

You Are My Sunshine.

A story of love,
promises, and
a really long
bike ride



Sean Dietrich

SEAN OF THE SOUTH

Praise for *You Are My Sunshine*

Sean Dietrich's sentences are the crack cocaine of literary humor. *You Are My Sunshine* is delivered with a style that would make Mark Twain jealous. Trust me: if you liked Lewis Grizzard, you will love Sean Dietrich!

—Andy Andrews, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Traveler's Gift, founder of WisdomHarbour.com

A perfect collision of southern wit and tissue-reaching truths. Sean and Jamie's story is authentic, raw, and inspiring. A must-read.

—Laura Jean Bell, host of *Y'all Podcast*

This book is more than a travel guide for the C&O trail. With his characteristic humor, insight, and talent, Sean shows us what it means to keep going . . . through a cancer diagnosis, during a global pandemic, or just over the ridge in the next difficult climb.

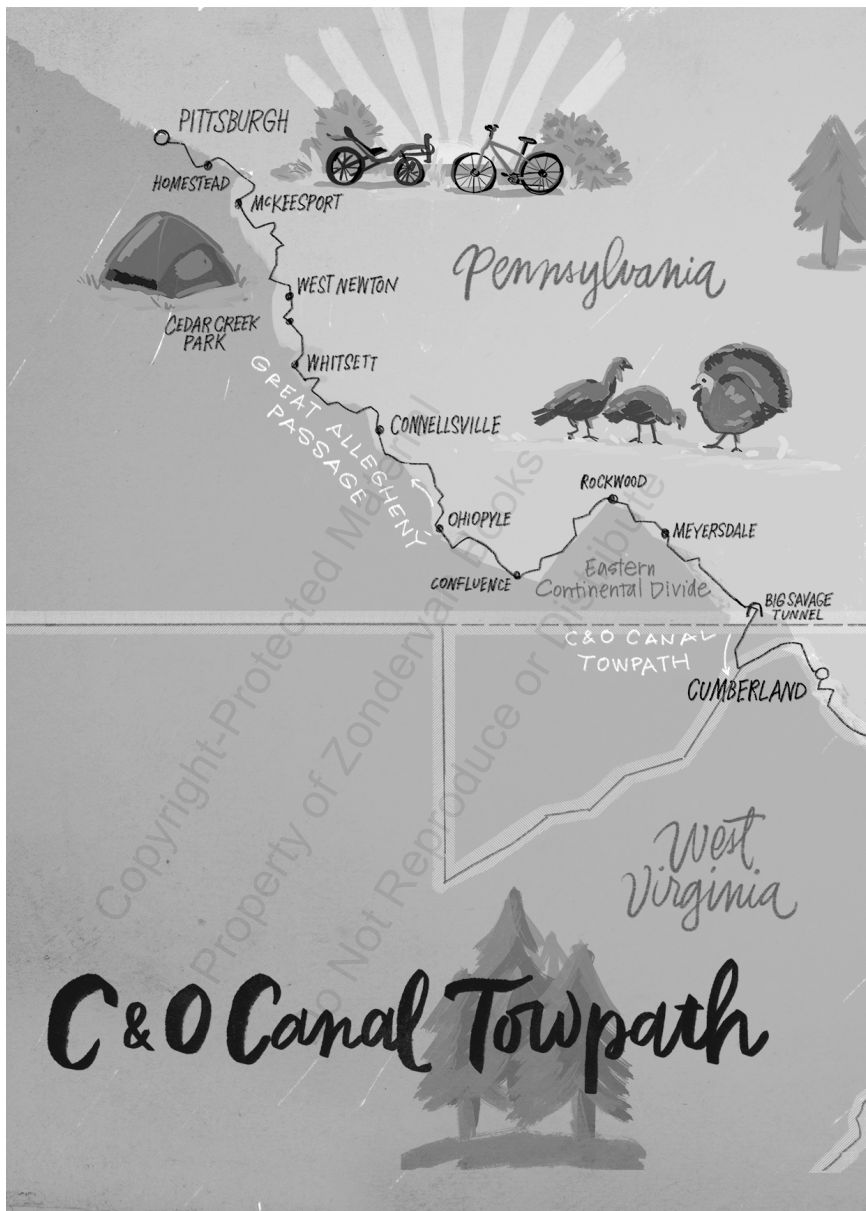
—Shawn Smucker, author of *The Weight of Memory*

Sean Dietrich is one of America's greatest living storytellers. His writing is full of heart, humor, and honesty. The world would be a better place if more people read Sean Dietrich's books. That's a fact. Thank the good Lord that Sean Dietrich writes a lot better than he looks. How he landed a woman like Jamie, I'll never know. Sean Dietrich has a gift for storytelling that makes me slightly envious. If I weren't so much better looking than Sean Dietrich, I'd be jealous of how well he writes.

