far. Wendy tells me of meeting

Photodude in Lamar the previous evening, and of how he said that he had a "present" for her, took her hand, showed her a pop-top ring from a beer or soda can that he picked up on the "Dun-burnin' Road," slipped it on her finger and said, "Now we're engaged!" I laugh at this story, and remembering last year's adventures with "Chief" I comment on how Wendy seems to have this "thing" about "getting married" or "engaged" every summer in Yellowstone and she says, "Yeah, what's UP with THAT???"

Suddenly we pass Joette and Ryan, headed in the opposite direction, back up towards Mammoth, and we realize that they have decided to forego this particular activity. Joette, courageous woman that she is, is so brave to even BE here. Her pain is still fresh, her sorrow shows in her eyes, and I know that she doesn't feel that she has any "right" to be here, that she feels she shouldn't yet be allowing herself to have any fun. Yet, many of us encouraged her to come, and I think she recognized that Yellowstone is a very healing place, and that here she would be surrounded by all the love and support and understanding of all of her Loon friends. I admire her so much for always pushing herself just a little beyond what she knows she is able to do.

Our caravan passes through the familiar stone arch, and continues straight ahead, on a dirt road that gradually goes up a gentle slope and curves around to the right to a parking area at the cemetery. It is a small, very old, fenced in cemetery, atop a hill overlooking Gardiner and the Gallatin Valley. We gather inside the enclosure and trash bags and flags are distributed to the group. We fan out over the hillside, calling out to each other every few moments as we discover something interesting on a headstone. Many of the graves are well over a hundred years old, but there are also some that are fairly recent. I find two very old graves – a mother and infant, the very young mother dying in childbirth at the age of sixteen. The mood is appropriately subdued though not melancholy, just respectful. The air is warm and the surroundings are serenely beautiful.

Mark's sister (Carl's daughter) Diana and her family are here with us as well, and the kids are excited, calling "Mom! Com'ere!" with each discovery they make. But I suddenly hear an extra note of excitement in one of the children's voices at whatever they've just discovered, and I overhear Logan exclaiming excitedly, "It's a bunny!" And sure enough, as I get closer to see for myself, he shows me what's in the palm of his hand – it's the tiniest rabbit I've EVER seen! Quivering with fear, nose twitching, it actually fits in the palm of his small hand! He doesn't know any better (he's a KID!) and has picked the

frightened little critter up, but where there's ONE baby critter, there are likely to be others, and somewhere a mama, and a couple of us express concern that perhaps he should put it back down. Sure enough, another baby bunny is spotted, and Diana tells Logan to put down the one he is holding. He gently lowers it to the ground, near where he found it, and we watch as they timidly hop away, taking cover in the sage. It is remarkable how perfectly the color of their fur camouflages the little rabbits, as they blend into this arid landscape and seem to disappear. This is one of my favorite wildlife sightings of the entire trip. Their little ears were no longer – and certainly not as big around – as the tip of my little finger!

As a group, we have collected a good amount of litter – broken glass, rusted tin cans, crumbly and faded plastic and silk flowers, left long ago in remembrance of someone and long since having succumbed to the elements. The many flags we have placed are gently waving in the breeze. John and Frank call us to come together near the southeast corner of the small cemetery. One of them (I'm afraid I don't recall if it was Frank or John) acknowledges the contribution of absent and sorely missed Loon Tim Williams in securing the flags and shipping them to John to be used for this project. He thanks those of us present for joining in this effort. Then John asks, if no one has an objection, for us to form a circle and join hands to offer a prayer and give thanks – to those veterans who made sacrifices in serving our country, and thanks for the many blessings we share on this glorious day. Of course, no one objects. And while I know that there are those in this group (myself included) who do not necessarily affiliate themselves with any particular religion, I sense that this is a deeply spiritual group – every one of us – and that is yet another thing that makes our bond so strong.

John's prayer is perfect, the words eloquently flowing from his heart. We have a moment of silence, and I stand there, my hand joined with my friends in this circle of Loons, and I feel such an overwhelming sense of belonging, of acceptance – a feeling that I am right where I am supposed to be at this particular moment in time. It is a quiet few moments, a solemn point in time, but again, not melancholy – in fact, just the opposite. Then the moment passes, and that easy conviviality takes over again.

We all seem to notice at the same time the lovely brilliant pink wildflowers growing at our feet, and someone – was it Frank? Cathy Montana? Or Deb? Or Cathy W.? -- SOMEONE identifies them as "rock roses" and several of us photograph them.

We mosey back to our vehicles and the caravan heads back up the hill to Mammoth, parking again in front of the Albright Visitor Center. On the way up the hill, I tell Wendy all about Saturday night's campfire, Jake's guitar playing, and the fun Jerry and I had singing songs from "our era," and just for good measure, Wendy joins me in singing a chorus of The Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again."

At Albright, there is more clowning around on the lawn, and waving and gesticulating at the webcam. Additional Loons – late arrivals – join us and point out that we missed the scheduled "Group Webcam Shot." They arrived too late to join us in the cemetery clean up, but we left for the cemetery too late to get back in time for the scheduled webcam shot. Oh well. What's that old saying about "the best-laid plans of mice and men...?" Sandi and Rick are here, and they tell us that Lori D. and Rosser had been here, having gotten a few minutes break from the Reservations Dept. so they could make the group webcam shot, and we're sorry we missed them!

We make our way over to McMammoth, and it is fairly busy, but somehow we all manage to place our orders and get our lunches in relatively short order. I fill up my beverage cup at the self-service fountain and follow the group outside, where some of us sit on the steps, while others find a place on the lawn. I am joined on the steps by the lovely Mike and the lovely Alice, and the charming Carl, and the adorable Mark. The day has warmed up considerably, and I can feel my face getting sunburned. You would think that I would know better, and would be prepared with a hat and some sunscreen, but NOOOOOooooo!!! THAT would be too logical.

I can't believe how MANY LOONS are gathered all together here, sharing lunch sprawled out on the lawn and the steps in front of the Terrace Grill. The mood is relaxed, casual, jovial. There are none of those "getting to know you" feelings of anxiety or shyness. It feels like a reunion of good, old, long-time friends. I eat my grilled chicken salad and listen to the story-telling and wise-cracking, only occasionally and only for a moment worrying about my burning face.

I finish my salad, and Carl, ever the chivalrous Southern Gentleman, takes my trash away. Folks seem to want to linger a bit, but the Beaver Ponds Loop Trail calls, and Loons going on the hike are assembling over in front of the Albright Center. After a while, I realize that I am one of the last remaining in front of the Grill. I have already decided that because of the difficulty I am having becoming acclimated to the altitude, and my lack of fitness, I am going to "sit out" this

hike. It is a bitter disappointment, and I resolve that this will NOT happen at another Loonion if I can help it. But I am self-conscious about how quickly I start huffin' and puffin', and I don't want to be "a drag" on the rest of the group, and I am afraid that I would push myself so hard to try to keep up and try NOT to be a "drag" that I might possibly endanger myself. I also don't want a big scene of people trying to convince me to come along, and me refusing – that would be too embarrassing, so I excuse myself to go back inside the Grill for a bottle of water.

