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1985 Route

Prologue

May 1985, Wyoming Highway 191

The pronghorn was running beside me.

I glanced over at him, saw the thin brown mane of his neck, the black patch on his cheek. In the large brown eyes I expected to see panic, but what I saw was determination instead, and muscles churning beneath the tan and white skin. We raced beneath an overcast sky, on a road that ran through rust-colored hills covered with yucca and sage. Side by side we moved, and I could hear the hum of my tires rolling over the pavement shoulder, the rush of the antelope's hooves on the sandy soil at the edge of the road, my CatEye cyclometer showing a speed of nearly thirty-five miles per hour as we moved together, miles of highway stretching out ahead and not a car in sight.

I had first seen the antelope moments before, standing by the side of the road. It's hard to imagine what he must have thought when he looked up and saw me, just yards away, pedaling silently on my bicycle, but he lifted his head, stiffened and watched, just long enough to determine that whatever was the vehicle, there was a human attached. And then he jumped into forward position and was off. There was a barbed wire fence to the right of the road, and at first he had moved toward it, but in the frantic stride of his sprint, didn't jump and moved back toward the shoulder. He was galloping now as I rode beside him, and I could hear him, clods of the Wyoming dirt rising around his feet.

I'd been riding three hours since leaving Rock Springs early that morning, without encountering another living being, save for the occasional pickup or RV, and I pedaled furiously, determined to keep up, and it seems now, as I remember it, that we rode and ran together throughout the morning, but in reality it must have been just seconds. Finally, unable to maintain the sprint, I slowed to a stop, and breathing heavily where I stood straddling the bike, I watched as the antelope veered right, slipped beneath the fence, and disappeared over a distant rise. Then, reemerging on a farther hill, he stopped, and I saw him standing, watching.

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Prologue

It was the summer of 1985. Ronald Reagan was in his second term. The Los Angeles Lakers, led by Magic and Kareem, were on their way to their third championship in six years. A music festival called Live-Aid played to audiences around the world in order to raise money for the world's starving children. It was a time of optimism.

I was twenty.

It is winter now, and nearly twenty years have passed since I rode beside that antelope. I sit in my small writing studio in Walton, Nebraska, and look at an old photo, at the lean legs that straddle the Trek touring bicycle, the still unused tent and sleeping bag strapped to the rear rack, fully packed panniers draped over each tire. The picture was taken by my mother, and I remember the moment after she snapped it, how we had each stood, not knowing what else to say, and then she hugged me good-bye. I lifted the bike, and in small stuttered steps turned and pointed it toward the street. With the tires wobbling under the weight of my gear, I pedaled off the curb and rode south to the end of Crown Ridge Drive, before finally turning right and heading west on a journey that would take me through the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Alberta, and Idaho, across Washington, into Vancouver, before returning down the coast, through Oregon and half of California, east across Nevada, Utah, Arizona, one tire carefully set into New Mexico at the four corners (I wanted to tell people that I hadn't been to New Mexico but my bicycle had), and finally, a five-day push back to Colorado Springs, where a small group of friends, family, and neighbors had gathered on the front lawn to welcome me home.

The journals from that trip are old now, the pages worn and yellowed. I take the first and gingerly turn over the cover, which has long been torn from its binding. It contains daily entries, scribbles of mileage, average speed, distance, and day-to-day life bicycling solo over back western roads. Stuck within the pages are various business cards and brochures, information on campgrounds and motels, and an old note, left on the seat of my bicycle by my older brother, David, the morning I left: *Keep your eyes on the road and your nose off the pavement.* It was a mandate I had managed mostly to adhere to.

What endures also are fragments of memory, pieces that no lon-

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ger flow together as a whole but remain scattered, like a puzzle once put together, now strewn about: a rattlesnake on a desert highway, a drenching hailstorm, a small town Montana bar in the rain, a Navajo man named Verl, a night of fireworks on an Oregon beach, an elderly couple in Raymond, Washington, who took me in and fed me. I remember turtling across highway 95, Nevada's most desolate highway. The winds, rebelling in true Nevada fashion, had reversed their usual westerly flow. For three days I'd averaged a measly six miles per hour, while bomber planes from a nearby military range flew overhead.

In Yellowstone I woke among a herd of elk; in Waterton, Alberta, to a pair of mountain goats licking the salt from my sweat-stained bicycling gloves. In Sequim, Washington, I woke to a bag of donuts left by a teenage girl whose mother had invited me to sleep in her family's yard.