—Christopher Thomas, founder of MADE SOUTH

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C&O Canal Towpath

great Allegheny Passage



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A story of love,
promises, and
a really long
bike ride



Sean Dietrich

SEAN OF THE SOUTH

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I'd like to introduce the band.

*To my dogs, Thelma Lou and Otis, without whom
this book would've been finished two years earlier.*

To Julie, for lending me her eyes.

*To Alex, without whom I would be
living in a refrigerator carton.*

*To Carolyn, for sticking with me, and for somehow
making me believe that I am a writer.*

To my late mother-in-law, who inspired the book title.

*And lastly, to my wife, who has never once
to my knowledge tried to kill me.*

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Contents

Our Two Heroes

xiii

Part 1: The Beginning

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>
1	12	20

Part 2: The Great Allegheny Passage

<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>
31	38	50

<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>9</u>
56	67	72

<u>10</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>12</u>
89	95	107

<u>13</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>15</u>
118	127	131

Part 3: The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Towpath

16

143

17

150

18

161

19

171

20

178

21

187

22

194

23

198

24

207

Epilogue

213

Acknowledgments

219

Notes

221

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Our Two Heroes

Love is friendship that has caught fire. It is quiet understanding, mutual confidence, sharing, and forgiving. It is loyal through good times and bad times. It settles for less than perfection. It allows for human weakness.

—ANN LANDERS

A doctor found a lump in my wife's left breast and multiple masses on her ovaries. We hadn't been married long. We were young. We still looked like youthful little Kewpie dolls. Our lives had been going great. We were poor but happy. And now we were talking seriously about the c-word. The next thing I knew we were sitting in a medical office waiting room, where I watched a toddler play with wooden blocks and try to eat an entire *Woman's World* magazine that

predated the Mesozoic era. Before long, we found ourselves seated in a tiny exam room listening to a doctor use medical-sounding words that froze my blood, words I never thought would apply to us, words like *biopsy* and *lumpectomy*. Then he threw out the words *mastectomy* and *oophorectomy*.

"But it's still too early to tell," he added. "We need to do tests."

"Tests," my wife, Jamie, and I said in unison.

He smiled weakly.

"You mean like multiple choice?" said my wife.

"Not exactly."

There was that cool, professional smile again. It looked like he'd practiced this face in the mirror a lot.

The doctor was nonchalant about what was ahead. To him this was just another day at the mill. But to us, this information was nuclear. He held the scans up to the light, pointing at them, rotating them, talking in doctor-speak. But I couldn't hear a word he said. To me, he sounded like Charlie Brown's schoolteacher. All I could think about was my vibrant wife. I was in a state of—I don't know—shock, although it also felt a little like paralysis.

I excused myself while the doctor taught my wife how to pronounce *ovarium inferum*, performing another inspection on her. Before I left the room, my wife said nothing but locked her eyes on mine. She made an unmistakable gesture that is common in my family. She held up a hand—thumb, index, and pinky extended; middle fingers down. This is sign language for "I love you."

I returned the salute.

I stood in the hall and doubled over.

I was about to puke. My mouth was dry, my chest was tight, the ambient temperature dropped. I saw myself in a mirror. My complexion had gone white, like someone had sucked the color out of my youthful world. I felt like I'd aged fifty years.

I hate going to the doctor. I hate being subjected to medical care. I hate needles, blood pressure cuffs, tongue depressors, and the medieval test where they tell a guy to turn his head and cough. But the thing I dislike most is the waiting. Everything in the world of modern medicine is based on waiting. Go call this doctor. Wait for a callback. Now call *that* doctor. Wait some more. Call *this* specialist. More waiting. Sorry, the specialist is booked solid—you'll have to wait fourteen more months. May I see your insurance provider information? Which credit card will you be using, sir? I'm gonna need your copay, policy number, Social Security number, and the blood of a nanny goat. Please sit down; the doctor will be with you shortly. And by "shortly" they mean sometime before the installation of the next pope.

