

*Her life had
fallen apart.
So she rode
her bike until
it all made
sense again.*

IN SEARCH OF THE WILD REINDEER

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IN COLLEGE I STUDIED PHILOSOPHY AND DREAMED OF BECOMING A MOUNTAINEER.



To fund my explorations, I got a job at the Satin Doll. Sometimes stripping was the best job in the world, but at crucial moments, it was also the worst. I loved ripping off my top and rocking out to Janis Joplin. But I hated the hustle, the way people pretended to be something they weren't. It was a rotten kind of intimacy, and I got lost in it. I graduated from college, and shortly before my 23rd birthday, I quit the sex industry for good. When I left, I promised myself I would never lose me again.

Afterward, I got rid of my things, packed up my bicycle, and booked a one-way ticket to Alaska. My Big Plan was to bike south until life made sense again. Strangely, this actually worked. After 3,500 miles of pedaling, I rolled into San Francisco, stronger and happier. My bleach-blonde hair was finally growing out.

I moved to Colorado and got a job on a forestry crew. My boss, Sarah, taught me how to sharpen a chainsaw, slice through trees like butter. Down they went, crack and thump. One night I met a guy at a party and asked if he'd hitchhike across Mexico. Two months later we had our thumbs out on the road south of the border. Freedom was the back of a pickup truck, wind in our hair, smell of asphalt and countryside. All the possibilities, open.

The kindness of strangers carried us through Mexico and into Central America. Scott was shy and steady, and followed wherever I led. In return, his warmth gave me a sense of security that I didn't have on my own. After a year of wandering, we met a couple who had started an ecovillage in Costa Rica. They asked us to partner with them in exchange for a profit share and co-ownership. Every winding road seemed to have led straight to that one heartfelt, handshake deal.

The Branch* ecovillage was a wild dream come to life. We lived on the edge of a remote jungle and hosted educational residencies for students from around the globe. Experts on natural building, solar energy, permaculture, and community development lived with us

and taught in our jungle classrooms. People smiled and laughed and helped each other. We built houses out of mud and bamboo, and held hands around the dinner table.

Scott and I worked long, hard days; learned how to build things, manage people, run a business. There was a feeling that we could do anything, that we could reinvent the world and ourselves and create something no one had ever created before. We developed new programs, became instructors, planted trees. In the evenings Scott and I wandered around our orchard, imagining how big the canopy would be when we were old.

After five years, the business was doing great but there was still no profit share or co-ownership. Then one night the owner came to my room and leaned over my bed, demanding a kiss. In that moment I knew two things at once: that he did not have my best interests in mind, and that maybe he never had. I told him, over and over, to go home to his wife and family. Finally he left, and I lay in bed looking at the ceiling. Nothing had happened, but everything had changed. I heard a sound and realized I was shaking so hard my teeth were clicking.

There are so many ways to lose yourself, to get lost, to be lost. And sometimes the process of losing is also the process of finding. Finding the edges of where you begin, and where other people start. Finding cracks in foundations of thought and identity. I have always loved men and my relationships with men more than I have loved myself. I have relied on men's perspectives to define me and measure my worth. I have wanted to be what they wanted, and the failure of those desires has always been devastating. In some ways my work as a stripper had accentuated those feelings; but mostly, it had just exposed them. The Branch exposed them even more.

My beautiful, radical ecovillage was not as progressive as I had imagined. And as more time passed, I saw things I had not seen before.

Women were funneled into service roles and assistantship positions. Men in leadership expected sexual access to female students and interns. People cheated and lied, and power flowed in certain directions. In those pre-#MeToo days, there was no common language to explain what I was experiencing. Even when people believed what was happening, they did not seem to believe that it mattered. It crushed me from the inside out.

More years passed, and I became sad, and sick. Strange pains gnawed at my stomach, and my thoughts grew thicker, darker. I had invested the best part of who I was into the Branch, and my faith in these people was indistinguishable from my own identity. It was impossible to extract myself, but I did not feel like myself, either. I had survived depression before, but I could not imagine surviving it again.

One day I went to the outhouse and sat there, alone. I could see a curtain closing over my mind; I could see a future in which I could not see myself at all. In a moment of lucidity, I decided to write myself a letter. I would tell my future self everything I knew about living. A time capsule; a message in a bottle; a last resort.

