



# DONIVAN BERUBE

YOU'LL ALWAYS HAVE A HOME IN ME

A MEMOIR

ON LETTING GO OF THE PAST LIVES  
WE CAN NO LONGER CARRY

When his plane finally touched down on the furthest edge of Northern Alaska, Donovan Berube thought he was unreachable. He'd quit his job and put life on hold to fly 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle and embark on the most challenging journey imaginable: a 20,000-mile bikepacking marathon from the top of Alaska to the bottom of Argentina. That's when he got the news that would change everything.

In this intrepid yet lyrical memoir, he weaves a once-in-a-lifetime adventure chronicle between the Earth's poles with prosaic heartsongs of reflection on balancing the death of his estranged parents—with whom he hadn't spoken since escaping their apocalyptic religious cult as a teenager—and how these two arcs converge in the peripatetic search for familial belonging. Set against a cascading backdrop of dirt roads and isolated villages across the Americas, he explores letting go of the past lives we can no longer carry, the ways in which remote landscapes translate the healing power of home, and where home lies without the people we love.

Grappling with impossible mountain passes, rabid wolves, Andean hailstorms and extreme desert stretches where resources fade toward nonexistence, *You'll Always Have a Home in Me* is a guiding light for the wayfaring soul. A kaleidoscopic elegy on the spirit of travel and the relentless pursuit of our wildest dreams.

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DONIVAN BERUBE is an international adventure cyclist, travel writer and music maker. He is a recipient of the Viola Award for Excellence in Music alongside features by NPR's *Morning Edition*, *Paste* and *Vinyl Me, Please*, while his writing has appeared in *The Travel Almanac*, *Men's Fitness*, *American Trails*, *LOST* magazine, *Adventure Cycling* and the book *100 Albums You Need On Vinyl and Why*.



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When the rain picked up a second time I was already too far gone to turn back. I'd been cycling a tangled wreck of rugged gravel logging roads across Vancouver Island's wild backcountry. Sharp braids of rocky shrapnel twisted in nameless knots around the Refugium mountain range toward the island's northwest corner. In drier spells these roads become a suffocating haze of volcanic dust that claws at the eyes and seizes gears, a costly alternative to the perpetual downpour I'd been drowning in for as many days as I could remember. Looking down at the loaves of mud collecting around my shoes, I couldn't decide if that sounded any easier.

Two months prior I'd flown 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle, rebuilt my bicycle on an icy airstrip beside Prudhoe Bay and began a two-year marathon south for the bottom of Argentina's Tierra del Fuego Archipelago.

Two weeks prior I'd gotten word that my estranged mother was dying in an intensive care unit on the other side of the continent. We hadn't spoken since I disassociated from their religious cult as a teenager – not even in the time since my father's death years earlier – so in some practical sense the inevitable had already happened. In actuality, though, this fresh finality to our distance tore away at my insides with parasitic devotion, a hemorrhage of spirit that I seemingly couldn't stitch back together no matter how fast I rode.

I wondered if I should abandon my bike ride to attend the funeral. Then I wondered if I was even invited to the funeral. Defiant of my isolation, the thought of her death lingered in me constantly, a strange new weight of omission that I struggled to process amidst voracious days and weeks wrought with depletion. I'd already traveled thousands of miles across Alaska, Yukon

Territory and British Columbia, looking back in enduring shock at each static horizon barbed by glacial blades and bergs like holy tokens petrified in wayfaring memoriam. The Pan-American Highway was the longest road I could find on the planet, which was exactly why I'd dreamt of riding it.

With endless dirt lanes over abandoned terrain, staggered ice roads atop empty tundra and overgrown trails connecting nowhere with nothingness, the nature of bike touring left much time for introspection. A little too much time, one could say. I tried to recall if Mom even liked the outdoors. Had we ever gone hiking? Had she ever been camping? It seemed like a pretty basic thing to know about someone, I just couldn't remember.