The next weeks and months were a miserable time to be alive. Fear was our main emotion. We never knew anything for certain about what lay ahead, and our minds became our perpetual tormentors, always racing toward the worst-case scenario between tests.

There was a lump in my wife's breast and growths on her ovaries.

You Are My Sunshine

The doctor's words kept replaying in my mind, akin to an old Bob Wills record I once had that skipped whenever it got to "Cotton-Eyed Joe."

*Had not'a been for Cotton-Eyed Joe,
Had not'a been for Cotton-Eyed Joe,
Had not'a been for Cotton-Eyed Joe,*

My mother finally threw that record from a second-story window like a Frisbee, achieving incredible distance for someone who, let's be honest, threw like a girl.

The doc said it *might* be this. It *might* be that. She *might* be okay. She *might* not. After about a month, I was experiencing something that amounted to moderate psychosis. I couldn't focus. I couldn't read books, watch movies, or carry on normal conversations without thinking about that one word in the back of my brain. And the weird thing was, my wife and I became very good at not talking about the worst possibilities, even though they were present in each unspoken word or emotion that passed between us.

Finally, the fateful morning came when I drove the math teacher to the hospital for her first experience under the knife. They called it a "procedure," a frightening word. The most important human in my life was having a procedure. Lord have mercy.

I'll never forget the drive to the hospital. The mist was covering the old Florida road. Our chipped Gulf Coast highway was first commissioned in 1934, originally stretching

from Apalachicola to Pensacola. At 671 miles, US Route 98 is the longest road in the Sunshine State. And yet that morning it felt about as long as my driveway.

I sat behind the wheel in a trance. The woman beside me held my hand tightly. I kept my eyes on the road and tried to remind myself to keep breathing. She needed me to be strong, that's what I kept telling myself. That's what my friends kept telling me. Be strong. Be a cheerleader. Don't jump to conclusions. Stay positive. Everything will probably be fine.

But what if things weren't fine? What if the person I loved most on this earth was being killed slowly and invisibly? I have too many family members who have died from the c-word, even more friends. Within a year, I had seen six people I love succumb to or suffer with cancer. Cancer does not discriminate. It kills children and grandparents alike.

We parked in the hospital parking lot. I shut off the car.

Why did time seem to be moving so fast? I looked at my wristwatch and thought about tossing it like my mother did with the Bob Wills record.

Soon Jamie and I were walking across a parking lot toward the towering hospital, holding hands tightly. Then came an awkward moment, just before entering the sliding doors, when we had to release hands so we wouldn't look like the kinds of fools who sit on the same side of a restaurant booth. We released. And for some reason, this letting go of hands was difficult. I can't explain why. As long as we were touching, things seemed a little better. But when we let go, this now made us two nontouching, ordinary people, adrift in the merciless world.

The thing is, I have never seen us as ordinary people. We've always been Jamie and Sean. Always in that order. Always said together. Some of my wife's high school students, however, knew me as Mister Jamie, and many of my wife's friends never even bothered to learn my name. They just called me Jamie's husband, or Whatshisface. I've always been okay with that. The most identifiable trait about me has always been her, and I wear this with pride.

My wife is loud, confrontational, type A, hyperorganized, and uses language that undermines the Southern Baptist Convention. She can hold more beer than I can and sing the national anthem louder than me. She understands the onside kick better than most jayvee quarterbacks, and she can prepare an entire squadron of pound cakes wearing a blindfold. She can captivate her second-grade Sunday school class with three words, and she is beloved by all who were fortunate enough to study math beneath her.

My wife and I tend to be animated people, and we appreciate humor. In social situations, we have our Burns-and-Allen routine down pat. We play off each other when our audience is hot and will do almost anything for a laugh. We are simple people. We get along. We disagree hard. We live in a small house. We drive old cars. We use coupons. We shop at thrift stores. We are dog lovers whose clothes are covered in dander and hair.

This woman also saved my life. Before her, I was a suicide survivor, a dropout, a construction worker, a beer-joint musician with a considerably dim future and with really pour

grammer. Jamie helped me get through college; she told me I was somebody; she tutored me in algebra, trig, liberal arts math, and the systematic, academic hell that is statistics.

We finish each other's thoughts, read each other's minds, fight each other's battles, and nobody has ever beaten us at a game of Taboo.

