

SUMMER

SPRING

AUTUMN

WINTER

Yosemite heaven

lost in desert

the end?

the Navajo Nation takes me in

Death Valley at midnight

meet a would-be messiah near the Hopi reservation

still looking for some game-changing epiphany

Bob joins me

a woman tells me: "We'll take care of you in Texas, unless you're black, or Mexican."

swamps and loneliness

romance and Mardi Gras

MLK Day in Selma

deep-fried squirrel

get food poisoning

first night under a bridge

run-in with inmates

"what the hell am I doing?"

My Route Across the USA

10.14.2011 - 9.8.2012

Chadds Ford, PA

to

Half Moon Bay, CA

## Author's Note

I recorded eighty-five hours of interviews while walking across the United States, which I've edited to create most of the dialogue in this book. However, there were many conversations that went unrecorded over the course of my year on the road, exchanges that happened too fast to catch or interactions that precluded the use of an audio recorder for various reasons. I've included several of these moments as scenes in this book, consulting the notes in my travel journal to recreate the conversations. For all dialogue, I've limited my own editing of these voices as much as possible, attempting to stay true to what people said and how they said it.

I used real names with a few exceptions, noted here. The following are pseudonyms: "Dan," "Frank," "Simon," "Don," "Mae," "Eric," "Manny," "Jay," "Maia," "Veronica," "Bea," "Mayor Rousseau," "Phil," and "Henry."



## Prologue

"Remember me."



The hills of northeastern Georgia shimmered with dawn light, sea green, strung together by the black thread of the highway. I was on this highway again, walking alone through the winter, filthy and far from home, virtually clueless as to what lay ahead. But that actually seemed okay today. Familiar. It was a kind of home in its own way right now, this feeling of familiarity, the sense that I actually belonged here, wherever I happened to be. It was getting steadier, that feeling, and with each day on the road I believed it a little more. Maybe someday it'd be unshakeable, a kind of knowing that went beyond believing. I walked a mile in the unseasonable December warmth, and then another, and another, and it felt like I was being held between two great hands—the high sky above and the fertile ground all around. No effort this morning, just floating. *Who am I today?* I wondered silently. *Who do I want to be?* The answer could've been anything, with so much space all around me, so much unknown.

I'd only been walking for two months, but it seemed like there'd never been anything else but this. Everything that had come before was fading into my footsteps: my childhood, nothing but whispers and flashes; adolescence, a blurry wash marked by a single vivid streak, the divorce; memories of college that felt ancient, as those passed on by an ancestor, or someone else long dead; and then my doomed job on the lobster boat, like a story told so late at night

it actually might've just been a dream. It all felt so far away, almost forgotten. Only the cars were close now, and the trucks, and if they got too close they would kill me. Their airstreams were monstrous invisible tongues, licking me good-bye over and over again all day long.

Around eight A.M. there was a handwritten love letter on the shoulder, highway trash. I picked it up and read. "Dear Caleb, Happy two months! I love you so much! It's been great like really. I know we're going to have more great times together."

It was something to think about. Not that I needed it. There's a lot to think about when you're walking alone on the highway all day. I tended to think about people—the people I'd met so far, the people I loved. And food. I thought a lot about food. Now, though, I thought about Caleb and his girl, and about how two months can seem like a lifetime when you're in love, or walking across a country, and how it all goes so fast until there's nothing left to go, and it's gone. "You are my absolute everything. Im sittin here missin you as usual. I hope your doing the same." What once had been a love letter was now litter, and this would soon disintegrate back into the earth. I wasn't that much different—destined to disintegrate someday. I placed the love letter back onto the grass. Didn't seem right to keep it.

I'd spent the night before in a barn owned by a chicken farmer named Diane. Her house was nestled in a stand of pines at the end of a long dirt driveway. A row of Christmas candy canes led me up to the front door. It was just before dark when I knocked, and as always, my breath turned shallow. *Who's going to answer?* This was the trickiest part, finding a safe place to sleep at night. *Are they going to scream at me? Bring out the dogs?* An older woman opened the door. I started talking before she could slam it.

"Hi, my name's Andrew. I'm walking across America listening to people's stories. I started two months ago in Pennsylvania and

I'm heading to California. Do you mind if I camp out in your yard?"

I always tried to pretend there was nothing unusual about a stranger knocking on someone's door at night—in 2011, no less. These days, that kind of thing happened online, safely scrubbed of all vulnerability. Interacting with strangers in the real world beyond the realm of superficial pleasantries, that was an endangered experience. Maybe it'd go extinct someday and we'd never have to feel the uncertainty I was feeling now, the nakedness. I was never as uncomfortable as I was when I knocked on a stranger's door, but at the same time, I never felt so alive, electrified by the unknown world on the other side, waiting to make itself known to me as soon as the door opened, any second now. *Just act normal. Smile.* This time it worked. Diane, still standing in the doorway, said I could camp on her front lawn.

The reds and whites of the electric candy canes bled like watercolors into my tent. The winter grass was soft beneath me, the night air almost warm. All my tension began to dissipate—the stress of walking on a highway all day, the muscle ache—but then I heard Diane's voice outside.

"Andrew? You in there? I'm so sorry, honey, but you can't stay here tonight."

I poked my head out of the tent, and Diane explained that she'd called her husband to let him know about me, and he hadn't taken the news well. He wanted me off the property immediately.

"He's not always like this," Diane said. "He's a veteran, and he got meaner when he came back from Vietnam. He would think you were going to break into the house at night and cut him up into little pieces."

I hated to be misunderstood like this, perceived as some kind of threat. All it would've taken was the slightest measure of

openness, a single conversation, and her husband and I might've met each other somewhere beyond fear. It had already happened like that with so many strangers since I'd left home. Not this time, though, but I couldn't blame the guy. Knocking on a stranger's door isn't easy, but opening the door when a stranger knocks isn't easy, either. And then letting that stranger camp out on your lawn? Or sleep on your couch, with your kids in the other room and your beloved by your side, all of you soon to be made utterly defenseless by the unconsciousness of sleep? I'm not sure I would've taken me in. I couldn't believe so many people already had.