I was sure that she would've loved the sunsets though. Everyone loves sunsets, but especially her. She used to clap for the best ones. It's a funny thing to clap for, or maybe the best thing to clap for. So I clapped for them too, making camp at the end of each day to watch boreal Oz greens melt into a warm ruby of alpenglow. There were alpine lakes wrapped in evergreen taiga and jewel toned rivers packed with so much glassy glacier ice that at times they ran with metallic chime when I'd dip my bottles in for a fill. I studied each teal tremor from Valdez Glacier Lake to the Juneau Icefield and Queen Charlotte Sound, blues brighter than the sun-dried Fun Step shoes she used to wear when I first started grade school.

I'd forgotten about those Fun Steps.

My parents worked opposite shifts then and shared a rusted blue pickup truck for commuting. Mom would bike with me to a parking lot across town and take the truck to work while Dad would drive the truck to the lot, switch onto the bike and guide me back home. Watching the spin of her shoes pressed flat against the pedals, I couldn't have dreamed the audacious scope of bike rides this little chore would inspire in me years later. Through the smog

of sunken childhood memories, those shoes were the brightest, most vivid blue I could conjure. I thought this trite little detail was something I'd successfully buried in the self-exile of adulthood, but now found myself dropping the bike at each water's edge no matter how small to examine whether their shades were closer to turquoise or eucalyptus, peacock or cobalt. Perhaps some entirely new color lingering on the fringes between them, something yet unnamed. Nothing could match that lucid blue of her shoes, this much was certain. I wondered if she still had them.

Disowning their faith in my youth incited my parents to respond with a disownment of their own, declaring the pact they'd made with each other not to inform me when they die. This was but one cost of my "disobedience to *Jehovah [God]*," they called it. Excommunication meant they had to shun me in hopes that I'd come back, but instead I kept fleeing further and further away from them. I got jobs in restaurants and crept steadily westward for a decade across the United States with each newly rented apartment. I taught myself how to play and repair music instruments, touring as often as possible. I rode my bike across the country to Big Sur, California, which went well enough to become a kind of gateway trip to the perennial hunt for cheap flights to faraway countries, cycling their perimeters in as many vacation hours as I could tirelessly accumulate. Sometimes these newfound rations for adventure felt far more meaningful than a past life spent preaching door-to-door and waiting out the apocalypse. Other nights I'd be pitching my tent in the not-so-picturesque wreckage of a burnt down gas station at one in the morning, questioning if this way of life really was any better than not having a family.

There were plenty of things I wanted from my parents along the way that I couldn't ask them for. Not "things" as in money, but things as in guidance. What questions am I supposed to ask when buying a used car, for instance? How does a teenager get an apartment on their own? I met a girl and tomorrow we're moving in together, what should I do? This kind of advice was

something I surreptitiously picked from elsewhere along the way, like plates of untouched food left behind on a restaurant table, deemed surplus and worthless by those unaccustomed to going without. But what I wanted most was simply to be wanted. It sounds so rudimentary now, “wanting to be wanted.” How does one calibrate for that kind of absence in life?

I wanted to be chosen and kept by those outside of me, not scavenging for muddled discards of self worth in friends and lovers, devouring their scraps in ravenous hunger for my own starved sense of place and identity. Learning how to survive on my own in a world seemingly designed to break us apart taught me to balance that abandonment with resilient independence, complete heartbreak with the opportunity for escape, healing from dense grief made buoyant by a forgiveness in understanding. But I remained guarded against opening myself to the allowance of being hurt any further by those who'd long since abandoned the promise of showing up for their child in return. I didn't make it to Mom's funeral.

“Make it” sounds like I tried. I didn't go.

