

# 1

## Roll Me Away

“Linda thinks you’re dead.”

The words came to me slowly. It had been a rough morning, so just before lunch I decided to take a quick twenty-minute nap that stretched into an hour and a half, and now I was struggling to reenter the world. I tried to will my eyes to stay open, but they kept dropping shut as if I’d been drugged. My limbs felt like rubber and my face was gummy. I should have just let the call go to voicemail, but my hand somehow reached the phone and my fingers somehow opened it and my mouth somehow said “Hello?” and then my cousin Cathy told me that our other cousin Linda thought I was dead.

“She saw the card and started crying,” Cathy said. I was having a little trouble following her thick Brooklyn accent. I wasn’t sure if it was because everything was still a little out of focus, or because her voice was stretched through space between New York and California, or because I wasn’t yet used to the acoustics of the cheap cell phone—my first, at age forty—that I bought out of necessity a few weeks earlier.

*The card*, echoed in my head. *Something about a card. What card?* I couldn’t make sense of it, so I zeroed in on the other big noun. *Linda*.

“She called you?” I asked, mainly to buy some time so that I could catch up with the conversation.

“I just got off the phone with her,” Cathy said. “She was *hysterical*.”

I heard my mother’s voice in Cathy’s. *Hysterical* was my mom’s favorite way to describe any and all female friends, neighbors, and family members. In her estimation, the women she knew were always getting hysterical about something. Now Linda was getting hysterical. Because of a card. Oh yeah—*that* card. The Christmas card. I rubbed my eyes and pictured Linda, down in Miami, as she walked to her mailbox, opened an envelope, read the words on the card inside, read them again, and then ran inside to call Cathy.

“Didja see it?” Cathy asked.

I hesitated. “Um, no,” I lied. The circumstances in which I saw that card were a little hard to admit, and in my sleep-addled mind I thought that if I confessed to seeing it, then all the rest would follow. As I got my bearings, I realized that there was something else that was a little hard to admit—the fact that when I *had* seen that card and the words on it, I didn’t imagine how friends and family might react. At the time, those words were as direct and unambiguous as a club to the forehead.

We talked more about the card and the greatly exaggerated reports of my death, and then Cathy moved on to news about her son, her husband, and their passel of adopted cats, dogs, and birds. Listening to her voice—and again hearing my mother’s—I rose from the bed and poked through the boxes that lined the walls of my room. In one of them was a battered copy of *The Phantom Tollbooth*, and sandwiched between its pages was the card.

The Christmas card, the one from my house, the one I stole. On the front was a picture I didn’t take of my sons Nick and Tony standing on either side of my soon-to-be-ex-wife Elizabeth in front of a Christmas tree I didn’t put up. Inside were the words that sent Linda running for the phone.

All the fuzziness was gone now, and I read the card’s two curt sentences in the way I hadn’t before—through Cathy and Linda’s eyes, through the eyes of anyone familiar with my recent past. And then I

felt myself smile, a habit I've had since childhood where I slip away from what's going on and see myself more as a character in a story than as the real me, in my life. Sometimes this has been a good thing, but I wasn't sure if this was one of those times. I saw that from a purely objective perspective, the card and its larger context was a little funny, but I also saw that nobody who got one would be objective. Still, I didn't begrudge Elizabeth whatever anger or confusion led her to mail them to everybody on my half of the Christmas card list. I was pretty confused myself and knew how that went. Plus, the implication of those words wasn't completely wrong. *Something* had died, but at the time I couldn't have said what.



That card is on my mind again, but I'm not sure why.

The southbound traffic is surprisingly light for a Wednesday morning, and I start to say this out loud when I realize that I already did, five minutes ago. Instead, I stare at the ocean off to my right as Shannon drives.

Neither of us wants to talk because the only thing to talk about, really, is where we're going and what I'm going to do once we get there, so I reach over and let NPR fill the silence between us. The news is the same. A little over a month earlier, in April, some machinery at a British Petroleum drilling operation in the Gulf of Mexico exploded, and since then oil has been pouring freely from a broken pipe wedged into the sea floor. On the radio, one correspondent intones that the soiled wildlife and dim prospects of staunching the flow anytime soon will likely make this the worst ecological disaster in U.S. history.

I switch it off, and we're drowning in silence again.

"I'll be okay," I finally say.

"Will you?" Shannon says. She shakes her head as if to dislodge the words that have been piling up there. "If you're out of touch for more than three hours any day, I'm calling the authorities."

“The authorities,” I repeat. Before I can ask, “Who are the authorities?” she laughs at how ridiculous she knows she sounds.

“Seriously, though...” She lets the sentence trail off into more silence.

We exit I-5 and Shannon steers us through shrinking streets until we’re at the parking lot for the beach.