Consider him, that twenty-year-old boy. (Knowing who I was then, I can't think of myself back then as anything but a boy.) Naive, sheltered, painfully shy. In the year that preceded the summer, I'd quit my second college and moved back in with my parents. I was working at a downtown soda fountain called Michelle's. Two nights a week I cleaned an office building. I opened the junior high school gym for the Park and Recreation Department. Three part-time dead-end jobs. My father wanted me to go back to school. I drank beer instead. I had a girlfriend. Cynthia. We spent evenings drinking coffee, taking walks around Broadmoor Lake, parking in the Garden of the Gods. She told me her life goals, none of which seemed to include me. I felt an anxiety I didn't understand, a longing for something I couldn't define. So I did what countless other lost young men have done in this country. I headed west.

Think of the changes the last twenty years have wrought. In 1985 there were no cell phones or even phone cards. A call home required a pocketful of quarters or a voice on the other end willing to accept a collect call. There were no ATM machines. Money had to be wired or taken as an advance on a credit card during normal banking hours.

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Computer use required an understanding of foreign languages today more outdated than Latin: FORTRAN, BASIC, and COBALT.

Much has changed in the West. Major urban areas are sprawling. Recent years have seen drought conditions and a rise in fires. There are increasing tensions between states and communities over water rights and legal battles between state and federal government agencies over where to store nuclear waste. Immigration across the southern U.S. border has emerged as one of the most hotly contested political issues. In the West, where capital is still tied to land, ideological battles rage on between conservationists and economic developers.

Worldwide, tensions are mounting, and the United States is embroiled in a war that feels like it will never end. Ronald Reagan has passed away and Magic Johnson has become the face (albeit still smiling and vibrant) of a devastating disease. World hunger and poverty have not diminished.

As for me, I'm no longer skinny, not so naive. My blood pressure's high, and I recently broke my hand after slipping and falling on ice. I spend most of my time working and studying in an academic building called Andrews Hall, in an office with no windows. Beer is more a condiment than a meal. Exercise is a walk from my office to the library. Cynthia is a pleasant nostalgic memory.

I schedule an appointment, walk across campus to the University Health Center. I'm breathing heavily by the time I get there.

"The first thing," says the nurse, jotting a number down on her chart as I'm standing on a scale, "we have to do something about the weight problem." Weight problem. The number one piece of evidence I'm no longer the kid I was then. That first trip was not only twenty years but also seventy pounds ago.

"Of course, I'm wearing shoes," I say.

"Whatever makes you feel better," she says.

I sigh. I once ran the Pikes Peak Marathon. Now I have to stop to rest after climbing a flight of stairs. I have fallen increasingly into a life that moves me away not only from good health but also from a relationship with that land of the West, the day-to-day connection of a life lived outside, in physical exertion, among the elements. What I

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fear is that all I learned on that journey is lost. I'm a different person now, thank God, but I want to feel the road beneath my tires again. I want to apply what I've learned in the last twenty years to the journey, and I want to apply the journey to the next phase of my life. In February I will turn forty. My longing for the West has never diminished. To think of that summer on the bicycle is to dream myself home, and home is an endless space, a roof of big sky, a bed of dry earth.

I've decided to retrace that route, to ride it again.

I work at convincing myself that in some ways it'll be easier now. I know more, can better take care of myself. I'm banking on wisdom to make up for the lard.

"Do you think I can do this?" I ask the nurse.

"I think you better do something," she says.

I walk down the creaky steps into the dank and dusty cellar, the smell of cold dirt, the soft hiss of the furnace. The old bicycle leans at an angle against the concrete wall. The tires are flat, the leather of the seat rippled and torn, the handlebar tape unraveled. How long has it been since I've ridden the bike? I can't remember. Fifteen years, maybe.

I carry the bike into the yard, lean it against a tree. I fill a bucket with soapy water and an old rag and start to clean, embarrassed at my neglect.

I purchased this bike in 1984. It's a Trek 520. It has old-school caliper brakes. The gearshift levers are on the down tube of the frame, and shifting is made by feel rather than by clicking into place. The bike was made specifically for touring, which means its longer wheel base covers more ground per pedal rotation than a mountain or racing bike. Riding this bicycle after riding a mountain bike is something like the difference between driving a Cadillac and a jeep. Right now it's like a Caddy on blocks, but I didn't even consider buying a new one. A good bicycle, even when neglected, will last a lifetime. But the bike needs work. Quality work. And probably parts that are no longer made.

I call my neighbor Tony.

Tony Koester is one of those I-know-a-guy kind of guys. You need something, anything, in Nebraska, if Tony can't get it, he knows a

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guy who can. If there are twenty-year-old bicycle parts anywhere in Nebraska, I know he'll find them.