Diane felt bad. She offered to drive me to a family barn a mile back east from where I'd come. I was walking west, so it'd be an extra mile for the next day, but I didn't mind. I broke camp and tossed everything in Diane's car, expecting to see her husband barreling down the driveway at any second, but he never did come.

The barn was right next to the road. Diane dropped me off and drove away. I sat down in a mess of straw, hidden by the warm, dark night. All my anxiety loosed itself back into the black sky, and the cars flew by me like earthbound comets, one every minute or so. I'd walked all day, and now I could be still. I'd been exposed, and now I was invisible, protected. Suddenly, unexpectedly, everything felt simple and profoundly beautiful: the moon, the barn, the bananas for dinner. Somehow even my sweat and grime pleased me. I couldn't understand it. *Why this subtle peace? How to hold on?* "Satisfied," I wrote in my journal. "Can't explain why, but so satisfied." One of Walt Whitman's verses from *Leaves of Grass* came to mind: "I cannot define my satisfaction . . . yet it is so, / I cannot define my life . . . yet it is so."

My breath rose and fell, rose and fell. I wasn't doing any of it. It was all just happening, and I thought that maybe I didn't have to become anything more than what I already was. That it would all

just happen, like my breath. That it was already happening. Sitting in the straw, it was spontaneously clear that there was nowhere else to be but here, and nothing else to do but this, breathe the air and witness the night, alone and yet not.

The feeling didn't last. I woke up the next morning anxious to get walking again, toward what, I didn't quite know. Whatever it was, it seemed far away.

After an hour or two I made it to the little town of Royston, where my friend Penn met me at a diner for breakfast. He was the first old friend I'd seen since leaving home, and I'd been looking forward to it. We laughed a lot in our booth, like we always used to in high school, and I caught a glimpse of what it might've been like to do this walk with somebody else, not just on my own. It was hard to watch him drive off.

Even still, the solitude felt important. It scared me, but that's exactly why I'd chosen it. I didn't want to be afraid of the very thing I'd be stuck with for the rest of my life: myself. I'd much rather enjoy it, and to enjoy it, it seemed I had to learn it and know it well. Solitude was the best place to do that work.

I was walking out of Royston when an old man stopped me on the sidewalk outside his antiques shop. His molars were filled with gold. A red polo shirt stretched tightly across his massive chest—I could tell he'd once been an ox—and he'd combed his white hair back neatly.

"Where are you going?" he asked me, nodding at my backpack.

I said I was just walking, east to west, probably all the way across the United States but I wasn't sure yet. I showed him the sign I wore on my backpack—WALKING TO LISTEN—and explained that

solitude

I was gathering stories and advice from the people I met along the way. The old man was intrigued, and we talked for a while on the sidewalk. The conversation was even better than breakfast, food for a soul that hungered for company, because Penn was gone and I was alone again and I wasn't ready for that yet. The solitude had been so satisfying the night before, but now it was sending me into a quiet panic. It happened that way sometimes, when all I wanted was to talk to somebody, or even just listen; anyone would do, anyone at all. That morning, it was the old man. We didn't talk about anything special, but that was fine because, for me, it wasn't really about what was being said. It was just about being together, that was all—two Americans in a little town in Georgia; two humans on a big, blue planet; two earthlings in a vast cosmos.

When I began my cross-country walkabout, I didn't know where I was going, how long I'd be gone, or what would happen along the way. I knew how I'd get there, though: I'd walk. And I knew why I was walking: I wanted to learn what it actually meant to come of age, to transform into the adult who would carry me through the rest of my life. I wanted to meet that man. Who was he? What did he know? How would he finally become himself, and where did he belong?

Sometimes, this search felt urgent. I was twenty-three years old. Soon, I'd be thirty-three, and then forty-three, and I had no idea how I was going to do it, though my life was already in motion. There was no turning back. I needed information and experience, some kind of rudder that would help me navigate whatever lay ahead.

I wore the WALKING TO LISTEN sign because I hoped people would help guide me through these questions, and others. Everyone was to be my teacher in some way, that's how I saw it. The walk would be like a graduate program in the human experience,

an initiation into the adulthood I still felt wasn't mine. I'd brought along an audio recorder to capture whatever it was people had to say. Over and over again I asked, "What would you tell your twenty-three-year-old self?" I figured if I walked well and listened close, there was a chance I'd find out what I needed to know. I'd walked over a million footsteps to get to Royston, Georgia, and I'd walk millions more if I had to.

When I told the man I had to get going, he asked me to wait. He rushed into his shop and came out a few seconds later holding a polished cane the color of dark amber. "It's strong," he said. "Hickory wood. Good for hitting the dogs away." He held it out for me to take. "Remember me."

I imagined the old man waking up that morning in the glow of dawn, walking out to the front porch with his black coffee steaming. I could see him staring in silence at the winter hills. What thoughts greeted him when he awoke each day? Maybe he felt he'd been a young man just a few days before, and that it had all gone so quickly, and that there was so much forgotten. Maybe he thought he'd be forgotten, too.

His name was Ernest Jackson. Four years later, I do remember him, but he's fading fast. He's getting hazier and hazier in my mind, and soon I won't be able to recall anything at all about him. This forgetting disturbs me—the good-bye implied by hello, the inevitable letting go, the dying that makes living possible. Best to remember everything while I still can, especially them, all the people I met on this walk, and the ones who came before and after, too. In remembering them, I remember myself—how they've contributed to the making of me, and I to the making of them, and how we continue to make one another even now. I remember how impossible it is to be truly alone (though loneliness would have me believe otherwise), how nothing exists on its own. I remember that

I am nothing if not connected to all of these people, and to you, whoever you are, and that we're all walking together, like it or not, and that to deny this is just another form of forgetting. But maybe the forgetting is a part of the remembering. After all, how can I remember if I haven't forgotten first?

"Remember me," Ernest Jackson said, and that's what I want to do here. Remember.