But when I looked down at my blank paper, I realized, slowly, that I had nothing left to say. Something about me had become blank, too. Finally a random thought skittered up through my brain and I scribbled it down. I stuffed the paper in an old bottle, left it on the windowsill, and walked away.

Several months passed, and my darkness deepened. Sometimes when I walked home at night I reached up to my throat, feeling for a lump. It felt like something was closing, strangling. Finally I told Scott I needed help. Maybe he did not know how, or maybe he did not want to. He drifted farther away.

Then one day I was cleaning and picked up the old bottle. My past self had crossed space and time to send me a message. But it wasn't

NEAR
KEBASHKA,
QUEBEC, BEFORE
BOARDING
THE FERRY TO
NEWFOUNDLAND
AND LABRADOR.
OPPOSITE:
CAPE BRETON
NATIONAL PARK,
NOVA SCOTIA.

just a message, it was a mission. When nothing made sense, I had invented a mission that was equally nonsensical. The joke was so funny that it finally made me laugh.

In my short, scribbled script, I had written just one sentence: *Find the wild reindeer.*

Soon afterward, I needed surgery for a torn ligament in my knee. I flew back to my parents' house in Rhode Island and spent four months in bed, watching my leg atrophy into a little stick. I did not want to be there, or anywhere.

I kept the old bottle on a table by my bed. Now and then I took out the message and held it in my hands. I began to wonder. What did I have to lose? Ten years ago, I had biked until life made sense again. I started looking at maps.

MY PARENTS AGREED TO DRIVE ME TO A FOREST on the Gaspé Peninsula, in eastern Quebec, and leave me there. I had thought it would be a fun way for them to participate in my bike trip. But as the car drew farther from Rhode Island, their voices grew more strained. The night before we arrived, my father lay flat in a hotel bed, nursing a migraine, and my mother knit her hands together and wailed, "Why do you want to bike over mountains?" Leaving their depressed, debilitated daughter alone on a bike in the forest was not, actually, their idea of fun. But I knew it was an act of tremendous love. I needed this.

Quebec in June was cold, windy, and very wet. My left leg was a string bean, my mind still thick with darkness. But I got on my bike and kept pressing the pedals. Twenty miles the first day. Thirty the next. Forty. The bike spun me into a rhythm, and as the days passed, I could feel the darkness slough off me into the wind. Thoughts and feelings rose out of my body and dissolved in my waxy. I became lighter

THERE ARE SO MANY WAYS TO LOSE YOURSELF, TO GET LOST, TO BE LOST. AND SOMETIMES THE PROCESS OF LOSING IS ALSO THE PROCESS OF FINDING.

and freer. The days were gray and sometimes I was scared, but the rhythm of the road pulled me closer to a me I finally recognized. I began to feel strong again. I was going to find those reindeer.

Within a week I noticed a small hole on my arm, and a little white worm poked out, wiggled around, and went down again. I smiled. After living for years in the jungle, I'd seen plenty of bot flies but I'd never had one myself. This one must have hatched in me in Costa Rica. Bot fly larvae grow under your skin and feed on your flesh, periodically poking out a breathing tube. Mine lived in the center of my upper arm, so I got to watch his little worm-tube pop out of me as I biked. His name was Spike, I decided, and we were friends. I spent many long hours singing him lullabies as I pedaled into the wind.

After a meandering 800 miles I stopped in a parking lot in Montreal and waited for Scott. When he got out of the car I recognized the breadth of his shoulders, the way his long hair hung slack in a ponytail. We hugged and his hair smelled like cereal, the way it always did. This was my person, the man I loved, my adventure partner of almost a decade. The last few years had been hard on us, and I wanted this trip to remind him of who we were. I hoped he would love the road as much as I did.

We sorted our gear, left his car at a friend's house, and started biking north. The next day we stopped at a gas station, and I went into the bathroom and looked down at my arm. I liked Spike but he bothered me sometimes. He was, after all, feeding on me. I pressed down on my skin and watched as the hole widened and a thick white larval head came out. I kept pushing until Spike slid out and lay wiggling on top of my arm. He was about half an inch long.

I walked outside with Spike in my palm. I was relieved to be rid of him but also sad. We had come so far together, just the two of us. I hesitated, said a few words of farewell, and then dropped him on the sidewalk and squished him with my shoe.

AS SCOTT AND I PEDED NORTH, THE TRAFFIC dwindled and forests morphed into wild, impenetrable bogs. We camped on top of boulders and cooked dinners over a fire. This was the land of wildflowers and wolves, of wide skies and open road. And this was the freedom I remembered, wind in our hair, all the possibilities, open.