When I come back out, as I had hoped, all of the Loons have now headed back over to Albright, to assemble for the hike, or headed out for other adventures. I walk back behind the Grill, passing by the front of my old dorm, looking up at my 2nd floor bedroom window, and remembering the times we climbed out that window to "sunbathe" on the porch roof. I feel so OLD now, smiling at the young AMFAC employees relaxing on the lawn here as I walk past, yet inside I feel the same as I did when I was one of them.

As I head for my cabin I see Ross approaching from the other direction. He's on his lunch break. "YOU got some SUN!" he exclaims, staring at my face. He asks if I got my tire fixed, and I tell him the latest developments. But now suddenly I'm smacking myself on my forehead (OW!), as I'm all-of-a-sudden remembering that when I bought my tires last year they made a special point of checking my spare and putting air in it! WHY hadn't I remembered this before??? Must have been the altitude. It's just one of those funny-looking little "donut" thingies, not really meant to be driven on for any distance, but it'll get me to Gardiner tomorrow morning, where hopefully I can buy another re-tread.

So, Ross forgoes having lunch, and puts the spare tire on my car. Such a sweetheart. When he's finished, we walk over to his dorm and he introduces me to the "dorm supervisor" (I don't recall what they actually call them in the park nowadays, back in '75 it was the "dorm mother"!) She signs me up for a "transient room" for the night, I pay her two bucks, she hands me a key. Cool. She, too, is interested in hearing what it was like, working in Mammoth twenty-six years ago. We sure didn't have anything like "transient rooms", THAT'S for darn sure! From what I can see, and from what I've heard and read, it appears that AMFAC takes MUCH better care of its employees than Y.P. Co. ever did. Of course, that's not saying a whole heckuva lot! I mean, heck, the day I arrived in Mammoth, back in '75, and they COULDN'T FIND the bedding that I had shipped out two weeks

previously, as they had instructed, do you THINK that they would have offered to let me use some bedding from the hotel that first night, until my stuff could be found??? NOOOOooooo... I ended up dumping out my suitcase and piling all of my clothes on top of myself, to try to keep warm while I tried to sleep!

After we scope out my room for the night, Ross heads back to work, and I head for my cabin to check out. I load my stuff into the car and, taking my notebook with me, walk over to the hotel and turn in the key. They give me a refund for my last night and don't say a word about the fact that I am checking out WAY past official check out time. I sit in the lobby for a while, trying to write the beginning of this report. The large wicker chairs are cushy-comfortable, and I feel myself getting drowsy, so I go out and sit on one of the benches in the "portico" of the hotel, continuing to write, thinking the fresh air will help keep me awake. A porter comes out and strikes up a conversation with me. He appears to be in his early 50's, has worked in the park for many years. I tell him I used to work here in Mammoth, and he is interested in comparing notes, and hearing about what has changed and what is still the same. We talk for a long time. The sky has clouded up while we talk, and a wind has come up, and the air has gotten cooler. He finally decides he needs to go back to work, and I decide I have writer's block and head back to the cabin, where my car is still parked.

MONDAY, MAY 28TH, "MI TAKUYE OYASIN" – Part Two

Now that I have a spare on my car, and at least a couple of hours to kill by myself, I decide to drive to the Upper Terrace Drive. Turning in, I park near the top of the terraces, get out and walk around. I go to the overlook, and notice how dry the terraces look. But I know that this is only temporary, as the terraces are constantly changing, both above and below ground. I remember that Matthew had said that "Narrow Gauge" – the strange-looking "donut"-shaped new thermal feature, was located somewhere near the top of the terraces, I thought he had said it could be accessed from the Upper Terrace Loop Drive. I look around for a clue as to where it might be, but find none. Back in the car, I drive the rest of the drive, stopping here and there. Finally, I am back at the entrance, and I turn back towards Mammoth.

But I still have time to kill, so now I decide to drive out to my favorite park waterfall, Undine. Driving east out of Mammoth towards Roosevelt, Undine is just a few miles down the road. In '75, on the day that Y.P. Co management had scheduled the

“official” Mammoth Crew group photo, I and three friends – Abid, Tanya, and Joany – decided to forego the group shot and instead hiked the Lava Creek Trail to Undine Falls. The trailhead is found off a service road behind the school in the residential area below Mammoth. A bridge takes you to the other side of the Gardner River, and the trail then follows the river until it joins with Lava Creek, and then follows Lava Creek to Undine Falls. Just a little ways above the falls, there are log crossings over Lava Creek and then a path that leads to the Undine Falls Overlook on the other side. My book of “Day Hikes In Yellowstone Natl. Park” says, “Many hikers cross the logs, but it is not advisable. It can be dangerous.” They advise returning back down the canyon the way you came. Of course, WE crossed the logs, and I remember it LOOKED like a simple crossing, until I was standing in the middle of that log, looking down at the rushing water beneath me – easy to lose your sense of equilibrium! But, we all made it safely across.

There were many beautiful views of the falls from the trail, and I’m savoring the memory of that joyful day now as I get out of my car, and walk to the stone-walled overlook from the parking lot. No one else is here, and I sit, straddling the wall, and think of my good fortune in being able to be in a place like this, and have such great memories connected to it. After a while, I decide to walk up the little trail that leads to the log crossings. The music of the creek is soothing and the serenity I am feeling is something I want to hold onto and take back with me to California when I leave tomorrow. I notice more of the little yellow “shooting-star”-shaped wildflowers that Peggy and I had seen at South Twin Lake. Finally, I walk back to my car, and slowly drive back towards Mammoth. I’m not sure when the Loons will be returning to Mammoth from the Beaver Ponds Loop, but I want to be there when they do, so I can take a photo of them coming down the hill at the end of their hike.

It has started raining – hard – and while I can’t see any lightning, I can sure hear thunder. Time passes. Rain falls. No Loons. More time passes. More thunder. I’m thinking that it might be a pretty soggy campfire tonight. FINALLY --- I see them. I have parked in the lot behind Ross’ dorm, and have gotten out of the car, trying to snap some photos of the “troops returning” from their adventure. Coming over the ridge, coming down the “Old Gardiner Road” (I THINK that’s what it’s called), first two, then three more, and finally all of the hiking Loons, in clusters, ponchos flapping, coming down the hill and waving at me. I snap a few photos, and Tim A., who is in the first “cluster”, points out a small rabbit nearby. I turn to look where he’s pointing,

and sure enough – there is another baby rabbit, though this one is larger than those we saw this morning at the cemetery, hopping through the parking lot. Though their clothes are damp, their SPIRITS sure aren't, and even though they've been out in the cold and rain for quite a while, the Loons are still laughing and joking and having an all-around great time! I keep hearing references being made about a "man-eating red squirrel" or something... One of Frank's funny stories is the impression I'm getting. (What WAS that all about, ANYWAY???) :-)

The first Loons to reach the bottom of the hill are standing around laughing and joking, while we all wait for the "stragglers" to arrive. I am told that the hikers separated into two groups – "faster" and "slower" – and that the first, or "faster" group had taken shelter and tried to wait out the storm. The second, or "slower" group caught up to them and they finally gave up on the storm blowing over quickly... Somewhere along the way, it was decided that tonight's campfire was probably not the best idea, so the Uhlers have graciously invited all of us to come to their home for our "campfire" instead. Finally, all of the hikers have arrived at the bottom of the hill, and we split off to seek dinner, drier clothes, and head to the Uhlers.