For weeks instead throughout North America's most desolate wilderness I'd been anxiously racing against road closures as wildfires heaved across a growing number of Canadian provinces. Eventually I landed on a midnight ferry just outside of Port Hardy, a harbor town on Vancouver Island's northern edge. Daylight staggered in a few hours later alongside plenty of sights I'd marked to see that day, pit stops when I was feeling good or quitting spots if I was fully spent. I restocked on groceries and savored the rare luxury of a hot cup of coffee in a basement bookstore downtown. I swung at the mosquitos in Ronning's Garden, a secluded plot of exotic plants bedded by a Norwegian settler in the early 1900s. Snow drops and monkey puzzle trees coiled into odd shapes as they pined for scarce dollops of sunshine. I hitchhiked to the Scarlet Ibis—self-proclaimed as “the most remote pub on Vancouver Island”—for a break with

strong beers, hearty food and an understated back patio perfect for tidewatching over Holberg Inlet when the weather holds. But those days the weather wasn't holding much at all. More rain lashed at the deck before the other diners and I could scurry for dry cover. I nodded my head in defeated acceptance while carrying my things inside, long-since having given up on the Northern Pacific's uninspired atmospheric performances.

The road plowed onward, a 40-mile slog through logging camps and lumber ruins to dead end at a bleak gravel lot from which I could follow a hiking trail out onto Cape Scott. Thick roots and fallen branches upturned the path while I pushed my bike over soft pine beds and slatted bridge crossings. Old growth rainforests of dense ferns and cords of moss draped gingerly across every last limb, an eternal ocean of timbers and mossy mushrooms all tinted green by time. A few miles further and San Josef Bay opened with the grace of a sparkling double-crested cormorant sunning its wings atop a bleached snag of driftwood, drying off in rest after diving for its dinner. I pitched my tent in a soft bank where bits of waterlogged branches had collected in patches of tall grass. Western sandpipers were shoring there as well, fragile little things that chase the tide probing for microscopic treats of their own. These were common enough birds, less than remarkable, but nevertheless reminded me that "Sandpiper" was the name of the golf course my parents and I biked through as a shortcut when exchanging the truck all those years ago. Another buried detail, unwillingly excavated like the blueness of Mom's shoes. The water looked somehow pregnant with these memories, echoes of something I'd let go of countless times before, faceless shadows lurking just beneath the surface, threatening to swim ashore if I lingered too long. "Come with us," they seemed to say. "We belong together." I waded in the shallows a while just to see how it felt, but I'd been so cold for so long already.

San Josef Bay unfurled with a tangible fervor of pastoral calm that day, one I would

continue to encounter in the ensuing months. A tactile silence somehow soothing in its emptiness. I wandered north along the beach ahead of sunset, exploring sea stacks freckled with stunted trees and the marbled rust of erosion. My fingertips dragged along the barnacled rocks and melting algae until it was too dark to see anymore. Nearby I'd spotted my first moon of the summer, a bright peachy sliver just barely able to escape the midnight sun's cold grip of the North. Placid waters lapped gently at the beach, steadied like a mirage with no booming surf, no bombastic churn. It was the steadiness of the Bay beyond that made it so special, less open ocean than a shallow pool trapped in sound, a meditative float. Towering veils of Sitka spruce and western cedar stood on guard against the shoreline like unflinching sentries, holding back the cold bath of intruding tide pools. Gaping caves tall enough to stand in bowled into the rocky scarp. It felt good to sleep in the sand, smothered in silence.

The next day was a 70-mile climb over merciless 13% grades to Port Alice, a secluded village built into the side of a mountain that slowly sinks into Neroutsos Inlet. The water there was an absurd glacial emerald cast with *cenotes* [*natural swimming holes*] called Devil's Bath and Eternal Fountain. More vibrant Fun Step blues paraded between the skies of my recollection. From there I connected another 50 miles of decommissioned logging routes to the Huson Caves, a remote collapse of triassic limestone cut by a river disappearing underground. Massive trees affixed to each rock in all directions, growing upside down and sideways. I slipped my fingers between shards of bark, enthralled by their shaggy texture, thinking back on a baby photo of me with both arms wrapped reverently around my mom. Our portrait was blurred in the grainy haze of a 1990s disposable camera. I stood on the kitchen table, hair still blonded by toddling youth, tiny hands draped gently across her shoulders from behind. She stood in front of me in a black floral sundress, hair permed, left hand clutching both of mine across her heart. She was not