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*KEVIN JORNLIN, Wells Fargo area manager and one of my uncles  
CHADDS FORD, PENNSYLVANIA, at the kitchen table in my  
mom's house*

*OCTOBER, right before I set out to walk*

*"You can eat maggots out there on the road, you know. They have  
great protein. And drink your own urine. It'll keep you hydrated. I  
want urine and maggots or else you failed."*

## Chapter One

## “Don’t trust anybody.”

I was walking on the train tracks outside Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, when I first saw them, four men in the distance sitting on the rails. I looked around: forest to the north, vacant industrial lots to the south, no one else in sight and no one in shouting distance. *Who hangs out on the train tracks outside of town?* Two hours into my walk, seven miles from home, and I was going to get robbed, shot, and left for dead. This seemed quite certain. *Maybe I should turn back*, I thought, but my feet kept moving.

The same set of train tracks ran right through my backyard, and the plan had been to follow them for twenty-five miles into Maryland. It was better than walking on the road. I wasn’t ready for the road on day one. Too much exposure. Too much noise. The train tracks wended through a serene otherworld—forests and farmland and suburban backyards. Only an occasional freight train split the silence, and it ran safely slow, about as fast as I could run. It was a good place to start the walk. Even the industrial mess outside town had seemed peaceful, until now, with the four men ahead. One of them noticed me, and then the other three turned their heads my way. *Shit.*

Two hours earlier, my mom’s landlord, Bob, had chased me down in his car to tell me I shouldn’t be doing this. I didn’t recognize him when he first pulled off the road. Whoever he was, I assumed he must’ve seen my WALKING TO LISTEN sign. Clearly he

had something important to tell me because he had to bushwhack through dense underbrush to reach me.

Then I saw that it was Bob—rider of motorcycles, builder of houses, unsmiling veteran of the Philadelphia police force. He wore a sharp goatee and a grim look on his face. But then again he always wore that look. Bob kept an old trailer in our backyard—his backyard, technically—and he was often out there tinkering in his graveyard of derelict machinery, piling more branches on the brush pile to burn someday. We’d wave to each other, but didn’t talk much, most of the time.

“Hi, Bob,” I said as he joined me on the train tracks. “What a coincidence.”

“It’s not a coincidence,” Bob said. He sounded, as usual, quite somber. “Your mom’s a wreck back at the house. You don’t have to do this.”

I looked down at his feet, unsure of whether to thank him for coming or to apologize. Instead, I just said, “Yeah.”

“This can be six months or it can be six hours,” he said, still looking at me. Maybe he felt some sort of fatherly responsibility. My own dad wasn’t there to stop me. He lived across the state of Pennsylvania, seven hours away. I only saw him a few times a year these days.

“I know,” I said to Bob. “We’ll see what happens.”

“Do you have a knife?” he asked. Before I could tell him I did, he took out a folding-blade pocketknife, a heavy Winchester blade.

“Here, take this. You’re on your own now. Don’t trust anybody.”

I didn’t mention that that was kind of the whole point, to trust in people, to listen to them; closing myself off would be a contradiction of the entire endeavor. Instead, I just said thanks and told him I’d be thinking of him out there on the road.

“Don’t think of me,” he said, “think of your mother.”

Six miles later, I could feel Bob's knife in my pocket as I walked toward the four men outside Kennett Square. Maybe I'd have to use it after all. I'd never been in a fight before. The closest I'd ever come was on the wrestling mat in high school, and although there was a kind of primal ferocity in the ring, there were also referees, and plus, the wrestlers all wore sparkly singlets that looked a lot like leotards. It's hard to take yourself seriously in a leotard, and you have to take yourself quite seriously to fight. This was different. It did feel serious. Would I really stab one of these guys if it came down to it?

My body felt fresh, ready to spring; I hadn't been walking long enough for it to hurt yet. Instead, everything just felt awkward. I'd loaded fifty pounds of stuff into my backpack that morning, and all of it lurched behind me now, an unraveling mess. A flaccid water bladder bowed out of a side pocket. My cooking pot swung madly with each step, clanging against my mug. My mandolin kept slipping out of position. An American flag poked me on the right side, and an Earth flag poked me on the left. I felt like a complete clown, a wannabe mountain man wading through the suburbs of Philly. I had no idea what I was doing. Surely the men could see that.

By the time I reached them they were all staring at me silently. One had a big potbelly and two had mustaches. They were Latino, and possibly homeless, and suddenly I was very aware of my whiteness, and how my freedom of movement was largely predicated on my skin color. My freedom of mind, too. How would it have been different walking out my back door into the American unknown, alone, if I were a person of color? A woman? Not that it would've been impossible. Arguably the most famous of all American transcontinental walkers was a woman—Mildred Norman, also known as "Peace Pilgrim"—and one of my own heroes was John Francis, "Planetwalker," a black environmentalist who spent twenty-two

years walking, seventeen of them under a vow of silence. When I was a senior in college, I'd heard Dr. Francis give a lecture about his walk that became one of the inspirations for my own. Clearly, you didn't have to be a white male to walk across America in 2011, but to anyone even just halfway willing to look at the prejudice in this country, it was just as clear that being a white male certainly helped. Before I even left home, my walk had already been made easier by the unmerited social privilege of living in a white male's body: I hadn't had nightmares of getting raped or abducted on the road, and I wasn't utterly paralyzed by fear of the police, or by the hordes of Americans still waving their Confederate flags. I wouldn't be immune from violence while I walked, but the odds of survival and success were stacked in my favor, and at some level I knew that, and counted on it. That's what racism and sexism looked like today, that surreptitiously yet overwhelmingly lopsided distribution of privilege. What did that mean? It meant it might take generations before a young black man could walk out his back door as unconcerned as I had, or until a young woman could walk alone on the highway without dread, free in her mind and body. Where was *that* America? It wasn't the one I'd just begun to walk across, as much as I wished it were.

At the same time, though, my whiteness might also make me a target in some places. This could be one of those places, on the train tracks outside town coming up on the Latino guys. I wondered, in some wordless place, if perhaps these guys didn't like white boys like me. They were all looking my way. What were they thinking?

I nodded and said hello. The men appeared confused. I must have appeared confused, too. Possibly clinically confused. We all stood there for a second looking at one another, and then one of the men asked me in heavily accented English: "What are you doing?"



I said I was walking across America. It sounded ridiculous because I hadn't even walked ten miles yet, but they didn't know that.