I start looking for Ross. I have been unhappy with him about tonight since my arrival three nights ago. He informed me that he would have to miss the campfire on Monday night because he had agreed to pick up his boss, Kim, at the airport in Bozeman. "WHY in the heck did you agree to THAT, on THAT NIGHT, of ALL nights???" I asked him. "Well, it was either that or say 'no' to having the use of her car for a week while she was gone," he explained. "Well, pooh," is all I can think of to say in response. But, her flight comes in late (around 10:00?), so he was planning on coming at least for a little while, before having to leave. But, he doesn't know about the change of plans.

I find him, and give him the directions I've been given to find John's house. We agree that I will follow him, but he tells me he has to get gas first. OK, I say, and he takes off. I turn around, and head out to follow, but don't see him! I drive to the Mammoth service station, since he said he had to get gas first, thinking that's where he went, but he is nowhere to be found! I circle back around to the front of the hotel. No Ross. Back towards my cabin, no Ross. Back to the parking lot behind his dorm – no Ross. Back up, again, to the service station. Guess what??? NO ROSS. Ross, WHERE ARE YOU???

Now completely discombobulated, and starting to feel just a LITTLE bit irritable, I suddenly spot the OLDTYMRS vehicle, parked between the Mammoth Ham's and the Terrace Grill. I realize that they ALSO had not gone on the Beaver Ponds hike, and it occurs to me that THEY may not know about the change of plans for the campfire. There is an empty parking space right next to their truck, so I pull into it and start to write them a note, explaining that we are going to the Uhlers' instead, and giving them the directions (thinking they probably know where it is, but "just in case"...). As I'm scribbling away, Bruce and Geri come out of the Ham's store, and as it turns out, they have already run into Lew and Deb and are aware of the change. I tell them about "losing" Ross, and hope that he's just gone on ahead. They agree to follow me to the Uhlers', just in case I have any further "tire problems."

So out of Mammoth we go, down the hill to Gardiner, then north out of Gardiner on Highway 89. As I'm driving along, I spot what I am CERTAIN is the house that was (last year) – and still IS – up for sale. As many of you will recall, the owner was holding a contest, the house being the "prize." The entry fee was \$100. To enter, you had to write a 200-word essay on why you should be the "winner" of the house. Several of us Loons decided to enter the contest as a group. I had decided to also enter by myself, a separate entry. I fantasized about opening a "Bed & Breakfast" there – the "Loon Lodge" – where I would give special rates to my Loon friends. I "invited" Buck to run rafting trips out of "my place." And I planned to schedule at least two weeks every summer that I would have groups of "inner-city" school kids come and stay, free of charge, so that they could experience Yellowstone and The Great Outdoors. Nice fantasy. Unfortunately, the owner was hoping to receive \$800,000.00 in entry fees, and by two days before the contest deadline she had only received something like \$8,000.00 in entry fees, so she called off the contest! Now – HERE is that very house! And with a "For Sale" sign in front! I recognize it from the pictures that had been posted on the Internet. Ahhhh, the stuff that dreams are made of.....

A few miles later, I come to the landmark that I am looking for, to turn off the highway. And in short order I spot what is unmistakably Casa Uhler! The "fort" at the top of the house is a dead giveaway! John has mentioned what they call the "fort" at the top of their house several times on the chat page. Kind of a loft, it is a room literally at the top of the house, with windows all around, giving 360-degree views of the surrounding meadows and mountains. I pull into their

yard, Oldtymrs on my heels. Ross' car is here, whew! Besides Ross, we were the first to arrive.

John greets us at the door, and as you enter their home you come into what is kind of a "solarium"-type entry, or an enclosed front porch, that runs the length of the front of the house. Stepping from this entryway through the actual front door, you enter an enormous "great room" that is stunning! To the right, a cavernous living room, open to the second story, one entire wall and the fireplace all of stone. Honey-colored knotty pine accents the living room. It is open to a spacious dining room, to the left of the front door, separated from a huge kitchen by what looks to be granite- or slate-covered counters (if I'm remembering correctly). A wide staircase is straight ahead, between the living room and dining room.

Carlene is in the kitchen as we come in, and cheerfully greets us. Ross is on the couch, and I ask him "Where did you go?" He says, "I went to get gas, I thought you were right behind me!" I ask, "Well, WHERE did you go to get gas – I went to the service station and you weren't THERE?!" He says, "NOT in MAMMOTH, in GARDINER! The gas is too expensive in Mammoth!" "Well, you said you had to 'get gas FIRST' – I assumed you meant in Mammoth, and you took off so fast I didn't see which way you went!" *SIGH* Men! If they would just SAY what they MEAN... :-)

The "Grand Tour" of the house is underway, and Ross tells me I have to go upstairs and see the "fort". He has already been up there. I follow the others up the stairs, to the second floor, and then up another, narrower set of stairs to the fort. From up here you can see most of the beautiful surrounding valley and looming mountains, and entering the fort I let out a gasp as I see, for the second time on this journey, the most AMAZING DOUBLE-RAINBOW looking back in the direction of Gardiner! The entire valley is filled with that strange, late-in-the-day light – a kind of "glow" from beneath the black storm clouds crowding the sky, making the grass in the meadows almost a lurid green, struck by the rays of the sun, and the mountains a purple-grey in their own shadows. Everyone is exclaiming over the incredible beauty and perfect timing of this almost spiritual vision, scrambling for cameras. I call Ross to come back upstairs, "You've gotta SEE this!" I tell him. I tell John what a beautiful place he has, and remark that he must feel so lucky to be able to call this "home", and he, of course, concurs.

Going back downstairs, I see that a couple of other Loons have arrived. People are straggling in, as folks had gone to change clothes and get dinner. Each new arrival is taken up to see the fort. Everyone that comes in asks, "Did you see the double rainbow?" Those of us already here when it appeared brag about getting to view it from the fort. Ross departs for the airport to pick up his friend.

I tell Carlene what I told John, how beautiful I think their place is, how envious I am, and how lucky they must feel to have found this place. Carlene agrees that they love it, but she says, "But you know, as much as we love this place, it DOES have it's little 'quirks'..." and she takes me into the master bedroom suite, which is downstairs, off the living room. She laughs and shows me that in the middle of the large master bedroom is a huge, "double-wide" sunken bathtub! And she tells me of her misadventures in getting up in the middle of the night, and how treacherous it can be to try to make her way around that tub when "nature calls"! She says that she loves the tub, but – really – what WERE the builders THINKING when they decided to put it RIGHT in the MIDDLE of the bedroom??! We both have a laugh over that, and head back into the living room as more of the group arrives.