But our years at the Branch had changed us in ways I wasn't ready to face. The same boys' club that had crushed me also seemed to have expanded Scott's confidence. And those two outcomes felt related in a way that I knew, but also denied.

One day we took a rocky track and my bike slid a little. "You could really use some bike lessons," Scott snickered.

My eyes narrowed. His words did not make sense. Years ago I had taken Scott on his first bike trip, taught him how to pack a pannier, change a flat. I planned our routes, handed him gear lists, helped him build out his kit. I had ridden thousands of miles before I ever started taking him with me.

After that, the comments came in a steady stream. I was bad at

CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: A WILD CAMPSITE NEAR SEPT-ILES, QUEBEC; WALKING THE SHORE OF THE BAY OF FUNDY, NEW BRUNSWICK; COOKING MOOSE-MEAT BURRITOS; WILD BLUEBERRIES GATHERED ALONG THE WAY.

biking. I didn't know what I was doing. He couldn't wait for someone to teach me how to pedal. And each day, I asked him to stop.

We decided to take the most remote route possible, a long stretch of pavement and dirt hugging the St. Lawrence River all the way to its mouth at the sea. There, almost a thousand miles from Montreal, the road would end completely and we'd board a ferry for Newfoundland and Labrador.

The miles flew by, but the farther I went, the more my confidence dimmed. I had come so far, and gotten so much stronger. But I no longer felt strong. An invisible string tightened inside of me like a ratchet strap. I loved Scott and he seemed to love me, but he did not make me feel good about myself. And as we pedaled across those stark, beautiful boglands, I began to realize that this had consequence.

On the day we were going to reach the end of the road, I pulled over at an outlook, and my bike skidded a little on a patch of sand. Scott rolled up next to me. "Nice skills," he scoffed.

The contempt in his voice filled the air so completely, there was no space for anything else. And finally, the string that was tightening inside me reached its limit and could go no further. I got off my bike and turned to face him.

I closed my eyes and screamed, "YOU! HAVE! TO! STOPPPPPPPPPPP!"

When I opened my eyes Scott was staring at me, his water bottle frozen in hand halfway to his mouth. Neither of us said anything else. We started riding, and within a few hours, we entered a small town. Then the dirt stopped in front of the sea. We had reached the end of the road.

We turned down a trail toward the water, and finally Scott broke the silence.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?" I asked.

"I know I keep bringing you down." His voice was quiet, sincere. "I just don't know how to stop."

We spent the rest of the day waiting for the ferry. I gathered wild berries and Scott napped under a picnic table. I woke him up and posed him in pictures with me, his arm around my shoulder, my face leaning against his neck.

I had built a home with this person. We had climbed mountains at dawn in half a dozen countries. When he was sick I had scooped vomit out of his mouth, and when my leg was broken he had held me up to pee. We had written love letters in two languages. It didn't matter who either of us had become. What mattered was a past that I loved, and a future I still believed in. I thought that if he saw the photos later, he would see what I saw.

BY THE TIME WE REACHED NEWFOUNDLAND, I HAD lost hope of finding the wild reindeer. Perhaps the message had meant something else or perhaps it had never meant anything after all.

One day we pulled into a seaside campsite near Port Au Choix in northwestern Newfoundland. As we left the registration office, the guy turned to us.

"Oh, and the reindeer are by the lighthouse now, if you want to see them. Been there all week."

I felt so excited, my stomach hurt. I went to the bathroom and put on all my most colorful clothes. If we were finally going to find these reindeer, I wanted to show up in style. I dressed myself in all the colors of the rainbow.





I HAD COME A LONG WAY TO BE ALIVE IN THIS MOMENT. IT WAS BEAUTIFUL TO BE SO FULLY ALIVE.

We continued on to New Brunswick, where we camped one last night together on a cliff overlooking the Bay of Fundy. From here Scott would bike to the bus station, and eventually fly back to Costa Rica. I'd bike back to my parents' house in Rhode Island, and then fly to meet him.

In the morning Scott packed up his panniers, and I started to cry. It was a big, bawling cry. I cried because I loved him. I loved him because of all our miles together, and also because of who he was. There was something in Scott that was rare and wonderful, that dreamed big and worked hard and loved deep. I cried because he was leaving, or maybe because part of me knew he had already left.