"I'm listening to people's stories along the way," I said, "so, 'walking to listen.'" I showed them my homemade sign as if it gave me some sort of credibility.

They didn't seem convinced. The man who'd asked the question looked at the guy who was sitting on a pile of railroad ties. He said something in Spanish—my death sentence, no doubt—and the guy on the ties began looking for something in a big plastic bin at his side. Maybe it was time to go.

Before I could run away—or waddle, as running would have been impossible with my backpack—the guy pulled out an unopened package of cookies and a few apple juice boxes. He gestured for me to take them, and to come sit with him on the railroad ties. I did, and the other three joined us. Their names were Martín, Sergio, Pedro, and Gabriel. I played a song on my mandolin, then Martín took out a fifth of Nikolai vodka and passed it around.

"You got a credit card or something?" Martín asked at one point.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm not carrying much cash."

"Good, because we could just snatch it." He made a gun with his fingers. "But we're not that kind of people. Friends. Friends."

Everything took on a surreal sheen. I'd wanted to live this kind of story for as long as I could remember, a story in which a traveler casts off into the big unknown with nothing more than a loaded pack, and meets strangers on the road, and breaks bread with those strangers, learning the unique language of their lives before casting off into the big unknown again. It was an ancient kind of human experience, that of the pilgrim, the wayfarer, but as an American Millennial and a son of suburbia, it felt like a lost

inheritance. Pilgrimages were something to study from a safe and scholarly distance, and wayfaring journeys were the hackneyed stuff of Hollywood, or best experienced in the isolation of your bedroom on the PS3, or in books not unlike this one. Journeys and pilgrimages; this was not common practice in the American middle class. Such things required a catalyst of existential urgency and curiosity that a lifestyle of constant comfort and consumption suppressed. I was comfortable, and secure enough. There was no reason I should want to set out and seek my fortune, because I already had the well-mapped path that would probably lead me to one. \*\*\*

But still, I felt something was missing on that path, and it had nothing to do with money or accumulation or achievement. It had something to do with the fact that I was a living mystery, and so were all of the neighbors I'd never met, and none of us were gathering together to discuss that astonishing phenomenon, the phenomenon of our existence and all the questions that came with it. No one seemed to care. No one even seemed to notice. Each of us was a cosmic improbability, brought into this life and sentenced to experience it, to suffer it when necessary, and there was precious little reflection about any of that, precious little support. And if you did need support, something wasn't quite right with you; you were weak or ill or just a little dense. Maybe, in my neighborhood, we were all too busy working to really be there for one another, too busy entertaining ourselves. Or maybe we desperately longed to connect, to share in the beauty and the sorrow of this fleeting life together, offline, face to face, but we just didn't know how, and so we stayed strangers and pretended that wasn't strange.

I couldn't live my life that way, but maybe I already was. When I finally graduated from college, I felt I had to do something drastic to ensure that I wasn't. I had to set off on a journey, go on a

pilgrimage, *something*. It felt a little contrived, almost cliché, but it also felt necessary. A shock to the system was required, something to zap me out of the habit of forgetting, of believing that life could ever be unremarkable or mundane.

“Every one of us has an extraordinary story worth hearing, and I’m walking the country to listen.” I wrote this on my travel blog a few weeks after I started walking. “There’s no such thing as the Average Joe, no such thing as a boring, uninteresting, unexceptional life.” I chose this as the premise for my walk, but the only problem was I didn’t believe it about myself. Not really. Bob the landlord couldn’t have said it much clearer: *You don’t have to do this*. I dismissed him then, but now I think I understand him better. He was saying, “You don’t have to do this to be enough.” But I didn’t hear that at the time, even though I was wearing a sign that said I was listening. So I kept walking.

I was still sitting on the railroad ties with the four men, playing mandolin and sipping vodka, when the sky darkened and thunderheads began to roll in from the west. A few minutes later we saw a misty gray wall rushing toward us.

“Hurry up!” Martín said. “It’s coming! It’s coming!” Pedro was already gone. Gabriel and Sergio were running through the field beside the tracks, heading for the trees. The thunderheads hemorrhaged above us and I was soaked in seconds.

“Come with us,” Martín said. “We’ll take you to our home.”

Bob’s knife was heavy in my pocket. But the cookies and the apple juice seemed like a good sign. And the vodka was a good sign, too, or maybe not, but before I could think about it anymore I followed Martín off the tracks, across the field, and into the forest. *I’m walking across America*, I thought. *What the hell, why not?*

It was a short walk to a clearing in the trees where the men had set up a camp. Each one of them had his own shelter. There were blue tarps for roofs and wood pallets for walls, and everything was reinforced by bungee cords and propped-up bicycles. We were right behind a strip mall I’d been to many times before. How often had I eaten lunch at the sandwich shop on the other side, clueless?

Martín invited me into his shelter. The two of us barely fit inside. “Sit, sit,” he said, pointing to his mattress. He began sifting through several boxes until he found what he was looking for: a pair of sweatpants, dry and clean. He offered them to me. When I said I didn’t need them, he stripped down to his underwear, his hairy potbelly exposed for a second, and then he put on the sweatpants himself, along with a new T-shirt.

We couldn’t talk much because his English was terrible and my Spanish was far worse, but still, the connection was strangely intimate. Martín began showing me his stuff: photographs of his teenage daughter, a painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a poster of three half-naked Budweiser models. I showed him a picture of my family. “Your sister is beautiful,” he said, “very beautiful.” Then, we settled in to wait out the rain with more mandolin and vodka. The vodka burned.

“It’s a storm outside and a storm inside,” Martín said when I coughed.

The rain didn’t last too long, and I hardly got drunk at all. Stepping outside again, a good-bye hung heavily in the air. None of us quite knew how to part from our brief and bizarre confluence. I wanted to hold on to it for just a little bit longer. Maybe they did, too.

“So, walking to listen,” Martín said. “Okay, okay.”

“What do you think?” I asked.

“It’s your choice, man,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“What do you think of Americans?” I said, even though Martín was American himself. He’d shown me his ID when I took out my recorder to interview him in his hut, perhaps thinking I might be an undercover cop.