Eventually, pretty much, the whole gang is here, with only a few exceptions. I know of at least two Loons, Sandi and Rick from Iowa, who unfortunately fell victim to the last-minute change of plans, arriving in Mammoth for the scheduled campfire, only to find no one around. I propose that for future Loonions, we have a plan in place to let people know if last-minute changes have had to be made to scheduled events. Since Albright closes at night, perhaps it would be possible to leave a message at the front desk at the hotel? I just think it would be a good idea to have it worked out ahead of time, if an "event" has to be moved or rescheduled, so that people know where to go to find out what "the scoop" is. Of course, I guess it's never possible to "plan" for EVERY possibility. Anyway, just a thought.

This gathering is much more subdued, but JUST as congenial as Saturday night's campfire. We sit around the perimeter of the living room, taking turns telling stories of adventures and misadventures. There are 26 Loons present. Frank tells some of his best Yellowstone Tales, including the one about that goofy Tower bear. It has a funny "name" that now I can't recall, but I'm reminded of the movie "The Jerk" starring Steve Martin, in which he has a dog, his faithful companion, whom he names "S***head". The "goofy Tower bear" ALSO has a somewhat denigrating name, though not as profane as Steve Martin's dog's name! The story Frank tells includes Frank's

observation of this bear that "he couldn't find his @\$@ with both front paws!" which sends Geri, sitting on the couch next to me, into a FIT of giggles! We ALL laugh, because Frank is such a consummate storyteller, but Geri can't stop giggling, and pretty soon she's got ME going, and we're both out of control... Of course, there is the usual talk about the chat page, and those who weren't at the campfire Saturday night want to hear what Photodude is like in person. A couple of people ask me what it was like to meet Buck for the first time, so I tell the story of Ross and I making our "surprise" visit to REI at closing time, and the great visit that ensued with Buck and Lauri, culminating in our "field trip" to Buck's mom's smoothie shop where we all toasted each other with shots of wheat grass, prepared for us by the Buckster himself (except Ross, who refused – but I'll try ANYTHING – ONCE!). Now Tim chimes in with stories of the Fairyland expedition of 2000. We're Loons talking Loon-talk. We talk about how wonderful it is that the Druids have come around and are now helping #103 to feed her pups. We laugh about Cathy W.'s remarkable sighting of the "surfing griz"!

Finally, the Lovely Alice and the Lovely Miked announce that they have to be up early in the morning to catch their flight, and that sets off a lengthy parade of Loons, many hugs, farewells, goodbyes, "see ya later".... Wendy, I believe, is staying overnight and sleeping in "the fort", and the Oldtymrs are overnight guests as well. I am one of the last to say good-bye. It is bittersweet, as I know that it will be AT LEAST another year before I see most of these people again. My consolation is being able to say to all of them, "See ya' on the chat page!"

My drive back to Mammoth (on my "donut" spare tire) is quiet, a little lonely, but uneventful, as I mull over the events of the last few days. I park behind the dorm where I'm sleeping tonight. It's not the newer dorm where Ross lives, but the older one behind it. Both of them have large lawn areas surrounding them, and face the Mammoth Post Office. I grab my overnight bag from the back seat, and creep inside, wanting to be quiet since it's kind of late. The halls are deserted. The room I'm in is fairly large, has three single beds, a couple of small dressers, and three shelves with a place to hang clothes underneath. Sharing this room with two roommates for a whole summer would be a bit crowded. The beds are unmade, but have fresh linens stacked on top of each. I choose the one under the window, and make it up, and open the window. It's been a long, fantastic day, and it doesn't take long for me to fall into a deep sleep.

**TUESDAY, MAY 29TH, 2001 – “I DON’T WANNA LEAVE YOU
NOW...”**

Here comes the sun
Doo-doo doo-doo
Here comes the sun
And I say... It's alright...

I'm up with the sun – well, maybe not at the BREAK of dawn, but not TOO long after. I fumble my way to the “bathroom down the hall” to find Lori D., in robe and slippers, brushin' her teeth! :-)) We chat a bit about what a nice evening it was last night, and how beautiful John's home is, before I slip into a “stall”. When I emerge, Lori's gone – probably had to work. Looking at my face in the mirror, I see that I did, indeed, “get some sun.” All I have is some hand and body lotion, so I put some of that on it to lamely try to keep my skin from drying out.

I pack up my stuff, strip the bed, leave the key in the “box” where I was told to put it, and head out to my car. I decide I must have one last morning in Lamar Valley before my departure. I drive out there, and it's a gorgeous morning just like the first one three mornings ago – Saturday, when I drove out here and found Peggy. There are MUCH fewer people in the valley this morning, the holiday weekend now being officially over. I don't see any signs of Loons anywhere, until – somewhere past the Institute – I spot Charles and Pat and Judy in a large turnout. I pull in and am warmly greeted. They have been watching a grey wolf, and I get a look at him too, across the river. On the nearer shore, resting in the top of a dead tree, Pat points out to me a beautiful bald eagle! The FIRST bald eagle I have EVER seen in the wild! It's a little ways away, but I can see him with the naked eye, and QUITE clearly with my binoculars. I watch him for a good long while. We're enjoying the quiet and the warm morning sun, but I realize that I've got to see about my tire and begin my long journey home – with a couple of other “stops along the way”, so I say my “See ya' on the chat page” farewells, and head back to Mammoth, and on to Gardiner.

I pull into the place that the guy at the Mammoth service station recommended. It is next door to the “Two Bit Saloon”, which was THE Saturday night hang-out back in '75. They had pool tables upstairs, and – during the peak months of the summer – live music and dancing in the basement, and the best tequila sunrises in town! Now it looks mostly deserted, but then, it IS fairly early in the day! Going inside

the "service area" I inquire about getting a used tire, and after checking, they tell me that they have one that will fit my car. Whew! Relief! It'll be \$32.00 – three dollars less than the one I got in Elko, Nevada. While I wait for them to put it on, I spot a newsletter on the bulletin board in the "waiting area" – called something like "The Gardiner News", or perhaps "The Gardiner Bugle". There's a story in it about Lee Whittlesey.

