

The Last Word

By Pam North

That final morning, we mounted our bikes and took a few deep breaths. For days, the crystalline autumn air had seared our skin and lungs, but the morning of our final ride began in a damp mist.

Standing roadside just above Maddox Cove, I remember Michelle clipping on her helmet and fighting tears while she called out our usual good luck prayer: "Okay friends - St. Anthony ... "

"Pray for us," we each muttered. Our tempered responses were odd, given how wildly exuberant we'd been and might expect to be, approaching the finish line.

I could feel that each member of our team was edgy, splintered with complicated states of mind. We had run the gamut of emotions over the four-and-a-half months together; now, at the end, we were overwhelmed by a variety of feelings: trepidation, exhilaration, sadness, and maybe even relief. But a niggling and persistent thought was struggling to reach the surface: *How had we made it? Would something thwart us after all?*

Nine days earlier we'd crossed the ferry to Port Aux Basque, already feeling we'd seen more jaw-dropping scenery than one country has any right to claim. But Newfoundland - sharp fjords, cruel climbs, wild ocean coasts and wailing wind - had seduced and punished us from shore to shore.

And here we were, approaching Cape Spear, the most easterly tip of the North American continent, the final destination of our 7000-kilometre journey. My husband and I and our two friends prepared for our last pushup the steep slopes to the coast - September 24th, 2022.

Whispers about the outlandish idea to cross Canada by bicycle had arisen in my mind from the outset: *you're too old; the roads are too dangerous; the social dynamics ... tricky*. But once we were underway, I, like my teammates, suppressed such voices and focused on the final goal. Maybe without realizing it, we had become increasingly cavalier about the inherent dangers. In retrospect, I realize that Cape Spear, Nature's monolith, had staked a claim on our ride. It would exact a toll, and our

profound brush with mortality at its feet was a necessary, sobering outcome of the journey.

From mile zero in Victoria B.C., Michelle had initiated our daily prayer - an appeal to St. Anthony. The tradition came from her dad who said the prayer whenever a family member was travelling or leaving home. I'm pretty sure that Jeff, my husband, and Barry, Michelle's partner, didn't believe that St. Anthony would actually protect us from harm. Neither did I. And yet, something made us say the mantra every day. Verbalizing, hearing our own vulnerability in the air around us gradually became a welcomed aspect of each day's routine. Had it been an affirmation of our trust in something bigger, or a comfort to us in a better-safe-than-sorry kind of way?

That morning, Sept 24, 2022, heads down and lost in our individual anticipations, we turned from sideroad 11 onto Blackhead Road, just under ten kilometres from the finish line. The pavement was wet. The jagged conifers and scruffy growth typical of the rocky terrain toed the line

on both sides of us and further shadowed the road ahead. We began to climb.

Usually, I simply mouthed the response to our St. Anthony prayer, but this morning I noticed I was clinging to it for security. And with each pedal stroke, I listened for the jingle of the Guardian Bell beneath my seat.

Another appeal to the forces of good luck. A friend had given each of us little pewter bells before we left home. Whenever I hit a rough patch or was swaying in the wind on mountain climbs, I took comfort in its reassuring tinkle.

Prayer said, bell in hand, I was acutely aware that we were about to realize our dream. But even though I was elated, I couldn't shake my feelings of displacement: this ending felt too close, too final - a signature on divorce papers, the first Monday of retirement life.

A taxi came over the hill towards us and forced my mind to stay with the road. The driver slowed and rolled down his window.

"I just dropped 'em off! They're ready for yus!" His spirited eyes crinkled with his grin.

We thanked him and gave him a thumbs up.

Brows tightening, he slung his jowls further out the window and added more emphatically, “Hey, just warned them to stay up from the rocks, eh. Ain’t safe over them ropes. Too many people do it.” He clapped his hand on the side of the car, we waved back, and continued the climb.