→ “Some good, some bad,” he said. “It’s the same with Mexicans. It’s the same with everybody.”

Standing in the middle of the camp, I looked around me. Crushed beer cans littered the hard, wet earth, and the jury-rigged huts leaned. A grill slowly rusted on arthritic legs. It was a place of exile, and it couldn’t have been more different from where I’d begun that morning: the suburban home-office of a single mother/yoga teacher/massage therapist. But even still, it almost felt like home, a safe shelter when I needed it, at the beginning of a walk I didn’t know how to walk yet.

Before I left, Martín gave me an orange pepper that set my tongue on fire and then sliced up a homegrown prickly pear. *Tuna*, he called it. It was sweet and it put out the burn.

“God bless you,” Martín said, shaking my hand, “and be careful. Sleep with a knife, *o una pistola*.” Once again, he made a gun with his fingers.

Back on the train tracks, I walked through an arching tunnel of sycamore and oak, maple and beech, all of it blazing with autumn. I passed stinking mushroom houses and fertilizer plants where plows worked the black, steaming stuff into head-high rows. I’d walked these tracks before, but never this far, and everything seemed different now, infused with a significance that was inexplicable but undeniable. Three horses turned to hold my gaze. A Mennonite man plowed his field with children in tow. An animal was dead on the tracks, split by the train and mashed beyond recognition. Fields of soybeans shivered in the wind.

By dusk, my pack had ravaged my shoulders, and I had two blisters that throbbed like they were alive. I hardly noticed. The

light was a lustrous gold as the sun sank, and the tracks ahead were glowing.

I thought about my mom. She was not a wreck, like Bob had said. Far from it. Mom has described herself as a “Roman centurion” when it comes to her three children, and a “she-wolf.” In other words, she doesn’t wreck easily. But she couldn’t fight for me now, and that was probably hard for her. Surely she knew I couldn’t be walking without her, though. We were so close that there were times it seemed she could read my mind. I was the oldest of three, and she was like that with each one of us. After the divorce, we all just got closer. All of us except my dad. In an instant, he became a stranger. I was fifteen, old enough for a painful initiation into the human experience. Much of my wanderlust came from that pain, although I hardly ever thought about that connection. That was the trick: Don’t think about it. Better to wander. Better to walk.

We left Dad in Erie, Pennsylvania, right after the split and moved across the state, landing in Bob’s rental house outside Philadelphia. Dad would come to visit us whenever he could, bringing with him the pain I preferred to avoid. The scene was always the same: hours of arguing and squirming, and then the long silences when no one knew what else to say. Mom’s cutting voice. Dad’s bitter eyes. My sister, Caitlin, three years younger, doing most of my crying for me. Luke, nine years younger, hiding in his room. I would disappear for hours, afraid that I’d tear the house apart if I stayed, or tear Dad apart. So many families break up these days; you’d think you might be prepared for the shock when it happens to yours. But you can’t prepare yourself for something like that, not really, especially if everything seems fine until the moment they tell you it’s happening. I certainly wasn’t prepared,

and I didn't know how to handle it, so I didn't. Instead, I'd walk for miles on the train tracks, but it was never far enough. The trains ran so slowly that the temptation was excruciating, especially when Dad was around for a visit. It would've been so easy to catch one and ride off into something else, anything else.

The train tracks weren't just an escape from the pain, though. They were an escape from suburbia. It didn't feel like home to me. I didn't know where my home was anymore, and in this void my wanderlust blossomed. The word "wander," I discovered, was an anagram of my first name. *Wander*. My own name was a command. I didn't know what it meant to wander, but I liked the sound of it. It had something to do with a lightness of being, a receptive approach to each new moment that might take you anywhere. Obstacles didn't exist because there was nowhere in particular to get to. Each place was just as good as the next. The wanderer never lingered too long, always moving onward and yet always here. I wanted to live that way, the wander way, so I wandered the train tracks behind Mom's house. Or I tried to. I never fully let go, free of everything but the movement.

One summer, I found an abandoned camp on the train tracks under a culvert in dense woods. Strewn across the dirt floor were the remnants of someone's life: a filthy comforter, a fire-stained pot, a ratty oilskin jacket. It seemed a whole other world, and I wanted to be a part of it, if only for a moment. I wanted to know who had lived there, and where they'd come from, what they'd seen. It made me wonder: If a single square mile in suburban Pennsylvania contained two worlds as different as my home and the camp of this unknown vagabond, then how many different worlds did the continent contain? How many worlds did the Earth contain?

And then I discovered Walt Whitman in college: "Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? Have you reckon'd the earth

much?" After Whitman, there was no escaping this urge to go reckon the earth much. Jack Kerouac fanned the flames, too, but he was drunk all the time, reckless and crazed. I didn't trust him as a source of reliable guidance. Whitman was a bit crazed himself: "Ranting and frothing in my insane crisis," he wrote, "... I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." The poet was unhinged, no doubt, but he wasn't lost like Kerouac seemed to be, so I chose him as my guide.

Mom was there for all of this, watching and waiting. She wasn't surprised when I told her I was going to leave home and just walk for a while, but she wasn't thrilled, either.

"I'm mad at you," she'd said before I hugged her good-bye that morning. "It feels like I'm being blown open again, like when you were born."

We ate breakfast together in the living room, just the two of us. Caitlin and Luke were still sleeping. Mom had made surprises, one of her specialties: marshmallow-stuffed Pillsbury croissants. In the heat of the oven, the marshmallows transformed into a sweet syrup, a liquid heart. Surprises were one of the constants she brought with us wherever we moved—the apartments in Chicago, the rental houses outside Philly, the home she and my dad bought in Erie a few years before the divorce. We never really had our own place, so instead Mom brought home with us.

That morning she'd made our lattes, too. She'd never bothered to learn how to use the steam wand properly, so she always microwaved them to get them hot enough. This used to annoy me, but at the table I realized I was going to miss this about her. I was going to miss her. I looked at her now. Her long hair was gray, almost white, and her face was furrowed. The past eight years had been hard on her. I could see it in her body. She'd lost so much weight she

was almost frail. But even still, I felt safe around her. She taught yoga and meditation, and yet, she would've annihilated anyone who threatened her kids. The thought of never seeing her again was so unimaginable I couldn't think it, even if I tried.