And then Scott looked at me and started to laugh. As I listened to his laughter, a visceral understanding rose from my stomach and landed in my brain. In that moment I knew something that I could no longer prevent myself from knowing. That the person I loved got bigger when I got smaller. That he could not stop bringing me down, because bringing me down was what brought him up.

He cared about me, and everything wonderful about him was true. But this other part of him was true, too. I stopped crying and became very still. We kissed goodbye and I watched his bike disappear over the hill.

SET MY COURSE FOR RHODE ISLAND, BUT AS THE road turned south into the U.S., I had the feeling I was going in the wrong direction. Injury and rehab had bought me time away from the Branch, but I was still expected to return. Yet the more I pedaled, the less I wanted to get there.

Finally in northern Maine I set up camp by a stream and let myself fall apart. Everything that had tightened inside of me finally came undone, and as the tears poured out of me, something else flowed out, too. It was a deep and uncontainable gratitude. I had lived and loved and some things had worked out and others hadn't and I was grateful for all of it. With this gratitude I finally wrote my resignation from the Branch. The owners had still not legalized our shares in the business, and no one knew if they ever would. I was 34 years old, and had invested eight years there. I would leave behind my home, my job, my business, and my community. Maybe even my relationship. But I would walk away with the most valuable thing I had put in: myself.

A few hundred miles later, I crossed the border into Rhode Island. I passed my old elementary school and turned into my parents' driveway. I stood in the yard and looked at the house with its vinyl siding, the unruly garden, the old oak tree. Everything was so familiar. And I had returned, pedal by pedal, after finding the wild reindeer.

I had gone on this journey for some reason, and as the months passed, that reason became clear. Finding the wild reindeer taught me that when hope is lost, you can create it. That life is too short to let anyone else own your truth. And that you can break and still be unbreakable. **B**

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FINDING THE WILD REINDEER NEAR PORT AU CHOIX IN NORTHWESTERN NEWFOUNDLAND.

The lighthouse lay at the end of a wide expanse of uninhabited tundra. We biked toward it, side by side, sea breeze in our faces. But the string inside of me tightened again and I didn't know why.

"I can't believe this is it," I said to Scott, pedaling. "We're finally going to find them."

"Yeah, what is it with you and these reindeer?" he asked. I glanced at him. "Oh because, you remember." I paused between each sentence, breathing in and out.

"Last year when I wanted to die." Breath. "I wrote myself that message in the bottle." Breath. "Find the wild reindeer." Breath. "And now these are the reindeer."

"What?" He said, turning his head toward me, then away. "You never said that. You never told me you wanted to die."

"Of course I did."

"No, you didn't."

We kept pedaling, the two of us side by side. And something about

who I was left me then. Something inside my heart rose up and exited out the top of my head and disappeared into the sky and never came back. If he didn't know I had wanted to die, then what did he know? I was alone on this journey. And no matter how far we pedaled together, I would still be alone.

The lighthouse drew closer and closer.

"Look," Scott whispered, slowing down.

In the middle of the road was a brown dot. We pedaled forward and the dot took shape. It had four spindly legs, a big broad nose, and two little antlers. At a hundred feet we stopped and watched, and the creature stared back at us, unperturbed. It turned and ambled off into the tundra. And there on the hillside was the whole herd.

Scott got back on his bike and headed toward the lighthouse. I walked my bike to the side of the road, took off my helmet, and slowly crawled into the bushes. The tundra smelled fresh and earthy, and my hands sank into thick mats of dry moss. I edged slowly toward

the herd, then lay on my stomach, watching and smiling. Little calves shook their heads and tottered on new legs. Reindeer with huge antlers lazed on the ground and nibbled at bushes. When a doe nipped at a raspberry bush, I stretched my neck toward a raspberry and nibbled it too.

I had wondered for so long what this moment would be like, what would happen when I finally found the wild reindeer. I had thought maybe some Big Life Lesson would fall from the heavens and I would cry until nothing was left of me. I had been sure that if I got here, everything would mean something.

But instead, lying in the bog with the wild reindeer, I just felt peaceful. I tasted the tartness of the raspberry on my tongue. Felt wisps of wind brush the scent of wildflowers past my nose. Watched the reindeer twitch their ears, calm in the sun. And I lay there with them because I wanted to be there. I had come a long way to be alive in this moment. It was beautiful to be so fully alive.