Taboo, for anyone who is not familiar, is a board game wherein you draw a card with a key word on it, and the object is to coax your partner to guess this word without using the hint words on the card. Our typical Taboo game goes like this:

"Okay, Jamie, this is a thing that—"

"Kangaroo."

"Right. Okay, next card. Now this is something you—"

"The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History."

"Time's up."

Violent high five.

After we walked into the sterilized air of the hospital, a nurse took my wife's blood pressure and attempted to make small talk. Next the nurses made my wife remove her clothes and put on one of those horrible gowns. We live in the twenty-first century. We have robotic medical devices capable of performing surgery manned by a doctor 4,100 miles away. And yet patients still wear cheek-revealing gowns that predate the Dark Ages.

Jamie was soon in a wheelchair, reading a *National Geographic*, ready to be escorted to the place where biopsies happen. I sat beside her in a sticky vinyl seat, drumming my

fingers on an armrest. I was sick. I ignored the TV in the corner blaring episodes of *Judge Judy* at a volume loud enough to crack porcelain. And I was trying a little too hard to be upbeat.

"It'll be fine," I said.

She drew in a breath. "Right."

"Over before you know it."

"Yes."

"They do this kind of thing every day."

"Every day. Right."

"Just a routine thing."

"Yes."

"Nothing to worry about."

I was a bad liar. What I really wanted to say was "I love you." But I'd already said it 12,203,291 times that morning, and I feared those three words had started to lose their impact.

I wanted to be the one in that wheelchair. I wanted to save the day for my wife. It should have been me going back there to be poked and sliced open.

My wife absently turned a page in her magazine. "I wanna do something fun."

I nodded.

"Something big," she said. "Something together. Something really . . . big."

"Like what?"

"Something—I dunno—big."

Judge Judy was tongue-lashing the defendant.

I was reminding myself to breathe.

She looked at me. "I'm thinking something wild. Something really, really . . ."

"Big?"

"Exactly. Something crazy."

"Like a reverse mortgage?"

My heart was not in our conversation, but I wanted to keep her talking.

"Okay, sure, sweetie," I said. "Whatever you want. We'll do something . . ."

"Big?"

"You bet."

The second hand on the clock was clicking. Judge Judy was tearing into the prosecution now. I realized I was wringing my hands.

My wife held up the magazine and tapped the page. "How about doing this?"

The glossy photo spread showed images of a trail cutting through deep woods and mountains, across rivers and creeks.

"This looks fun," she said.

I didn't answer at first because I was confused. My wife and I are not outdoorsy people. We're more Krispy Kreme enthusiasts. Even so, I smiled. "Whatever you want, honey."

"We could camp out," she said. "Sleep under the stars, and you know . . . it could be really fun."

"Sure."

"You'd do it?" she said.

I looked at the magazine closely. The pictures showed something called the C&O trail. I'd never even heard of it.

I nodded. "Why not?"

"Seriously?" she said. "You think we could do all one hundred and eighty-five miles?"

"Wait. How many miles?"

"One hundred and eighty-five."

"Um. Maybe," I said.

She smiled. "You'd really do this for me? You swear?"

"Well, let's not start swearing."

"Swear to God."

"Honey."

She plopped the magazine into her lap. "I knew it. You're just telling me what I want to hear."

"Alright. I swear to God." My Baptist mother would have disowned me.

Thus satisfied, my wife read through the magazine article while I watched her beneath the glow of the harsh lights and nearly cried.

The nurse finally came into our little room and gripped the handles of Jamie's wheelchair. She handed me the magazine. I released my wife's hand once again and felt my chin start to quiver dangerously. I followed the wheelchair down the hallway, spewing more nervous chatter. I could see the math teacher nailing a brave smile to her face. I kept pace alongside her chair until we arrived at two foreboding doors labeled "For Authorized Personnel Only."

The nurse turned to me. "Sorry, sir, this is as far as you go." The lady mashed a big button on the wall, and the doors swung open. And they took my wife away from me.

“We’re going to do something big!” I called out behind them, holding up the *National Geographic*. “Something really big! This will all be over soon! You’ll see!”

The doors closed.

The last thing I saw was my wife’s hand, raised in an unmistakable gesture. Index, pinky, and thumb extended. Middle fingers down.

“I love you too!” I shouted to steel doors. But there was no answer.

And this is where our story begins.

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5

Our shuttle driver threw the gearshift of the minivan into park.

“We’re here,” he said. “Welcome to Pittsburgh, backbone of America. Now everybody get outta my van.”