She read me a poem over breakfast, one by the Sufi mystic Rumi. "So don't be timid," she read. "Load the ship and set out. No one knows for certain whether the vessel will sink or reach the harbor."

I wondered what it would look like, in my case, to sink. And the harbor. I wondered about that, too.

"Like it or not, Andrew, it *is* about breaking this hold that death has on us," Mom said. I had my recorder rolling—the first interview. "You might not be thinking that, but you're taking risks. You're working me hard. And I feel like I'm being blown up again. I really do. I'm living."

After breakfast, I hoisted on my backpack and the two of us walked out to the train tracks behind the house. Caitlin and Luke watched from the back porch, still in their pajamas. Mom insisted on taking my picture. One picture became a dozen, and I began to feel like a six-year-old on his first day of school—I had the backpack and everything.

"God, would you just hurry up and get on your journey?! Let's take as many pictures as possible, jeez!"

This was Luke, thirteen years old, shouting from the back porch, pissed off that he'd had to get up early for this. In an instant, the romance of my epic departure dissolved. I would've called him an asshole, but I was grateful for the excuse to just get going.

I hugged Mom good-bye. When I was a hundred yards down the tracks she shouted at me to lift up my arms for one last picture. I didn't stop, and I didn't turn around, but I did raise my arms, and it was only then that I cried, but I was laughing, too.

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*WOODY CURRY, a Vietnam veteran and clinical therapist  
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND, in his office before dinner at the  
Baltimore Station, a residential treatment center  
OCTOBER, one week into the walk*

*"How do you think it feels to go and put your life on the line for two and a half years and come back to find out everybody thinks you're wrong? What do you think that does to all the shit you just went through? When you come back and everybody thinks you're some goddamn, crazy-ass, drug-addicted whatever? Shit. Made me pretty angry. My whole foundation was gone. Nothing to latch on to. Not a damn thing. I wound up in a mental institution for six or seven years off and on, and drug detoxes, and jails, and the streets, and homeless, and all of this trying to find out what was real. I needed to believe in something, and I needed to own something, and I needed to control something as an indication that I was real. So when I let go of that, then all the shit that came with it went, too. And it came back that I am whoever the fuck I feel like thinking, and that ain't got shit to do with me. What's real is what I'm experiencing and feeling, that's what's real, and my perception isn't real. That's my perception of what's real. But who is it that's perceiving, right? Fact of it is, there's nothing there."*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"No thing. I'm an activity. There's only one thing. I'm just a part of that one thing, doing exactly what that thing does."*

*"Doing that Woody Curry thing."*

*“That’s what I call it, but it’s no different from what everybody else does. I just got my own style. That’s what makes it fun. I call the universe my playground. I say, ‘This place is like Disneyland,’ and I ain’t bullshitting. I can get on a ride and scare the shit out of me, and then get off of that and relax, and then go climb on another one goddammit, and that’s all it is. I’m the rider of the universe. But most people feel powerless because they see things outside of them being in control.*

*“I say, ‘In control of what? They’re not in control of your choices. They’re not in control of what you accept or reject. You see your life as being at the whims of some power greater than you, but I want to know, what fucking power is there in the universe greater than you when you can accept or reject any damn thing coming at you? Now that is the ultimate power.’ I ask people what they’re afraid of and they don’t even know. All they know is their fear. I say, ‘Don’t worry, that’s called free-floating anxiety. You’ll find some shit to hook it up on.’*

*“You feel the same way I felt at your age, that, ‘I gotta know, and what I gotta know is why, and I also have to know what it all means.’ Well, it means whatever the fuck you want it to mean. It’s not out there, what you’re looking for. It’s in you. It’s been there all along. It’s just yours. Shakespeare said that shit a long time ago. It’s been said for ages. It says so in Genesis: God created the heaven and the earth and everything in it, then created man in his own image. So if you’re in his image, then it stands to reason that you create the heaven and the earth and everything that’s in it. That’s what you do. So you’re the creator of this thing you’re looking at, this thing you call the world.*

*“So what’s the problem? Why are you looking for what’s happening? You happening, goddammit. Nothing happening to you. You happening to it. You don’t know who you are, and that’s what your search is. You’re gonna hear it. When you arrive at wherever you’re*

*going, that’s where you’re gonna be, and you’ll see, just like I did. You’re gonna find the same shit going on everywhere. But you will be a much wiser person. And I think you’ll have a whole lot less stress and questions when you get finished. Yeah, you’ll know. You’ll know who you are, because that’s what you’re looking for anyway. This is just the vehicle that you chose to find out.”*

## Chapter Two

## "You should start looking for another job."

A few months before I started walking, I was a senior at Middlebury College in the state of Vermont, where the rivers have been carving cliffs into the Green Mountains for millennia. My friends and I would often seek out those cliffs, climb them, and then leap off into the flowing water below. There was something irresistible to me about stepping out onto that brink where the rock ended and the air began. And then the launch. The letting go. It felt like the threshold between life and death, and once or twice it actually was. Those quick plummeting seconds connected me to the tremendous gravity of being fully alive, and to the forgettable fact that I often wasn't.

It might have been that I felt more alive falling through the air over a cold mountain river than I did sitting in most classrooms, or doing keg stands to a chorus of "Eight! Nine! Ten! Eleven! Eleven! Eleven! Eleven!" chanted by my rugby buddies. There was a lot to learn in college, certainly, and much of it had nothing to do with the course curriculum. It was a revelation, for example, when I realized that it was actually okay to spend a Friday night alone in the swaying crown of a pine tree, sailing the sky—that it didn't necessarily mean I was sad or sick or missing out. Quite the opposite, in fact. I didn't learn that one till I'd just about graduated, though. First, I had to learn how to shotgun beer, how to make apple pie cocktails directly inside my mouth, how many apple pie

cocktails it took for me to throw up, and how interested I seemed to be in throwing up on the weekends, until I finally wasn't.

I learned a little bit about love, too. And then when she broke up with me after two years, I learned about heartbreak. That's when I took to the pine trees at night and realized that I liked it there, that being alone in the dark wasn't something to be afraid of.