Finally, it's ready, and leaving Gardiner, I of course have to drive through The Arch. "Farewell, little town", I think to myself, as I pass through the entrance and head up the hill. Arriving once again in Mammoth, I see Joette's car parked in front of the Albright Visitor Center, so I park nearby, and wait to see if she and Ryan show up. I get out of my car and go over to stand near the picnic table – the one that can be seen on the webcam. Standing here, I raise my arm and wave to the camera, and think to myself, "The image only updates once a minute, or so, so it MAY not have me ON it yet." So, I stand there, my arm in the air, and begin to feel really ridiculous! But, instead of taking my arm down in defeat and self-consciousness, I begin to jump around and wave my arms wildly, laughing to myself AT myself, doing my own interpretation of a "60's dance craze" known as "The Freddy"! HAH! A FEW of you might be old enough to remember that one! Finally, thinking the webcam MUST have caught me doing something stupid by now, I stop, knowing I'm making a "spectacle" of myself and looking furtively around to make sure nobody's looking. No sign of Joette, so I get out my notebook, to leave her a "Farewell – See ya' on the chat page" note, and as I'm leaving it on her car, up drives Quickcarl and Mark R.

"Didja get your tire taken care of?" they ask. "Yep!" I reply, "Only thirty-two bucks! Cheaper than the other one!" Quickcarl says that Mark will be in touch about the computer, and it'll probably be sometime in June or July that he'll be out to install it. I tell them again that I just can't thank them enough, that words fail me, that I still can't believe that they're not only WILLING to do this, but PLANNING on it! I tell them I'm about to head out, and that I plan to stop in Old Faithful to try to look up Matthew, the Funkygeyserman, and Kristine, Yellowstonegirl. They get out of their vehicle, and we exchange BIG, strong, Loon-style bearhugs. "OK, Mark, I'll talk to ya' in a couple of days on Instant Messenger," I say. "See ya' on the chat page, Carl!" And we drive off in separate directions.

I head south from Mammoth, toward Old Faithful. Somehow, it's now already past noon. I look for the now-familiar moose near Willow

Park, but don't see him. Passing the Grizzly Lake trailhead, I hope for one last glimpse of Obsidian et al, but no luck there, either. I enjoy the lovely scenery, and the elk and bison that I DO see, and finally come to Old Faithful. I park in the lot in front of the Inn, and go inside.

AAAHHHHH..... THE INN!!! Still takes my breath away, every time I see it! I can't believe how LUCKY Matthew is, to get to actually work here EVERY DAY! When I worked in Old Faithful, my second summer in the park, I worked at the Snow Lodge – the “OLD” Snow Lodge. An abomination of a building, if ever there was one! All of my friends that second summer were my Snow Lodge co-workers, most of whom had arrived in the park earlier than me, and ALL of whom lived in rooms upstairs in the Snow Lodge – above the restaurant where we worked! I was the only one that lived in the dorm behind the Inn, and I had a CREEPY roommate that year, who hardly ever spoke to me (or to anyone else, apparently!). My best friend Nita and my sister Brenda were both working in Fishing Bridge, and were roommates there, so on many of my days off I would head over there, to see them. Nights that I wasn't working a dinner shift, or over in Fishing Bridge, I spent a lot of time in the Inn, writing letters home at one of the antique writing desks on the balcony overlooking the lobby, or reading there. Because of my dorm / roommate situation that summer, it wasn't nearly the joyful experience that my summer in Mammoth had been, so that's why when I reminisce about my summers working in the park, I mostly talk about my summer in Mammoth.

I stroll into the Inn's gift shop, glancing around at the cashiers, looking for Matthew. Having only seen his photos on the Loon site, I'm not sure that I will recognize him if he's here. I only see females working in here today. I browse around the store, wandering deeper inside. There is a “back room” in the store, down a step or two at the very back of the store, and I wander in there, but no sign of Matthew. A clerk begins to glance at me strangely, like she suspects I might be a shoplifter or something, since I don't seem to be looking at anything in particular, and I keep glancing around at all the clerks! In this little back part of the store, I can hear employees in another “back room” talking, through the log wall. A male voice and a female one. Laughter, more talking. Finally, I walk back to the front of the store, and at the main counter I ask a store employee if Matthew McLean is working today? She says, “Yes, he's in the back,” as she gestures toward the back of the store from where I have just come, “Just go back there and knock on the door.” So, I mosey on back there, and I see a door that looks like it probably leads to an office. But now I get

another “shyness attack”! As I’m standing there, I suddenly hear the “male voice” begin to sing: “Alllllllllisonnnn, I know this world is killing you, oh-oh-oh, Alllllllisonnnn, my aim is true...” HAH! Elvis Costello, vintage Elvis, even!

Just then another female clerk approaches me, obviously on her way into the office, and says, “Can I help you with something?” “Yes,” I tell her, “I’m a friend of Matthew McLean’s, and I was told I might be able to find him back here?” She says, “Oh, yeah, he’s right in here, I’ll get him for ya’, can I tell him who’s here?” “Yeah – tell him Allison, from The Total Yellowstone Page.” A moment later he comes out, and he doesn’t look ANYTHING LIKE his Loon site photos, but then, neither do I!!! HAHAHA!!! But, my point is, I NEVER would have recognized him, had he not been working and had I gone searching the geyser basin for him! He has a big, curly head of hair (in his Loon page photo he has a “buzz cut”!), and he’s not quite as tall as I thought (though still taller than me), and he’s huskier. He almost looks “wimpy” in his photos on the Loon page, but Matthew is NOT a “wimpy” guy! Of course – BIIIIIG HUGS!!! I ask him if that was him that I just heard singing the Elvis Costello, laughing. “Oh, yeah – what a coincidence! I was singing ‘Allison’,” he says. “We were talking about music, and _____ (I forget the name) said that she had never heard of Elvis Costello!” We stand there and chat for – twenty minutes? Half an hour? I lose track. I tell him about the Loonion events, and say that I’m sorry he missed them. I tell him I’m on my way home, as soon as I leave him. He asks about different Loons and folks from the page, and I bring him as up to date as I can. After a while, I realize that he is still at WORK, and I’m keeping him from it. We say our good-byes, promise to stay in touch, express hope that next time we meet in the park he won’t be at work. Finally, I take my leave.

It’s now well past lunch time. I skipped breakfast this morning, and dinner last night was the remainder of Peggy’s chocolate-dipped strawberries. I decide to have lunch at the Geyser Grill, in hopes of seeing Kristine. The place is deserted, only two or three employees are present. The young girl taking my order seems frazzled and distracted, and doesn’t look like the picture of Kristine on the Loon site, so I decide not to “frazzle” her further by asking about Kristine. I sit by myself at one of the tables in the grill, and watch a young family of four. Husband, wife, two elementary school-aged children. They look tired and like they’re not having ANY fun AT ALL. The wife is complaining furiously to her husband about something to do with their meal. Finally, the husband goes up to the counter, taking the offending food with him. After a moment the wife joins him, and

eventually the manager is brought out. My lunch was fine – no better and no worse than any other similar-type establishment – YOU decide if that's good or bad! I throw away my trash, stack my tray, and head back to my car.