Within minutes now we would embrace our adult children. They and their partners had arrived in St. John’s the day before, despite the havoc that was unleashed on much of the Maritimes by Hurricane Fiona. Maybe the near cancellation of our much-anticipated finish-line celebration was a sign. But, at the time, we figured some uncanny luck must have intervened for so many flights and logistics to align with our moment of glory, the grand finale to this once in a life-time adventure.

The taxi driver’s report sharpened my focus on the finish and my excitement began to displace all else. I looked up, dug my feet into the pedals, and felt the adrenaline course through my legs as we hit an even steeper vertical. The air above cleared to a sharp blue. Open road shot up ahead of me to the summit. In seconds, I was no longer dazed by the

magnitude of our accomplishment or uneasy about the end of the adventure. Noises burst from my mouth, unbidden. "Ouuuwoooooo!! Yes!Yes! Yes!" I hollered, eyes concentrating on the rise ahead.

As if floating, I crested the hill, the precipice above our view to the end. And there it was! The whole coastline sparkled in the intermittent sun. Cape Spear - an explosive yet solemn peninsula jutting out from a long scythe-shaped bay.

On top of the mammoth tooth of rock in the distance stood a lighthouse, still a good kilometre away. The vista was a dramatically painted canvas of ocean rollers, crashing sprays, rock and sky. A spectacular wilderness - unexpectedly stunning and brutally confronting at the same time, misty and white-washed against the mix of sun and shadows.

We hurtled towards the beach and then pressed into the final climb. I sprinted upwards, no longer feeling like Sisyphus, struggling against Newfoundland's relentless inclines. Cresting the final summit, my stomach dropped briefly - our gang wasn't there; but then we realized they must be down at the most easterly point, closest to the ocean cliffs.

One final descent towards the monument and viewing area! I saw the moving forms, jumping and waving a banner at the tip of the cape and fell silent, coasting closer to the indiscriminate hollering carried in the wind.

They looked wildly out of place on this edge of the world, the ocean behind them a moving backdrop that made me doubt my vision and hold my breath in awe.

I dismounted and threw my arms around the nearest body. Champagne was popped, poured over heads, bottles tipped, and glasses passed - the whole thing was happening around me. I felt like a fallen leaf caught in a whirlpool.

To recall this feeling is to describe a spinning and blurring, like being inside time-lapse photography - not the murky, slow, underwater grogginess of discombobulation, but a winding up, a swirl of lightness, a lifting up. A feeling of invincibility.

No need here for prayers to St. Anthony, or trinkets and thoughts of blessings or protection. We said we'd do it; we made it here. With this assertion, I felt a power, a fearlessness like I have rarely, if ever, experienced.

Briefly, the air calmed amidst the blast, and I looked from Jeff to the kids; and then, in this moment of stillness, I caught a view of Barry. He was holding his bike over his head, striding towards and then straddling the barrier rope to the rocks below. A grey-bearded Colossus. I knew he was determined to dip tires in the Atlantic, just as we had done in the Pacific seventeen weeks earlier.

Here, however, we would not be able to get down to the water. From this vantage point, the ocean was a good 60-75 metres below the edge of the cape. We'd have to cross the rope and climb down on the boulders another 50 or 60 metres to a large pool of water in the rocks, still 20 metres or so above the ocean. Barry had his eye on this pool. It was about ten metres wide and three metres deep, filled by recurring ocean waves and spray. From the top, it looked somewhat benign in the flashing sun - an Instagram moment.

I saw what he saw, and the desire to finish the way we started was strong. At the same time, a faint but adamant voice called to me inside the roar of the wind. *"It's not worth it,"* she whispered. I paused, almost ready to call out to Barry; but we had made it this far. "Just do it!" I heard myself mutter.

Also, my reservations were quickly quashed by the sweep of the strong young guys who stepped in to help. Michelle's son picked up my bike, and we crossed the rope barrier, climbing down on big, reddy-brown boulders, with crevices into which any one of us could have stumbled, broken a leg or worse. The enthusiasm of the group, the pride in our accomplishment and the heightened adrenaline soaring through us at the time prevailed over good judgement.

