

2nd Place, Writing Division

Morning Hike by Summer Smith

Last week I hiked Carbonate for the first time. I'm almost embarrassed to admit this, having lived in the Valley for over six years. Six years, and I've never gone up once. For many Wood River residents, outdoor activity is more than exercise; it's a way of life. Not only do most locals like to ski, bike, and hike—they're really good. In fact, just the other day I could have sworn I overheard some husband say to his wife, "Honey, I'm going to deposit some money at the bank, swing by the hardware store, and bike up Baldy. I'll be back in an hour." And should I ever stop someone on the street to tell her I jogged 10 miles that morning, she will have undoubtedly just run 12. Our community's enthusiasm for action is contagious, and since moving to the area, I've stepped it up. Soon after settling down, I fell in love with running and nowadays try to get in a few long jogs each week. And while I'm not the best Nordic skier, I like to head out to Quigley or hit the Harriman Trail once in a while each winter. But I'll confess that when it comes to hiking, I'm a little skittish. Bad balance, coupled with poor depth perception, hasn't deterred me from trying most activities, but I am admittedly wary of uneven terrain and steep slopes. Plus, I can't help but worry that my slow-poke pace will hinder hiking partners. Fortunately, my friends are patient, and when I opt to go along, they'll slow their speeds to match mine. And so I've hiked Adam's Gulch and Buttercup and Baldy. These outings have been accompanied by a few close calls and the occasional fall, but so far I've had to recover from nothing more than a skinned knee here and a bruised ego there.

Still, as my friend Leah and I pulled up to the trailhead late Sunday, I was somewhat nervous. Starting up the hill, I found it easier than expected. "This isn't so bad," I said. "In fact, I'm doing pretty good!" Famous last words. Almost immediately I caught my right foot and stumbled forward. I regained my balance, however, and after my heart stopped pounding, we continued, filling each other in on our latest news as we climbed. Forty-five minutes later, Leah and I stood on the very tip-top of the mountain by the flag I'd often noticed from town and were admiring the ochres and umbers in the cottonwoods below. It's been said that people come for the snow and stay for the summer, but, like Hemingway, I love the fall best of all. An avid reader, I know that writers often set stories in autumn to symbolize some sort of deterioration or decay, the end of something. However, this interpretation reflects few real-life situations. For many of us, these months represent hope and fresh starts, and as a teacher, I see this time of year as an opportunity to take on new challenges, just like the one I faced that day.

In no hurry, we lingered at the summit for some time. My eyes roamed the streets below, wandering from Galena to Silver to Spruce, while I thought back on other goals I've reached these last six years: surviving my first year of teaching, writing my masters' thesis, running my first race. Sometimes I wonder whether the Wood River Valley is the right fit for me, whether the lifestyle is too intense, but as I looked out on the familiar landscape from a point of view unseen before that morning, I realized it is this intensity that has pushed me to be my best.

Ready to go, we discussed the route back. “Let’s head down the face. It might be tricky for a bit but we’ll go slow,” Leah said. I was game, but within minutes, I realized that down might be more challenging than up. The incline was steep, and I had difficulty maneuvering my way amid the shale. “Leah, I don’t know if I can do this,” I said. “You go ahead. Leave me. Save yourself!” I was only half-kidding; I seriously doubted I’d make it to the bottom in one piece. “Here,” she said, “take my hand.” Feeling foolish but grateful, I grabbed her hand, and we started a slow, somewhat awkward dance down the mountain. “Rest your foot right there,” she would say, pointing to a rock, or “Okay, now step down here.” When I wondered what other hikers might think about someone so inept on the hill she needed help, Leah said only, “They’ll think you’re brave.”

Finally, and somewhat miraculously, we made it to the switchback that led us the rest of the way. As we hiked down, I reflected on the friendships I’ve formed in the Valley. Teaching colleagues and others have, over time, become my running buddies and my coffee companions. They are the ones with whom I share my successes as well as my struggles. They are the sturdy stones that have supported me through the sticky spots in my life, tricky spots that left me, like shifting shale, a little off-balance and in search of firmer footing. They are the reasons I consider myself lucky.

Arriving back where we started, Leah turned to me. “So, how was it?”
“Not as hard as I thought it might be,” I said.
“It never is.”