Leaving Old Faithful, I drive south. I simply CANNOT come ALL THE WAY from California to Yellowstone, and NOT visit the Tetons! But first, I simply CANNOT come all the way to Yellowstone and NOT go see the Lake area! So, at the West Thumb junction, I turn northward. As much as I love the West Thumb Geyser Basin, I decide that as late as it's now getting to be in the day, I do not have time to stop there. I simply want to drive a little ways along the lakeshore, and take in the views. Traffic is light, and the scenery is SPECTACULAR! The bright green of the spring grass alongside the brilliant royal blue of the lake beneath the robin's egg blue sky with only a few marshmallow-like clouds is simply breathtaking, and all of it before a backdrop of the snow-capped Absarokas off in the distance. I want to stop and take a picture – the light seems perfect for these colors, but I keep thinking I'll find a better angle around the next bend. I reach the Fishing Bridge area, and can't resist turning east there. I only go a little ways, just far enough to look at the bare patches of land where my sister and my friend's dorm once stood, the cafeteria where they worked, the cabins that were behind... Probably a good thing that they're gone, I always thought that their dorm was a fire-trap, and those cabins were, in my opinion, the most run-down in the park! But still, it's strange to come back to a place where I once spent so much time and find it so thoroughly changed...

I turn around and head back to the Loop Road, but reaching it, decide without really even consciously thinking about it that I HAVE TO try to find the carcass at LeHardy Rapids (it's not too much further from here!) and see if I can see just one more griz before I leave Yellowstone again.

Driving north, I pass a HUGE lone bison in a clearing alongside the road, and snap his picture. His dark hide looks black against that green, green grass. A little further on, I see a large traffic jam, and I slow down, but can't see what it is that everyone's looking at. Finally, I see a bear, a blackie, going up a slope, a ways away from the road, and some fool with a camera going after it. He's too far away for me to yell at him, and there are LOTS of others around. I can't stand to watch, so I drive on. I come to the pullout at LeHardy Rapids and turn in. I get out, and stroll the boardwalk, looking for anything resembling a carcass. I see nothing. Realizing that it's now mid-afternoon, and I

haven't even gotten out of the park yet, I get back in the car, ready to leave.

But, just as I'm about to pull out, here comes Joette and Ryan! They recognize me and wave, and pull up nearby. Joette tells me she got the note I left at her car this morning. She can't believe I'm STILL in the park! I laugh, and say that I'm leaving now, but that I HAD to come and try to find the "surfing bear" before I left! They tell me that the carcass is still there, just a little ways further up the road from the rapids, but that there was nothing but a lot of people there just now when they went by. I say, "Well, I've come this far, might as well take my chances, maybe he'll come out just for me!" Or, maybe not. One more time, we say our farewells, exchange hugs, and then they head off down the boardwalk, and I drive further on.

I soon come upon the "carcass site." LOTS of people. Camp chairs set up alongside the road. Scopes, cameras, tripods galore. Cars all over da place! Carcass clearly visible in the middle of the river. No bear. Not even a coyote or even any ravens. I keep driving. I go a few miles further, far enough to check out the Hayden Valley and see how many buffalo have gathered there, this early in the warm season. Surprisingly few. The LAST time I traveled through the Hayden Valley it looked like a scene out of "Dances With Wolves" or something! Finally, I find a safe place to turn around, and head for the Tetons. As I pass by the "carcass site" on the way back there is still no bear, and still lots of people.

Going back past the lake I realize that I never took my photo, and now the light is not good. Opportunity missed. Passing the West Thumb Geyser Basin once again, I continue south towards the Tetons, and now I am really leaving the park, and gosh I hate to go. My desire to see those jagged peaks again is the only thing that keeps me pushing onward.

Every time I drive this stretch of road – going south from West Thumb out of the park, I am surprised at all the neat things that are down this way that, for some reason, I tend to forget about in between my visits to this area! Lewis Lake and the beautiful Lewis River meandering along as the road follows, Moose Falls, those interesting "columnar" rock formations – similar to the Sheepeater Cliff – all are delightful "surprises" along the way, as I exit the park.

The road goes up an incline and as I reach the crest I catch my first glimpse of that "snaggle-tooth" of the Grandest Teton. There is thick

forest on either side of the road, giving the illusion of driving through an evergreen tunnel. The next incline finds me pulling off to the side of the road. On the right side of the road is a small meadow absolutely BURSTING with yellow wildflowers – those commonly seen flowers in Yellowstone that resemble daisies – “Arrowleaf Balsamroot” MIGHT be what they’re called, but I’m not sure. I see what I think is a great shot for a photo, but doubt my abilities as a photographer to do it justice. Still, I give it “the ol’ college try!” There is no other traffic on this stretch of road and I’m glad of that as I lay down on my stomach to try to shoot from the level of the flowers, up through them, where I can see that “snaggle-tooth” between the tops of the pines. I get my shot, but decide not to just “shoot and run”, so I take a few moments to enjoy this beauty, to let my eye seek out the details, the better to remember them.

Finally, getting back in the car and driving on, I come soon enough to one of my favorite “photo stops” of all of my trips to The Tetons. Although I already have numerous photos taken from this spot, it is my “tradition” to stop here and shoot this view, so of course, I pull over. It is one of the earliest views of the Tetons that you see as you drive south from Yellowstone. From the shore of Jackson Lake, looking through a sparse stand of aspens in the foreground and across the lake waters which – this afternoon – are relatively still, you look down the “length” of the Tetons, which appear blue in this afternoon light. I take my shot and again take a few moments to appreciate.

Approaching Flagg Ranch, I think of all the stories Ross told me of his experiences working here this past winter, and I decide to turn in and “cruise” the place, having only driven past in previous trips. But, of course, there’s not much to see, so I just “cruise on through” and get back out on the highway, neither impressed nor unimpressed with Flagg Ranch.

I come to a junction and decide to head toward Oxbow Bend to look for moose, and I realize that my usual habit is to take the other road south to Jackson. I reach the picturesque spot quickly – only a few other vehicles here. It is now evening, but still light. I rest here for a while, and I’m thinking of Charles, and a gorgeous shot of his that he has posted a few times of Oxbow Bend. It is one of my favorite photos that has been shared on the page. No moose reward me with a glimpse of their lives, nor any other wildlife, for that matter. I know it’s there, though. Perhaps I’m just road-weary and not looking carefully enough.

At any rate, I realize that I must move on. I have tonight and tomorrow to get back home, to prepare to begin my new job the day AFTER tomorrow. I decide to backtrack to the junction and take the route with which I'm most familiar, Hwy. 89.

I see an elk doe in front of one of those beautiful log fences with the Tetons in the background and snap a shot of her. There must be a specific name for those kinds of fences, but I don't know it. The fences always look to me like they've been there since the pioneers passed through.

A few miles further I spot – in a sage meadow to my left – a gorgeous male pronghorn and his "harem" of three females. My only sighting of pronghorns this trip! And it's mine alone, as there are no other vehicles or people anywhere in sight. The group is only about 20 –25 yards from the road. Since I can see no cars in either direction, I stop right in the road. The pronghorns freeze, standing like statues in the evening light. I try to use my zoom lens to get a good shot, but the sound of my motor, and/or my fumbblings with my camera spook the male and he begins to trot away. The females follow. I snap a few shots and hope for the best. They are running away in the direction that I am driving, so I get back behind the wheel and follow along, until they turn away from the road. I pause, and watch them go until they become too difficult to see anymore.