“Are you really going through with this?” she asks for probably the eightieth time this week, and I know that even now, as we look for a spot, part of her hopes I’ll change my mind so that we can drive back to the house where we’ve been living together for the last two years.

“The die is cast,” I say, showing her my palms. “Out of my hands.”  
“Oh, bullshit.”



Like any big plan, this one had stages.

First was the Daydream Stage, and it involved a lot of *what ifs*. What if I got on my bike and started riding? What if I just kept going? What if I went all the way across the country?

Next was the Internet Stage, which led to the simultaneously reassuring and annoying discovery that my *what ifs* were nothing new. Lots of people rode across the country. In fact, lots of people did much more. One guy had been on the road for over fifteen years. Just as I resigned myself to the fact that it’s impossible to have any truly original ideas anymore, a line from one site caught my eye. It said that every tour—hitting the open road on your bike was called *touring*, I learned—was different. Okay. That suited me. Mine would be different. How, I wasn’t sure.

The rest of this stage was spent researching what to pack, where to pack it, which way to go, where to stay, and most importantly, what to ride.

Which quickly led to the Money Stage, the stage that signaled true commitment. My first purchases were a couple of books on touring

and some official maps from the Adventure Cycling Association, a Montana-based group that had mapped routes up, down, and around the country. The rest of the stuff I bought consisted mainly of toiletries, tools, camping gear, medical gear, and biking gear, which far and away contained the priciest items. Before I could get racks and bags—and just like that, *panniers* was added to my growing bike vocabulary—I had to settle on a bike.

I soon found out it's easy to spend a lot of cash on a good touring bike. I also found out these bikes can be hard to find. The sea of spandexed bikers that floods the roads every weekend are seated atop aluminum, carbon, or titanium, none of which is suitable for someone who's planning to pile a ton of gear on his or her frame. For that you need steel. Steel is durable, but it's heavy and inefficient for those bikers who count pedal cranks and compare average mile times—which is to say, most bikers. And because the average bike shop caters to most bikers, not many of them stock touring bikes. I wasn't crazy about buying one over the Internet; I wanted to be able to climb aboard, so I got on the phone. After spending half of a morning on calls, I found a shop that carried one of the three models in my price range. I abandoned my Cheerios mid-bowl and took off in my car.

The shop was a Trek Superstore, and the bike was the Trek 520. It popped up on a lot of my Internet searches and had good reviews. Back in the early 1980s, it was one of several steel bikes manufactured by Trek, but now it was the only one.

I stepped into the shop and was confronted by a giant cardboard Lance Armstrong. He shuffled back and forth in front of me, and I was about to say something when a dark-haired head wearing black horn-rimmed glasses poked out from behind and smiled.

“Welcome to Trek,” he said. “Can I help you find something?”

When the rest of him emerged from behind the cardboard, I could see his nametag, which read, “Ask Me—I'm WILL.” I told Will why I was there and what I was looking for. He set Lance down on the counter behind him, shouted to a co-worker by the shoe area that he

couldn't get him to stand up right, and then walked me upstairs and to the back corner, where a two-tiered rack stood filled with bikes. He reached up, grunted a few times, pulled a bike free, and set it in front of me.

I reached to touch it. Long, sleek frame. Gleaming silver chain. Bold, metallic finish of "Root Beer Brown," according to the tag.

"Can I take it for a ride?"

A smart shopper and someone with even an inkling of what he was getting into would have taken the bike on a serious ride and been prepared with a list of questions. But I was neither of those things. I rode the bike around the parking lot a couple of times and pretended to weigh its pros and cons, but I had already decided that this was it, this was the bike that was going to take me across the country. In fact, I had already named it "Rusty," as in, *Rusty, you and I are going to kick some serious ass together.*

The final step was the Planning Stage, during which I figured out how to get from here to there. To do this, I relied on the ACA maps I bought. Problem was, there was no clear-cut route from San Diego to Greenville, North Carolina—the place I picked to finish partly because of its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean but mainly because my cousin Tom lived there—so I cobbled a route together out of four existing ones. That still brought me only as far as Virginia. I would have to figure out some way to get down to Tom's house from there, but I assumed that I could work that out when the time came.

More worrisome was the matter-of-face tone of doom that pervaded the touring books and maps. The books advised starting out with one- or two-night trips to get a feel for the many problems that arise on long-distance tours, and the maps warned—at least three times per map—that the routes I planned to take could be "very dangerous" and were for riders with "several years of experience."