His name was Bob. He was a local. Bob was a portly, talkative guy, covered in white whiskers, with a staccato Eastern accent and a deep affection for unfiltered Camels. He’d driven four hours south from the ‘Burgh to Washington, DC, to pick us up and drove another four hours north to Pittsburgh’s trailhead at Point State Park downtown.

It was a cold September morning in America’s Spinal Column, and we were running dangerously low on sleep. Not the way you want to start a four-state bike trip. We crawled out of the tobacco-fogged Chrysler Town & Country to find ourselves standing beneath the towering skyscrapers and smokestacks of an old steel town. We couldn’t have been more disoriented if we’d woken up with our heads sewn to the carpet. My truck was parked three states away in Virginia in a public parking area. We were 1,014.19 miles from our

Florida home. To say we felt naked only hints at what we were experiencing.

“Welcome to paradise,” said Bob, gesturing at the maddening cityscape. “The nation’s Pitt.”

An emergency vehicle shot by us with sirens blaring and blue lights flashing. Then came two more. Also nearby we saw a homeless man vomiting into a storm sewer.

“Be it ever so humble,” said Bob.

We looked at Point State Park. It is not a park, at least not like we’d expected. You hear the word *park*, and you envision greenery, maybe a few elms, picnic tables, and kids playing Frisbee. That’s not what we saw before us. Point State Park is a tribute to the Age of Concrete, with all the subtle charm of a Soviet bunker.

And bridges. Pittsburgh loves its bridges. There were suspension bridges, arch bridges, beam bridges, and through-truss bridges everywhere. Bob told us that Pittsburgh has 446 bridges—that’s more than Venice, Rome, or any other city in the world. Bob had been doling out tidbits like this all morning. He happily shared every hometown fact he’d ever learned since third grade.

“Pittsburgh has more annual days of rain and snow than Seattle.” “Lewis and Clark started their journey right here in Pittsburgh.” “Pittsburgh held the first World Series.” “Pittsburgh has more Catholic relics than anywhere else in the world except the Vatican.”

“Huh,” we kept answering, silently praying that he’d run out of Camels.

But now we were deposited on a cold sidewalk with nothing but our cycles and our tonnage of gear scattered around us.

"Nice hat," Bob said to me. "Never seen anyone ride a bike in a cowboy hat. Looks kinda dumb, you ask me."

We were off to a great start.

"He's not riding a bike," said the math teacher. "It's a *trike*."

Bob scratched his thinning hair. "But why?"

"Because he's afraid of bikes," said Jamie.

I smiled.

Bob stared at my odd-shaped tricycle. "You're afraid of bikes?"

"Also clowns," added my wife.

Bob touched my side mirror. "Ain't never seen a bike with three wheels before. It's so . . . low to the ground."

"It's *very* safe," said the math teacher.

Bob seemed concerned.

I ignored them and kept loading my saddlebags. Although I must admit, my recumbent trike was a little silly looking beneath the soaring cityscape of Pittsburgh. The thing looked faintly reminiscent of a motorcycle sidecar, minus the dignity. The math teacher bought the trike used for a few hundred bucks, which solved the problem of my bicycle phobia, but it brought me new problems. Namely, it looked like I was riding a Barcalounger.

Bob tilted his head. "You don't actually plan on taking that thing on the C&O trail, do you?"

"I do. Why do you ask?"

“You’ll never make it on that thing.”

“What?”

“There’s a lotta rough trail out there. I don’t think your toy is up to it.”

My wife and I exchanged looks.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” said my wife.

Bob handed me a business card. “You just keep my number, case you have any problems. ‘Kay?” Then he pumped my hand and looked at me the same way you’d look into the casket of a loved one. “And, hey, promise me you’ll call me when you finish the trail. Just so I know you’re safe.”

Bob then crawled into his Chrysler, gave a solemn wave, and left us standing on the sidewalk.



It took exactly eleven minutes to nearly get killed in Pittsburgh. I’m not being metaphorical.

Picture, if you will, two uncoordinated average Americans, sitting on cycling seats the size of Altoids containers, cycling through the heart of a major American city, on the shoulder of a wildly busy highway. Now imagine that it’s rush hour. And pretend, for the sake of this illustration, that your hot-tempered wife is pedaling ahead of you, making your unpromising situation worse by screaming aggressively at speeding vehicles.