smiling. Was something wrong? Was I still a good son then? I looked at the way our hands were clasped and realized I'd forgotten what that felt like, to feel her, to be looking right into the eyes of someone I once loved, someone who bore me and raised me, to see our hands touching but knowing only a spiritless vacancy now where warmth used to be. How could time take away something so simple?

The adult version of me was doing a poor job at burying these memories. Instead I felt tethered to that past, innumerable life changes in tow, entirely new lives crisscrossed and relocated. Had I not outgrown that little blonde boy standing on the kitchen table? What about teenage-me or last-year-me when she was still alive, when I still technically had a mom? Why didn't she ask to see me at the end? What would I have told her? We chose corrosion in the face of communion, which I accepted in part while still longing to understand the alchemy of our togetherness. Some parts of my past I couldn't help but keep carrying.

I looked back at those chapters so often, years stuck together like favorite pages in a worn-out book, dogeared by the people I'd loved since and the ones who loved me back in reciprocity. There were long winters in the Midwest that I thought could never thaw, endless summers in Arizona that baked the body into bleached submission, then late mornings in California under the cover of redwood trees. Each expired era was like its own little lifetime piling up in repetitious eons of starts and restarts across the latitudes. Each one devoured the last like sourdough left out on the kitchen counter, sticky and messy and eating itself empty with air, waiting to be shaped, wondering if there's some place left where I'll finally fit in. In hindsight, each of those past lives felt full of the same holes, composed by imperfection, in constant need of kneading. Nonetheless they remained anchored in time to some of my favorite places, lying in wait alongside the smallest of forgotten memories. Maybe that's what made them so hard to let

go. Or maybe that was part of the exchange, an allowance to bury the pieces of ourselves that we no longer have to carry. A gift to exorcise and walk away from, to reflect back upon only in our own solemn moments of choosing, with curious appreciation as opposed to pain.

I did wonder what Mom saw when she was dying though, which memories she replayed and who she'd been thinking of. Was there space for me inside her mind, or had I been cropped out of those family portraits as well? I thought about all the memories she had and couldn't give me: my first words, my first steps, my first time tasting chocolate ice cream, all those deleted scenes of our shared existence that neither of us would inherit. They would only fade with the darkness inside her. I could close my eyes and try to imagine those moments of us together like old polaroids decaying in a crumpled shoebox, their creased edges slowly ambered in time. I pictured our faces stained with the color of honeycomb and the wrinkles of our hands lining up in mirrored precision. These are parts of my own life that I'd never get to see, as if they weren't even real. That's the essence of family, or how I imagine it sometimes. It's a piece of us that's lived through someone else, something never quite ours. Something carried on beyond us while we're away and long after we've gone. Something imaginary but somehow more meaningful, prismatic and glistening, with deeper roots to hold tightly against the bludgeoning tides of time. It's a second life lived, but only in memory. And all the miles I'd ridden since had only brought those memories closer.

I shuddered to envision the inanimate sigh of nurses powering down my mom's ventilator in the hospital that day. I hoped she was able to love while the window opened. I wanted the world to be easier for her, for us both. I wanted time to feed her all the life she so desired until her eyes became a brand new color. I wanted our family to feel like a warm, glowing shelter at the far edge of a perpetual rain-laden bike ride, protective and fastened safely from the storm.

People to love and look out for, those who will watch over us in return and surround us with blessing. I wanted her to have everything she needed and then some, to thrive in the ways that she wished for, holding on tight through each little lifetime toward tomorrow. And tomorrow.

And tomorrow.

And tomorrow.

And tomorrow.

Letting go only when she's ready to.

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