I started to feel the fury of the ocean close at hand once we were on the downward side of the barrier. After all, the early lashings of hurricane Fiona were striking out on the other side of the island while we were enjoying patches of sunshine in between dark, rolling clouds.

I don't think I actually saw my bike's tires dunked. Someone yelled, "she's done," and then Ben, our son, hoisted Rita, my red Trek 520, over his head and carried her back up the rocks to safety. Barry, Michelle and a couple others were still down by the rock basin holding their bikes and I climbed down near them to be a part of the tire-dipping ceremony.

Describing the feeling in writing now, I see myself perched above a rocking power, intoxicated by the force and the beauty. I stand

majestically, like the wanderer in Caspar David Freidrich's romantic painting of the tumultuous northern seacoast. But now, as then, the feelings of might and fearlessness were short-lived. The sky and water roiled with darkness, and Poseidon with his frothy beard rose up and cast the ocean about himself with one back-handed swipe.

The waves stormed the twenty-metre-high rocks on the bluff and yanked back with a deep clap that resonated in the gut. I'd heard this blast before - the overwhelming roar and tug at Peggy's Cove when I was a kid but held tightly in my dad's arms. Or something similar to that feeling of a sudden drop during plane turbulence. The rocks quaked, the waves continued to grow, building momentum with each surge, and the ocean spray scattered in the wind. And then, another huge wave crashed just behind me. I was knocked off balance, jolted at last into the beginning of a sober awareness of our precarious footing and closeness to the rock pool.

Barry's daughter, Tori, was beside me, soaked and laughing. She had her phone out. "This is nuts! Wow, wait, I want to get another pic!"

Michelle and I looked at each other, just long enough to see, written on our faces, what we both realized. We had over-stepped, way-over-stepped our

welcome down on these rocks. The ocean was ready to toss us where it would, as casually as a fed-up mom might toss her teenager's dirty shoes from the front door down the basement steps.

And then with another deep clap, Barry and his bike were snatched off the edge, lost in a gush of ocean spray. He disappeared in an envelope of white, sealed in the ocean's powerful fist and then dropped like a crumpled wrapper into the pool. My memory is of gasping mouths, faces washed away in a slurry of wind and wetness.

Another roller smashed just below us. The force of the spray and water didn't hit me directly, but I saw it pick up Tori and launch her into the pool of water. Michelle slid from the edge and was clinging to a boulder, her legs dangling behind her in the sloshing pool. My gut dropped again. Unable to respond or even call out, I was paralyzed for seconds. I heard yelling from behind, mixed with the crash of the waves. Michelle was gasping for breath between foam and spray. "My leg is caught!" She cried in terror. The waves were too powerful to fight and we stood, screaming, holding our breath.

Trying to recreate this scene I realize that in the moments leading up to the calamity, each of us had thought we were participants in a drama of our own making. Now re-living the scene in the aftermath, I see those of us down by the rock pool as bits of wool, seed-heads, feathers, buffeted by air, some blown across surfaces, others suspended or swirling. The indiscriminate forces within the larger pattern of nature left each of us without control and, at the same time, locked into our own experience.

Now I was calling out to the greater forces at play for protection. "Help them! Save them! ... Please!!!" Who was I calling to? All I knew was that Tori could be pulled under, Michelle's leg could break, the waves could sweep Barry or any one of them, with another huge swell, right off the other side of the pool and then beyond.

Finally, between momentary lulls in the surf two of the young guys grabbed hold of Tori and then Michelle. By then I was about 20 feet up from the rock pool, just out of the range of the waves. Michelle clawed her way up and collapsed in front of me. I shimmied forward and clutched her in relief.

During the next brief calm between ocean blasts I saw Barry struggling to haul himself and his bike out of the water on the other side of the pool.