Urban life eddied around us. Taxi cabs. Police vehicles. Sirens. Enormous trucks. Eighteen-wheelers traveling at

breakneck speeds. A BMW honked, swerving around me with a loud squeal, and I nearly quit breathing when I realized how close the vehicles came to swiping me. We had not only slipped out of our comfort zone. We had found Dante's Inferno.

It took a full fifteen minutes to pedal across our first bridge, and I was struggling to keep up with my wife's gladiatorial pace. We were on a busy three-lane highway arching over a river, cycling on a thoroughfare alongside an onslaught of speeding cars, transfer trucks, emergency vehicles, SUVs, and infuriated drivers who periodically rolled down windows and shouted mid-Atlantic obscenities at us. These vocal motorists were in for a real treat when my wife introduced all well-wishers to the Florida state bird.

Finally, we pulled over. My heart was about to pump right through my ribs and flop on the sidewalk while the math teacher consulted our pathetic paper map (\$12.99). A map that should have been turned into toilet paper long ago. This was not the experience I imagined having on the GAP. I'm not sure what I expected, but this wasn't it.

The din of rush hour was too loud for my voice to be heard. But I tried anyway.

"Where are we?" I shouted.

My wife shook her head. "Can't hear you!"

"Which way are we going?"

She tapped her ear and shook her helmet.

I could tell by the way she was looking at the map that our situation was bleak. We were lost.

Meanwhile, traffic was whizzing by with wind gusts strong enough to blow off my facial features. We had no idea what exactly we were supposed to be looking for trail-wise. Where were the woods? Where was the sanctuary of nature? What about all those pictures from the guidebooks of happy people in tents, strumming Martins around campfires? How were we supposed to get to untamed wilderness from here? The only wilderness I saw within the citified hellscape was a single tree being watered by a wirehaired terrier.

Finally, my wife spotted a cop strolling by. "Oh, thank God!" she shouted, already leaping from her bike and jogging toward the man with the badge.

I pedaled behind her.

"Excuse me, Officer?" she said. "Do you know where the GAP trail starts?"

The officer started to speak, but his eyebrows rose when he saw me riding the flagship for all geriatric persons.

"What kinda bike is that?" he said.

My wife shoved the map at the officer. "Can you show me where exactly we are on this map?"

"Never seen a bike like that," he said, chuckling.

"It's not a bike," I said. "It's a trike."

To his credit, the officer did try to help us, but it was clear that he didn't know anything about the trail. "I'm sorry," he said. "I really can't help you. They've been rerouting the trail entrance this year, everybody keeps getting lost, and nobody seems to know where it is. I'm afraid you're on your own, guys."

"On our own?" said my wife.

“Afraid so.”

And with that, Pittsburgh’s Finest removed a phone from his pocket and took my picture. As he walked away, I overheard him say to his partner, “I’ve *gotta* get one of those for my little girl.”

Jamie and I pushed our cycles to a nearby crosswalk. At the traffic light, we met a group of young men carrying large backpacks and wearing bandanas. There were four of them, and the looks on their faces were as helpless as ours. They said they had been looking for the trail for hours, consulting their maps to no avail. And I learned my first trail lesson in the bush. When you’re on a pilgrimage, it is possible to build meaningful relationships based on mutual disgust. We were immediate friends.

“This is *ridiculous*,” said one young man between gulps from a water bottle. “See that bridge over there? Some guy told us to go *under* that bridge, but Jack’s maps say go *over* it. We can’t figure out whether to go over or under or backwards.”

“We coulda been halfway to DC by now,” said another.

One kid tilted his map sideways. “This stupid map got four stars on Amazon.”

Since my wife has always thrived during situations wherein a leader is needed, she craned her head over the young man’s shoulder to observe his large atlas. Then without asking permission she commandeered his map and traced a finger over it. I could see her mind at work. She was already fitting the pieces together in her mathematical computer. Her eyes looked wild and unruly.

Somehow, being males, we all instinctively knew it would be best to remain silent and let the woman alone.

One kid leaned in and whispered to me, "Is she, like, really smart or something?"

"She has three degrees," I said.

"Three?"

I held up three fingers.

"Why?" he said.

"You're preaching to the choir, buddy."

We all remained unmoving for several minutes, watching Jamie translate markings on paper as though solving the Riemann hypothesis. Then her face suddenly brightened.

I knew that look.

She pointed forward. "Follow me," she said.

And then we were six.