If I've had years of experience doing anything, it was enjoying summers off from my teaching job at the local college. Losing myself in a stack of novels, goofing off with my two sons, watching TV—these were

the things I knew cold. But biking? When we moved to California from Indiana, we had an eighteen-month-old baby named Nick, an orange tabby cat named Bogart, and a red Dodge Neon named Leon. We had another car, too—a gold Omni whose parts I was constantly replacing—but we sold it before we left. It wouldn't have made the trip, and it was too expensive to ship. The plan was that Elizabeth would drive Nick to doctors' appointments, parks, and play dates, and that I would bike to school. This commute turned out to be about thirteen miles round trip, a total that would have impressed these mapmakers not at all. But there was no way I was going on an overnight practice run. I knew that if I did, I might realize that pedaling my forty-two year old ass for thousands of miles and who knew how many weeks—or *months?*—was one of my crazier ideas. Maybe the craziest.

Shannon had her own reactions to each stage.

During the Daydream Stage, she said, "Okay, you can do this."

During the Internet Stage, she said, "You're really doing this?"

During the Money Stage, which started when I unloaded Rusty from the back of my car and continued as packages arrived from strange-sounding companies like Tubus and Ortleib, she said, "You're not seriously going to do this, are you? *Are you?*"

And during the Planning Stage, when I was careful not to repeat the words "very dangerous" or "several years of experience," Shannon's main comment was, "Whatever."

At some point she decided that I was going and there was nothing she could do, so she planned and threw a big send-off the weekend before I left. It was meant to be festive, but whenever one of our friends mentioned how "impressed" they were with what I was doing, my stomach clenched. At that point, I hadn't done anything except spend money and pretend. I loaded up Rusty and put him on display, and person after person would grip the top tube and rear rack, grunt as they tried to lift him, and look at me with wide eyes that said, *You're going to ride this?* It was my weekend to have Nick and Tony, and I

spotted the two of them, at different times, both trying and failing to raise Rusty's wheels off the ground.

Somewhere between Daydream and Internet, I told them what I was thinking of doing and asked if it was all right with them—a question, Shannon reminded me later, that I did *not* ask her. I said to myself that if they seemed at all apprehensive, I would bail on the idea. But they were okay with it. Enthusiastic, even.

At first.

The night before I left, we took the two of them out for dinner. I told them I would call every day and aimed for a light mood, but the prospect of spending two or more months apart hung between us like a thick cloud of smoke. At fourteen and eleven, Nick and Tony are more comfortable talking about sports and television shows than their feelings, which is something Shannon understands much better than I do. After a too-short phone conversation, I'll say to her, "They don't have much to say to me," and she'll tell me, with much more patience than I deserve, "They're *boys*." During dinner, I kept fishing for what they thought about my trip, but all I got were shrugs. Until we were almost done.

Nick's fork hovered over a piece of pie that was oozing hot apple onto the plate. His brow was wrinkled—something that happens when he's thinking, which is most of the time. He looked up at me. "Just be careful, okay?"

Tony was patting Oreo crumbs into a leaning tower of soft serve with the back of his spoon. A tuft of brown hair hung in front of his eyes, and he flicked his head sideways to get it back in place. He stared at his bowl so intently that until he spoke, I thought he was focused on something in his ice cream.

"I couldn't even lift it," he said.



The five or so minutes I had allotted between dipping Rusty's tire



in the ocean and actually rolling away is a bit off. Once I slosh my way out of the water, I have to carry Rusty back to the parking lot, dry off, put on my socks and biking shoes, and load up the six bags, each one heavier than the one before.

A half hour later I'm pointed east down the neatly asphalted river trail that will lead to road after road into who knows where. Shannon stands next to me with her camera, and the same silence from the car returns.

"I feel like I should say something profound," I finally offer.

Shannon hugs me and backs up. To cover her tears, she lifts her camera and snaps a few shots of me as I pedal away.

Fact is, I'm not prepared for any of this, and it takes all of four minutes to figure that out. As I weave around the runners and dog walkers who fill the trail this morning, I'm sweaty and panting, my muscles are straining, and even Rusty resists as I fight to keep the two of us balanced under an impossibly heavy load, made just a little bit heavier by the voice in my head that keeps repeating, *This is a big mistake, you moron.*

When people heard my plan and inevitably asked *Why?*, I was ready with *An adventure! A new writing project! To see the country!* and these all sounded more or less convincing. More convincing to my friends and less convincing to my dad, who has had to work this new development in his younger son's life with some older developments that he *still* hasn't processed completely. I had another set of answers that I kept to myself, along the lines of *I want to find myself* (a phrase that made me wince), *I'm restless, I need to feel strong again*, but these didn't seem quite right either. What occurs to me now, as I negotiate a ninety-degree turn onto the bridge over the San Diego River floodway and almost topple over, is that what I'm doing, plain and simple, is running away from some of the disasters that I had encountered and—if I'm being completely honest here—*created* these last few years.