Sure enough, just weeks later, Tony delivers the bike to my door. The tires and seat are a polish of black, the new chain sharp silver. The handlebar tape has been replaced. I ride the bike down the driveway and to the end of the gravel road. Rides smooth. The gears shift easily. I replace the old rusty rearview mirror and add a new cyclometer. A week before I'm ready to leave, I lean the bike against our elm tree and step back to admire it.

The bicycle sparkles in the sun. Good as new.

Departure

TO GET TO THE JOURNEY was a journey in itself. Purple redwood tree blossoms lined Lincoln residential streets as I made my way to campus to finish and turn in final grades, the end of a hectic semester. I had a lunch meeting with two of my University of Nebraska colleagues then the handing in of my final comprehensive exam portfolio, a culminating semester-long project that accompanied a forty-eight-book reading list. The day was characteristic of the semester—scheduled to be finished by noon, I left my office at four.

It was warm and sunny, that time of quiet afternoons, before public schools officially ended and summer settled in. I walked out the sliding glass door off our living room and onto the redwood deck. It needed staining, something I'd planned on doing before I left. Now there wouldn't be time. Oscar, the neighbor's cat, sauntered over and rolled onto his back. I reached down to pet him. Soon Joan would arrive. I took a deep breath and walked inside, started to pack for our eight-hour drive.

We drove west on I-80, neither of us talking much, just looking out the window at the night sky, stopping only once for gas at Big Springs and then spending a night in Sterling, Colorado. In the morning we headed south on Highway 71, through the eastern Colorado ranchlands, the mountains far on the western horizon, cirrus clouds against a light-blue sky. At Limon we turned west on Highway 24, through Calhan, and into the mad traffic of Colorado Springs, the city of my birth, which grows ever more unrecognizable with each visit, past the cloned home developments, the endless traffic lights, past the Citadel Mall, what once was the eastern edge of the city but is now in the center, zigging our way to Uintah Street, 19th, King Street, and finally, onto Crown Ridge Drive, the home of my parents, and my youth, the exact spot where I'd begun my trip twenty years before and in two days would begin it again.

One day, weeks earlier, I had been sitting at an English department

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social in Dudley Bailey Library with the fiction writers Gerry Shapiro and Judy Slater and the poet Grace Bauer. The talk turned to my impending journey.

“So you must be doing a lot of training, then?” said Grace.

“No, I really haven’t,” I said.

Grace started to laugh but then realized I wasn’t joking. She blinked a couple of times. Judy looked down, took a sip of her tea.

I had doubts of my own to contend with, but I knew that an advantage to a solo bicycle tour was that you could ride at your own leisure. It would be slow going, but on a bicycle, slow was the point. The goal was neither adventure nor fitness, though if those became by-products, fine. What I wanted was not only to see the West but to experience it—to feel its changing day-to-day moods, to see its geography in terms not of pockets of beauty but of a continuous and changing landscape. And more than that, I wanted to be a part of it, to lend my own respiration to the air.

The disadvantage, obviously, to a solo bike trip is loneliness, which brings me to what I knew would be the most difficult part of the trip.

Consider all the men throughout history who have left their families behind: soldiers off to war, men who took jobs on expeditions of discovery, sometimes gone for years, before phones or even telegrams and letters. What must that yearning for their lives back home have felt like for explorers such as those on the Grinnell expeditions in the 1850s, men for whom, as Chauncey Loomis and Constance Martin write in their introduction to Grinnell’s *Arctic Explorations*, “must have felt deeply the great distances between themselves and their homes and suffered a sense of hopelessness, especially when they brooded on a second winter in the arctic.” What I will be doing pales in comparison, obviously.

I will try not to belabor this point, other than to say that in the twelve years we’d been married, Joan and I had lived in ten states, many for a short period of time. This meant that she was not only the most important person I knew in town but often the only person I knew. In Alaska, due to our jobs, we had lived apart for several months, seeing each other only on occasional weekends. When people

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talk about difficult times in their marriages, they tend to mean times when they weren't getting along. For us difficult means being apart, and because we know what that feels like, we don't waste much time not getting along.

It wouldn't be storms or wind, mountain passes or sore muscles that would cause me the most hardship on this journey.

As antidote, we had splurged on two flights for Joan. We would meet first at the end of June, in Friday Harbor, on San Juan Island in Washington, and then again in San Francisco in July. Optimism assumed I'd make it that far.

That night I stayed up late, packing my bags and then repacking them, whittling my gear down to the most basic of needs. I didn't get to bed until one. I was nervous, and not without reason.