The sun was setting. We had wasted an entire day looking for the trailhead. A half dozen strangers wandered through Pittsburgh on a quest to find the Three Rivers Heritage Trail, which leads to the GAP trail, with a lone math teacher leading the way. In some ways, our caravan looked downright biblical as we pedaled through the busy side streets. The map kept taking us off course, but Jamie seemed to be able to translate the map somehow, so we kept pace behind her because, truthfully, who else were we going to follow?

At times we found ourselves wandering through vacant

parking lots where a single Ford Escalade would be idling, windows tinted with roofing tar. The driver would smile at us and reveal twenty-four-carat teeth. We'd all avoid eye contact because these weren't exactly the areas of Pittsburgh where you wanted to find yourself while wearing extremely tight, asset-displaying bike shorts.

On our journey across America's sixty-eighth-largest city, more cyclists joined us. Cyclists, I discovered, tend to gravitate toward each other, especially when they're lost. Our first companion was a slender woman named Sandy on an expensive bike. She came pedaling toward us, no hands on the handlebars, carnation-white hair, and an emaciated frame.

"You guys as lost as I am?" she said.

Everyone answered in grumbling, mob-like tones.

"I've been looking all afternoon," she said, "but I can't find the trailhead. I'm so mad I could punch someone in the mouth."

She fit right in.

We had yet a few more recruits join our ranks. One was a young Russian-American man from Florida who knew exactly 4.3 words of English. Three of these words, apparently, were swear words. Another was a young guy from Nebraska on a Schwinn he bought from Walmart, which made me feel better about my own machine, which I was growing certain had been probably purchased from Toys "R" Us.

The math teacher was now leading nine people through Pittsburgh like a gaggle of confused steer, weaving through

frightening mazes of skyscrapers, intersections, and sidewalks. The general consensus was, "Let's trust Jamie." I was proud of this woman, who led perfect strangers toward their destination. I only prayed she actually knew where she was going, otherwise these people might try to lynch us.

I headed up the rear of our cavalcade on my trike, riding a full three feet below everyone else's rear ends. Sidewalks led to crosswalks. Crosswalks led to empty asphalt lots, which led to detours weaving around condemned buildings and back alleys. The alleys led to more intersections, which led us beneath more behemoth bridges. We doubled back. Reoriented ourselves. Retraced our steps. Once. Twice. Three times. After hours of this, we were no closer to the trailhead than when we'd started. We picked up four more people who were also looking for the trail.

And then we were thirteen.



I have read about sailors adrift at sea, suffering the effects of malnutrition and scurvy. When they first see land, many grizzled seamen have emotional breakdowns. Some get so excited they tear off their clothing and jump right into the water, naked, swimming toward a distant shoreline. This was like that. When we found the temporary plywood ramp with a spray-painted sign reading:

GAP TRAIL

I felt like either cheering or collapsing. Or both.

The entrance to the trail couldn't have been any uglier if it had been designed by Jackson Pollock. The on-ramp was part of a construction zone, leading beneath an overpass. The trailhead was trimmed in neon cones, chain link, and orange barrels. A ramp shot downward beneath a frighteningly loud interstate where, supposedly, the wilderness began.

You could have lit the city with the looks on our faces.

We cheered loudly.

Before we parted ways, everyone paused to congratulate Jamie and slap her back. Without her, we might have ended up dead, or worse, stuck in Pittsburgh.

"Well," said Sandy, pulling on a long-sleeve racing shirt over her skeletal frame. "It's all uphill from here—literally."

"Uphill?" I said. "Really?"

"Didn't you know?" she said. "Bout a two-thousand-foot climb uphill altogether."

"Two thousand?"

"Straight up. Ain't too bad though, if you take it slow."

"Slow. You mean like six or seven years?"

She smiled. "Don't worry, you'll be fine." She nodded to my wife. "You got a good one there. We'd all be sleeping under a bridge if it weren't for her."

"You have no idea."

We shook hands.

"Godspeed," Sandy said before releasing my hand.

Once we finished all our congratulatory remarks, we went our own ways. The last sliver of sunlight sank beneath

the Pittsburgh horizon, and it was time to ride an American trail that is roughly the distance of an average Midwestern state.

The math teacher and I stood at the apex of the ramp, staring at a tiny sign that read:

WASHINGTON, DC, 350 MILES

“Here we go,” said Jamie. She stepped onto her pedals and shot ahead of me, her right hand was extended in a familiar sign language gesture.

Godspeed.

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