One semester, I heard about a class on historiography that was taught by a beloved professor. It was rumored the class would change you forever. I wanted that, to be changed, enlightened in some lasting way. That kind of class was the reason I'd come to college; I wanted a teacher who'd show me how to do the work of being human. I'd found a few such teachers, and we did some of that work obliquely, through the middlemen of poetry, philosophy, and creative writing. But I wanted a full immersion without the degrees of separation afforded by theories and narratives, an apprenticeship to the craft of navigating life, not a seminar in how a bunch of dead people had done it. You could only get so far by reading the old poets, philosophers, and writers. You had to experience it, whatever it was they were talking about, know it for yourself. Maybe this historiography class would show me how. The class was in high demand, so every applicant had to write an entry essay. The only detail I remember from my essay is a metaphor I made about a pencil. I was a pencil, I said, but I was blunt. This class would sharpen me into the well-honed pencil I had always wanted to be. Needless to say, I never heard back from the professor.

Although the pencil metaphor fell a bit flat, it was made in earnest, and in my last semester at Middlebury I still had that feeling of bluntness. I was operating this incredibly complex biochemical, psycho-emotional machine that thought things and felt things, and wondered and worried, and just wanted to understand what the hell was going on. I was this machine, in fact, but I'd

the liberal arts

never read the owner's manual, and I still hadn't found the class that would show me how. If those classes existed, I was too dull to find them. Or maybe I had found them and just wasn't asking the right questions.

With just a few months before graduation, I set out to interview a long list of men about what it meant to come of age, for my senior essay. I interviewed men because I was supposed to be a man but I didn't feel like one. And I couldn't talk to my dad about it. I didn't trust him as a source of reliable guidance, not after some of the choices he'd made.

"Coming of age, to me, is trying to get a balance," Marc Lapin told me. He was one of my environmental studies professors. "It's about integrating parts of yourself that you feel alienated from, and I think it's recognizing, 'I don't have to do more to be who I am.' Why is there so much anxiety today? What makes people anxious? It's the idea that what they're doing isn't right or okay. There's no trust in self."

I sat down with Greg Sharrow, a folklorist in town. "My shtick now is about empathy," he said. "I want to be able to imaginatively enter into someone's experience, understand where they're coming from, and if they're doing something hurtful to me, I want to be able to love them for their pain. Pretty much everyone experiences some degree of damage as a kid growing up, and that damage makes it hard for people to know themselves. People become stuck, stuck in their own pain. So coming of age, it's the whole business of growing into yourself."

I met with Jonathan Miller-Lane, an aikido sensei and a professor of education. "At its best, I think coming of age is a way in which an individual is shown that a community cares for him or her. It's not only the community recognizing this young adolescent as being a member of us, but the child has to look up and

Three Wise Men

realize, 'Oh, I'm a part of this. I didn't realize all these people cared about me.'"

As I gathered interviews, my urgency increased. Graduation loomed. I'd applied for a Watson fellowship to continue studying the process of growing up, but the college committee rejected my proposal in the first round. I'd wanted to visit indigenous communities around the world to see how they guided their young people into adulthood, and compare those traditions to some of the mainstream methodologies in the United States, which had left me with so many unanswered questions. In my experience, there wasn't a sustained and personal conversation about what it meant to come of age. There wasn't a ritual of any kind, something to catalyze the transformation and mark it. The freshman-year initiation into my all-male cappella group might've been the closest thing I got. I had to dress up in a bra and skirt, submit to getting splattered with condiments and fish oil, sing a song in the student union to a very confused crowd, and then get hammered if I wanted to, which I did. It was a wild night, but perhaps not the best model for manhood. We were a tribe of boys. Lots of the full-grown alums were, too. A middle-aged tenor came to one of our parties my freshman year. We were both wasted. "Fuck anything that moves," he advised me, "while you still can," and then he slapped me in the face—it was a forehand, level five or six out of ten. Then he told me to give him a backhand eight, straight to the cheek. I obliged. It was the blind leading the blind.

Before graduation, I decided I'd do my fellowship project anyway, just without the fellowship. I'd made contact with Malidoma Somé, a shaman with a Brandeis Ph.D., from the Dagara tribe in Burkina Faso; I'd read one of his books and tracked him down in upstate New York. He said I could live and study with his uncle in the village where he had grown up. This sounded perfect. Surely I'd discover something important that far away from anything I'd ever known.



One of my last interviews for my senior essay was with Jeff Howarth, a geography professor.

“The whole process of coming of age has to do with developing the ability to shift your focus from yourself to other people,” he said. “It seems to be opening yourself up to not being so self-involved. It’s about being able to recognize other people’s needs as you’re able to recognize your own. There comes a point when you’ve come of age that you’re no longer disappointed by people. You’re just empathetic for people. One way to think of it is when a kid develops parental love for his parents. It’s when you realize your authority figures have faults, and you’re no longer rebelling against those faults.”

Jeff told me I should turn the lens on myself for the project. What did I think about coming of age? Where did I fit into the story? I realized I should probably interview my dad. We’d never tried anything quite like that. I decided to wait until I was ready.

A couple days after graduation, I was on a lobster boat in Cape Cod Bay stuffing bait bags full of fish skins. The plan was to make a lot of money as quickly as possible and then fly to West Africa. There was no time to lose. I could only put off my tuition debt for so long.

I’d never worked on a fishing boat before. It was nothing like college, and I loved it. My captain, Dan, was a stout man who didn’t talk much. He was good-humored mostly, but sometimes grim. When I first met him I asked if I should call him Captain Dan or just Captain.

“I’m far from a captain,” he said, even though that wasn’t true. “I’m just a guy with a boat. Call me Dan.”

The two of us spent long hours out on the silver water. Sometimes we’d long-line for dogfish—small sand sharks. They

ascended from the depths on the three-hundred-hook lines like murky ghosts, their white bellies flashing as they rose. My job was to gaff them if they slipped off, and then pile the writhing bodies into boxes in the stern. By the end of each day, my orange coveralls were smeared with blood and yellow embryonic fluid from the fetuses the mothers aborted as they died. At first, I tossed these fetuses over the gunwale, hoping they might survive somehow. The seagulls loved that.