A few more miles, and now, off to my right, I see a large turnout with a few cars, people out of them with cameras at the ready – it's a moose! A large female. I turn in and I'm reaching for my binoculars, but the moose has been spooked and is running southward, away from the pullout, parallel to the highway towards Jackson. I watch her for a few moments, and then I get back on the highway and drive ahead of her a bit, stop, and wait for her to "catch up" to me. As she does, I snap a photo of her with the Tetons as the backdrop. The light is really low now, and I am doubtful that these photos will turn out.

I finally arrive in Jackson, and it is much as I remember it. I smile to myself as I pass the "Million Dollar Cowboy Bar". Had lunch there with Nita on our trip eight years earlier. But it's the 26-year-old memories that are making me smile now. Ah, well, those will have to wait for another time, as THIS story is winding down.

I drive through Jackson and find a gas station where I stop and fill up. I am unsure of which route to take to Idaho Falls, so I ask the female cashier, expecting her to be disinterested and tired of answering

tourist's questions, but she is neither. It's a choice between continuing south from Jackson on Hwy. 89, then west on Hwy. 26 to Idaho Falls, which on my map looks like a much better road, or turning west out of Jackson on Hwy. 22, which looks like a more direct route, but on a much less developed road. She tells me, "Oh, no question – take 22, it's much quicker!" She tells me it'll take me 1-1/2 to 2 hours to reach Idaho Falls.

It is somewhere between 9:00 and 9:30 P.M. as I leave Jackson and begin the climb up and over the mountains, following Route 22 towards Idaho Falls, via the small (sometimes nearly invisible!) hamlets of Wilson, Victor, Swan Valley, and Ririe, Idaho. Darkness falls as I wind my way up these mountains, and now a sadness overtakes me as I leave paradise and all my wonderful new friends behind. Traveling alone now feels lonely and less like an adventure. Not one to wallow in such feelings for long, I console myself by going over each detail of the past four days and thinking I can't wait to tell my friends and family back home about how great this experience has been.

"Don't be dismayed at goodbyes. A farewell is before you can meet;
And meeting again after a moment or a lifetime is certain for
those who are friends." --Richard Bach

I come down off the mountains rather abruptly, and drive for miles and miles on what seems like little country roads. Miles and miles through farmland in the dark, and finally I reach Idaho Falls around 11:30 PM. I need to find Interstate 15 going south, and I think I'm on the right track, but I run into a construction detour, and following the arrows I suddenly find myself lost. The detour sign tells you to turn right, and I do that, and then there are no more signs or arrows after that, to tell you where to go! I find myself wandering around a neighborhood at midnight in Idaho Falls, and I find myself wondering if Tim and Betsy live in one of these houses I am driving past! I backtrack, find where I was, follow the arrows of the detour sign again, and get lost again! Frustrated, tired, and hungry, I see a fast-food place and decide to grab a VERY late dinner and ask directions, but as I pull into the parking lot, they turn out their lights! Well THAT'S a fine how-do-you-do!

Giving up, I let my instincts take over and just drive, following what looks to be main thoroughfares, and somehow I eventually find my way. But now on the Interstate I realize just how tired I am as I'm having difficulty staying alert, my eyes harder and harder to keep

open. The Traffic School Instructor in me is screaming at me to "PULL OVER YOU IDIOT!" And at the next "Rest Area" I do.

I pull right up in front of the "Visitor Center" here, under the lights, and get out. It is EXTREMELY windy here, and I go inside to use the facilities. The wind howls around the building and almost knocks me down as I walk back to my car. I move my car a few spaces away, to get away from some of the glare of the lights. There are several big rigs here, their running lights glowing amber in the dark, engines at a low rumble. I get out my pepper spray, and place it on the passenger seat beside me. Then I put my seat back and snuggle beneath my heavy coat, and try to sleep for a while. At first it's difficult. It's freezing cold and every noise makes me look. But finally I drift into a restless sleep.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 30TH, COUNTRY ROADS TAKE ME HOME

Country roooooaaaaaddsss take me hooooommme
To the plaaaaaaace I belooooonnnnggg
(North Californiaaaaaa :-) , mountain mamaaaaaa
Take me hooooommme, my country roooaaaddsss

I wake up at 2:30 AM, shivering, and decide I'm OK to drive, so I get back on the highway. I drive for an hour before I find myself once again struggling to stay awake. I watch for the sign telling me how far it is to the next Rest Stop, and fight to stay awake till I can get there. I know that this is very dangerous – to keep driving when you are so drowsy, but I don't want to pull off just ANYWHERE...

I make it to the next Rest Stop. I sleep for another hour, and wake up shivering again. Well, this is fun. I get back on the highway again, it's just before 5:00 AM. And before I can say "Yellowstone" the monotony of the road is putting me to sleep again. I haven't seen a sign indicating there's a Rest Area up ahead for a while. I struggle to keep my eyes open as I watch for one. I do all the things that I tell the people in my Traffic School classes don't work – I open my window, turn on the air, turn up the radio. I yell at myself. I slap myself. I am really fighting to stay awake.

Finally, in desperation, I turn off at the next exit. The sun hasn't risen, but it is getting light. I am out in the middle of nowhere. There is a gas station, and what looks to be a small café. A large, dirt, vacant lot is next to the café. I park in a corner of the vacant lot, and go to sleep again. I wake up to the growling of a diesel engine, as a

big rig pulls into the lot. I am too sleepy to pay him any mind, and I nuzzle under my coat and drift off to sleep again.

When I finally awake again, this time I am not shivering, I am sweating! The sun has come up, and it is very warm in my car, under my coat. I get out of the car, and walk around it, stretching my legs and arms as I go. I toss my coat into the back seat, climb back in, and get ready to get back on the highway. But, before turning the key, I realize that my face feels funny – puffy, swollen. I look in the mirror on the back of the sun visor, and OH MY GOD! My face is covered with blisters! Some larger, some smaller, they go across my nose and cheeks, around my mouth and on my chin! I had been feeling the “sting” of the sunburn that I got Monday afternoon, sitting outside the Terrace Grill, all day yesterday, but I had assumed it would be somewhat better today. I am startled at the severity of this burn, and have nothing with which to treat it. Of course worries of skin cancer jump to the forefront of my mind, and secondary to that is the realization that tomorrow I am going to have to start my new job looking like a FREAK! The NEXT time I go to Yellowstone the FIRST thing I pack will be sunscreen, and the SECOND thing will be a HAT. Sighing at my own stupidity, I start the car, and get back on the highway.