On How Not to Begin

SATURDAY, MAY 7. I said good-bye to Joan and my parents, wobbled down the driveway, pedaled to the end of the street, King to 30th, and onto Pikes Peak, to the four-way stop on 36th. The mountain air was cool, the sun behind me, the shadows long. I crossed Colorado Avenue and merged onto Highway 24 and Ute Pass. I rode for about a mile, but the seat wasn't set right, so I stopped to adjust it. After placing my tools back into the front pocket of my rear pannier, I neglected to cinch it. As I pedaled, the strap caught in my spokes and ripped. Then I realized that my cyclometer wasn't working. Not used to the altitude, or the climb, I was already panting. I hadn't ridden for nearly three weeks, was in probably the worst shape of my life, and it was clear I'd packed too much gear. I stopped to catch my breath and tried to decide what to do about the cyclometer. I didn't want to ride without it, and I wouldn't be near a bike shop until Breckenridge, maybe three days away. Best to get it fixed now, I thought.

I struggled to the Cliff Dwellings entrance, where I called Joan.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Never felt better," I said.

"How far have you gone?"

On How Not to Begin

“Bout a mile and a half. And I’ve only stopped to rest twice,” I said.

“Might as well pace yourself,” she said.

“Can you come get me?” I said. “I’m having trouble with my speedometer.”

Because it was early and the bike shops weren’t open, we drove into Manitou, where we sat at an outdoor café sipping coffee in the sun. At the table next to us, a group of friends were laughing. A young couple with a dog showed up and joined them. Being in the morning mountain air watching the dog wag its tail reminded me of all the things I missed about western mountain towns. My discouragement faded a little.

We finished our coffee, and Joan drove me to Old Town Bike Shop, where I bought a new cord and mount for the Sigma. Then she drove me back to the highway. She said she’d leave for the cabin at noon, and she’d pick me up wherever she found me. She wished me luck, and then she drove away. I took a deep breath and started to pedal again.

Ute Pass was named after the Ute Indians, who used the route to follow bison herds back and forth from the mountain meadows today known as South Park. The Utes were nomadic, and by the time the Europeans arrived, their culture had spread throughout what is now western Colorado. Later the route served as a wagon road and then, during the height of the mining operations in the towns of Victor and Cripple Creek, the Colorado Midland Railway. As I rode, I could still see train tunnels carved into the cliffs on the southern side of what is now four-lane Highway 24. Once I was in the narrows, Pikes Peak disappeared from view. I pedaled slowly. Twenty years earlier the day had been warm, sunny. Now the day started clear, and I expected a midday heat. Instead, it grew colder, and clouds rolled in over the mountain, darkening the sky. Furious gusts of wind blew fine specks of sand into my eyes. The temperature dropped quickly. There was a brief flurry of snow. I stopped to rest often. When Joan found me three hours and just ten miles later, I was sitting on a guardrail, eating dried apricots.

On How Not to Begin

“You’re doing well,” she said. Said it like she meant it, which I appreciated.

“This road’s steeper now than it was twenty years ago,” I said.

We drove together to the cabin, where we were met by my parents, my brothers and sisters, their spouses and kids. Everyone brought food and gave me a send-off celebration. I was embarrassed to tell them I hadn’t actually made it to the cabin on the bicycle. In fact, I hadn’t even made it to Woodland Park.

That night, unable to sleep, I stepped out onto the wooden deck and stood beneath the black sky. I listened to the stillness, let it calm me. I knew that in the morning Joan and I would take a short hike through the forest, find an outcropping of rock where we could sit and sip coffee. The whole morning would be spent avoiding our inevitable good-bye.

I’d been planning this trip for years, but now I considered all that might happen—lightning, snowstorms, hypothermia, accidents, injury. When I’d left on that first trip, I faced similar fears, had put off leaving for a week, had almost decided not to go.

I thought of the mountains I’d soon ride over. Colorado would be the most difficult part of the trip. If I could make it to Wyoming without pulling a muscle or blowing out a knee, I’d know I could do it. I walked inside, lay down next to her. The last few weeks had been filled with the frenetic pace of graduate school and of preparation for this trip, and I lamented my self-absorption, the writing and graduate school life that left her with her own dreams unfulfilled and a debt that she didn’t deserve. Real men hold steady jobs and provide, I thought. They don’t pedal off trying to be twenty again.

“You okay?” she asked.

“I’m not going, I decided,” I said.

“You’ll be fine,” she said. She cuddled close, and we fell asleep.

Early Sunday afternoon I watched her drive away. I was on my own.