Barry's son, Christian, had also been swept in and was twirling away from the edge. Barry caught his son's hand and dragged him out. Closer to the drop-point to the ocean, they were in even more danger; but thinking they were now safe, they began cheering in the throes of adrenaline-fueled exhilaration.

"My God Barry! Get back from the edge." Michelle yelled.

"My GoPro is down!" Barry motioned to the bottom of the pool.

"Don't do it, Barry!"

My voice joined in with Michelle's. "Barry no! It's not worth it!" I knew he wanted to save the film footage, almost at any cost.

He dove down to the very bottom to retrieve the camera. Up he came, and hauled himself out again on the other side, holding the camera above his head. Triumphant, Barry then became fixated on saving Michelle's bike,

also swept into the pool. He couldn't hear our calls or see the huge rollers we saw coming from our side of the rocks.

"Mom, come on, get up further!" Ben yelled from behind me. His voice broke through the chaos and pulled me from my stupor.

On the other side of the pool, Barry and Christian were still trying to save Michelle's bike. It lifted with each swell and then retreated in the pull. The screaming voices in the wind and the disbelief muddled with fear and silence as people watched, swirled together, which makes the calamity hard to recall now. If asked today, each of us has difficulty remembering exactly what happened. Each of our physical positions on the cape was integral to each of our experiences, and we were all left with individual wounds and lessons.

Somehow, we all made it back to safety, away from the pool of water, the swells and the massive spray from the ocean. Somehow, we all climbed our way out and up. Michelle had lacerations on her legs and her shins. I sat down beside her on the curb by the parking lot, her daughter on the other side. Michelle was shaking her head, arms tightly wrapped around

her knees, crumpled in disbelief. Why did we do this? How did this get so out-of-hand?

In the midst of this confusion and trauma in the parking lot, I knew I still needed to do something, maybe to block out what had happened or to retrieve some level of normalcy for myself. Four months earlier, I had picked up two stones on the beach in Victoria, for the express purpose of carrying them across the continent. Now, I took them from my handle-bar bag and pressed one into our daughter Jane's palm.

"Come on, we have to throw them in." I pulled her with me over to the railing of the viewing area. I felt the smooth, round, black stone in my hand, looked at Jane and threw it out over the bluff. The ritual I had anticipated as a celebration now felt like an offering. Jane threw hers as well. And then she pointed to the ocean out beyond the treacherous rock pool now 50 metres below us. Drifting on the waves, Barry's fluorescent yellow riding jacket that had been strapped to his bike swept further down the coast, away from shore.

How can a vision of death, a deep punch of terror that makes an indelible bruise after a close call, exist alongside frivolity and bravado? Huddling

and commiserating in the parking lot, we attempted to downplay what happened. Our nervous laughter and empty words a wet blanket over our shaken bodies.

But later, Michelle realized that her Guardian Bell was missing from her bike. Had the ocean required this exchange, a toll for our trespassing? Had her bell, stamped with the image of an angel, done its part in keeping Michelle, all of us, safe?

These thoughts, in retrospect, seem silly. Saints, ancient religions, trinkets and rituals are apt to elicit both enthusiasm and scorn. But then, as now, they continue to ground me in the unknowable and provide a resting place when the road is obscured.

The fact that we survived the journey is still a miracle to me. Einstein said: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." I can't help but see these seemingly different perspectives as two sides to the same coin. We made it across the continent on bicycles, and then jeopardized ourselves and our most loved ones in an act of hubris at the finish line.

The warning continues to resonate through my bones every time I think about our brush with death and our incredible good fortune.

Maybe we passers-by on bicycles needed the humility offered by St. Anthony the Abbot, protector of domestic livestock. Or maybe the jingle of the Guardian Bell was meant to attune me to life's limits and remind me to be grateful. Not sure. But one certainty I rely on, whenever I am heading out into my precarious, unpredictable world, is the ultimate power of this spectacular wilderness.