Finally I feel able to stay alert. Most of this day is spent backtracking the same highways by which I came. Driving across that barren Nevada wasteland, only in the reverse direction – so I’ll spare you the details of THAT monotony. As sad as I am for this trip to be coming to an end, the state line of California is always a welcome sight, and it is around 4:00 PM as I drive past Reno and start the climb up the eastern flank of the Sierras. There is a Rest Area near Donner Summit, and I turn in there, just so I can get out and stretch, and smell that sun-warmed pine needle smell.

Hey it’s good to be back home agaaaaiiiiiinnnnn...

After a little while, I get back in, and continue over the mountain pass. Coming down the western side, I remember how giddy with excitement I was as I drove this highway going the other direction, a mere six days ago. Six days? Well, let’s see... It was Thursday, May 24th when I left Santa Rosa, and it’s now Wednesday, May 30th as I’m headed home. Yep. Six days. I remember leaving my “taunting” note for Buck, and wonder if he found it, or if it blew away before he could. As I’m thinking of this, I realize that I should be driving past the turn-off to his REI store at just about 6:00 PM, and if he’s working

tonight, I'll bet that's the time he would be arriving. Of COURSE I've got to try to catch him on his way into the store, to let him know he missed out on a fabulous time!

A woman on a mission now, I continue down through the foothills, and eventually come to Sacramento, and the Cal Expo exit. I pull into the REI parking lot at 5:55 PM. No sign of Buck's red Grand Prix. I pull into a slot near where – from my previous two experiences – I know that he usually parks, and wait, listening to the radio. Less than a minute passes, and here he comes. He ROARS into his space, LEAPS out of his car, and is half way into the store before I can even open my car door. I open the door and jump out and yell, "HEY, you!" to his back. He stops, turns, recognizes me. "Hey, Allison!" he says. Of course, we greet each other with a hug. "You missed out," I say, and he asks, "Oh – did you make it to the Loonion?" "I'm just on my way home!" I exclaim, and again say, "Boy – did you miss out!" I then bend his ear for the next few minutes, trying to encapsulate for him the entire experience. He can't get a word in edgewise, I am so excited at having my first "victim" to tell my tales too – all the more excited because it's BUCK, the Looniest Loon. I tell him about seeing Obsidian and her cubs, and 21M, the Alpha Male, and meeting Photodude and all the other Loons, the campfire, the evening at the Uhlers. But, alas, I realize that I am making him late for work. I tell him I didn't mean to make him late, but that I just HAD to end my journey with one final Loon hug. He seems genuinely glad that I stopped, and I am glad too. It's a fitting end to my trip. I get my one last hug and we say good-bye, and he heads into the store and I get back into my car and back on the highway.

Two more hours and I'll be home. As I'm driving along, one of my all-time favorites – and a somehow very appropriate – song comes on:

There are places I'll remember
All my life, though some have changed.
Some forever, not for better,
Some are gone, and some remain.
All these places have their moments,
With lovers and friends I still can recall.
Some are dead and some are living,
In my life, I've loved them all.

It's a little after 8:00 PM as I finally find myself back in Santa Rosa. As is my custom, I sing a favorite old Pink Floyd song as I pull up in front of my house...

"Home, home again
I like to be here when I can
And when I come home cold and tired
It's good to warm my bones beside the fire...

I grab my bags out of the back seat and stagger to my front door, a little wobbly after so many hours behind the wheel. I unlock the door and step inside, to find "my girls," Dorothy and Cinder, waiting in the entry to greet me, looking more than a LITTLE miffed at my extended absence. "HI GIRLS", I exclaim to them loudly, cheerfully, as I kick the door shut behind me.

EPILOGUE

What has all this meant to me? How, exactly, has finding The Total Yellowstone Page "changed my life"? I don't know if I can say, exactly. I don't want the end of this report to come across as "Allison's Therapy Session"... But a part of me feels a need to convey, somehow, the impact the TYP and TYCP and Loons have had on me... My life, like most of yours, I imagine, has had its ups and downs. One of the biggest "ups" – one of the highest highs – in my life, was that summer in 1975 that I lived in Mammoth Hot Springs. There, I experienced for six months the utter freedom to be fully myself, and that I could make myself whomever I wanted to be. I loved that "self". She was enthusiastic and witty and energetic and smart and kind and funny, and occasionally a royal pain in the ass, but for the most part in love with life and loved and accepted by those around her. She had dreams to fulfill. Over the years, life became less carefree, as it does for all of us as we grow older. Many of those dreams have remained unfulfilled. Don't get me wrong – I have always kept in mind that "Things could be better, but things could also be a WHOLE lot worse!" Still, I've struggled with disappointment, and with trying to find some "purpose." Throughout those ups and downs, triumphs and disappointments, Yellowstone – my love for and interest in the place, and my far too infrequent return visits to it – have remained a source of serenity and rejuvenation in my life. Back in February, Bonnie asked us Loons, "Why do you keep going back to Yellowstone?" My reply was this:

"It PULLS me back... I saw this question and those were the first words that came to mind – 'It pulls me back...' As I thought about it some more, I asked myself, 'Is it nostalgia? Is it some kind of pathetic attempt to relive my youth?' (I spent maybe the best six months of my life thus far there, the first summer I worked there)... And, I

suppose that's part of it, but it goes deeper than that. I'm reminded of the answer I once gave when someone asked me what it was about The Total Yellowstone Chat Pages that was so compelling to me, so 'addictive'...And after thinking for only a second or two, I said, **'Because it reminds me of what it feels like to be me.'** On this page – and in Yellowstone – the 'REAL Allison' comes out. The one who lurks deep inside, and who worked in the park that summer long ago, but who has kind of retreated in recent years and has only made rare appearances in my life lately – UNTIL I FOUND THIS PAGE and YOU PEOPLE. I'm back in touch with myself, and going to Yellowstone gives me that feeling too. And, of course, it also makes me feel connected to God, and that, really, is maybe the 'pull' that I feel..."

On the chat page, I feel again like that "self" that I was back in '75. My love of the park, and as a result of THAT love, my love of the TYLCP (and the Loons) has given me **purpose** – a reason to get out of bed in the morning! I have an "interest" that is all-consuming. And I share that love, that "interest" with **friends**, who love and accept me **for who I am**. I now have something to look forward to – MANY "somethings"! It makes me want to take better care of myself, so that I'll be able to more fully enjoy and experience these wonders. The following quote explains part of what I'm trying to say:

"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life... I think that what we're really seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our innermost being and reality, so that we can actually feel the rapture of being alive." -- Joseph Campbell

Yes. I think that is it. In Yellowstone, and with the Loons, I can actually FEEL the RAPTURE of being ALIVE.

I am compelled to end this with a few more quotes that I want to share:

"Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art. It has no survival value; rather is one of those things that give value to survival." -- C. S. Lewis

"A Friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of Nature."
-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

"When we seek to discover the best in others, we somehow bring out the best in ourselves." -- William Arthur Ward

"The bird a nest,
the spider a web,
man friendship."
-- William Blake

"A true friend is someone who thinks that you are a good egg
even though he knows that you are slightly cracked." :-)
-- Bernard Meltzer