“It’s pretty gross,” Dan said on my first day. “The whole fishery’s pretty gross.”

I got used to it. We hauled hundreds of lobster traps, and I banded thousands of crustaceans that summer, mesmerized by the rainbows that shined across their shells. Stuffing the bait bags, hauling the traps, banding the lobsters—after a few hours my mind would get lost in the work and the wind and the hungry, heaving sea.

We always went to the bar before going home. I was just a sternman, but Dan let me join the captains’ club, the end of the bar where only the fishermen sat. He didn’t have any kids, and my dad was far away, and we got kind of close, despite the fact that we both seemed to be speaking different languages sometimes. We’d hang at the bar for hours, trash talking each other, “zooing” the other captains, sipping Bud Lite.

A few weeks into the summer, I started a storytelling blog about my fishing experience, inspired by the newness of it. When I told Dan about it, though, he wasn’t pleased. After that first conversation, we didn’t talk about it. Neither of us seemed to know how. I wasn’t invited to the bar anymore, but I still kept writing stories on the blog, foolishly, and then on the first day of September Dan went fishing without me. He didn’t respond to any of my texts. I went to his house that night and found him in his living room, watching a boxing match.

reminds me of Wieg's  
"Snowy Egrets"

"What's going on?" I asked him.

"Why don't you tell me?" he said.

"Well, you went fishing without me today."

He looked at me for a second, and then he said, "I think you should start looking for another job."

It must have been the blog, but he never told me outright. Had I insulted him? Did he feel betrayed? I should have been more aware of the clash of sensibilities that my blog had initiated. But I wasn't, and he didn't want to talk about it. If you're a fisherman and you set your traps in someone else's waters, there won't be a truth and reconciliation process. You'll just get your buoys cut. Don't come back. It was one version of American masculinity that I'd had little experience with.

I'd been planning on fishing until December. Now, I didn't have the money I needed to get to West Africa. I didn't have any job prospects. I didn't have a backup plan. I did have all the questions I was seeking to answer, though, and the wanderlust, and I couldn't just forget about the whole thing. And I couldn't stay at home, either. I was now a college graduate living at his mom's house, and as much as I loved my mother, that wasn't going to wash.

A week after I got fired, I hatched a desperate plan. I started wondering what it would be like to walk out my back door and just keep going. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. It still does, five years later. Walking is deep in the dirt bones of this country. It's practically a religion. Each year, thousands of modern-day American pilgrims thru-hike the long-distance trails. They're always out there, the walkers, hauling around the great weight of their wondering. And why not? Walking is an ancestral itch, evolution's urge. North Americans have been doing it for centuries. The Plains tribes were perambulatory by tradition. Others walked because they were forced to: the Navajo and their

1864

1830

Long Walk, the Cherokee's Trail of Tears. And then there were the pioneers, the Mormon refugees, the runaway slaves, the civil rights marchers, the peace activists, the wandering vagabonds of the beat and hippie eras. Plenty of people had walked before me. Why not take my place among them? I'd be in good company, even if I were alone. And plus, walking was free. I couldn't afford much else.

I had six weeks to prepare from the day I was fired. It was early autumn. If I left any later than mid-October I might freeze.

I took one training hike—a three-mile walk with two twenty-pound barbells in my backpack cushioned by some pillows. I quickly realized this was idiocy. I was already pathetically underprepared, so why bother?

Two weeks before I left, I told my friend Andrew—a fellow baritone—what I was about to do. He worked as a gear tester for *Outside Magazine*. He called his boss, and a few days later she sent me everything I needed. It was like Christmas came early, with a vengeance. The boxes kept coming. All the gear was worth more than I'd made that entire summer: boots, socks, pants, shirts, coat, rain gear, tent, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, water filter, sunglasses, backpack. Everything. I paid for none of it. It seemed like an omen from God, or maybe Santa Claus.

Before I left, I gave myself some rules:

I wouldn't take any rides to make forward progress. Walking only.

I wouldn't listen to music while I walked. No earbuds.

I'd use maps on the road. No smartphone.

I'd sleep in my tent unless someone took me in, camping with permission if possible, trespassing if necessary.

I'd keep to the roads, because I wanted to meet a diverse cross-section of people and the trails might be too self-selecting.

I'd stay as presentable as possible, because I wanted people to feel comfortable approaching me.

I'd take three poets as my guides: Walt Whitman (*Leaves of Grass*), Rainer Maria Rilke (*Letters to a Young Poet*), and Kahlil Gibran (*The Prophet*). I'd turn to them whenever I needed a boost of inspiration.

I'd view everyone as a teacher of some sort, and I'd interview anyone who would let me.

And the last rule: I'd walk until it felt like I should stop; until I broke my budget of four thousand dollars; or until I hit the Pacific Ocean. Whichever came first.

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*CYNTHIA SHANK, mother of a Green Beret serving in Afghanistan  
ROANOKE, VIRGINIA, at the dining room table in her friend Tina  
Cannon's house*

*NOVEMBER, almost a month into my walk*

*"When I write him I tell him, 'I'm so glad you're my son. I'm very proud of you and I love you. I'm your mom.' We always talked about how life is an adventure, something that you experience, you don't sit and watch. At eighteen he wanted to do this very badly, and then he came to us at twenty and said, 'It's a done deal. I am doing this.' That was really hard. And it's still hard, knowing that your son is willing to put himself in harm's way. So yeah, you can see the tears even now, three years later. It's still hard to think of your son making a choice that's a constant life threat.*

*"He's our quiet child, but he's our intense child. He's our silly guy who can also be dead serious. So, one of my questions to his recruiter, and still this is one of my biggest worries: I cannot see Caleb killing somebody. And I'm really concerned, worried, stressed about what that will do to his psyche if he comes face to face with somebody and he has to pick up his gun and shoot that person. He is a sensitive kid. He loves people and he would come home from school and be angry with teachers who would ridicule a student because they got the wrong answer. He does not like that. And so I think the hardest part will be to actually shoot someone and know that he's killed someone. I still worry about that. His recruiter was a really nice guy, but I kept asking him, 'What will happen with him once this happens?"*