



Unexpected Company

BY BECKI NEIDENS

I was curled up with my feet tucked underneath me in a cozy chair flipping through a stack of magazines inside the warm public library in Estes Park, Colorado. My soaked and muddy clothes were heaped as tidily as I could manage at the foot of the chair.

I had come from the Timber Creek Campground that morning. I was nearing the final stretch of my first solo bikepacking trip, from Steamboat Springs to Boulder, Colorado. I woke up blue-dark early to the magnificent sounds of elk bugling in every direction. It was too frosty to get up and go, so I lingered around the campground until the sun had a chance to share its strength. Plus, I was nervous about slinging my leg over the saddle. I had ridden the most miles ever in my life the day before, and in the final 15, I could not bear to sit for even an instant. I couldn't stop early, though, because I had plans to meet up with someone at the campground.

I ran into her that morning at the ranger station in Granby. She was getting a permit for something and I was checking maps for alternate routes to Boulder. We stared

at each other with confused recognition. It was an out-of-context place for us, but we both clicked at the same time! We had met at my cousin's wedding in San Diego the fall prior! It was one of those super-duper fun wedding eves where you make fast friends and enduring memories. We were an instant heap of hugs and laughs and remember-that-nights.

Within 15 minutes, the plan was made that she would be camping with me that evening. She insisted on driving my panniers over the pass the next morning to make my travel easier. Seriously? I wondered if this is what people call Trail Magic. She had a couple of ducks to put in a row before she'd join me. What kind of dinner should she bring? What kind of beers would I like?

We agreed on a pesto pasta and I politely declined the beers. She looked at me sideways.

"Seriously, after riding all day, you don't want a beer?" she said.

"Actually, nothing sounds better, but I'm on a health kick," I said. "Told myself I'd wait till Boulder. Thanks, though."

I pedaled away from the ranger station feeling guilty about the lie. I couldn't tell this stranger-friend that I was pregnant. I hadn't even said it out loud yet.

When my sister was getting married, the bridesmaids banded together to get her a vacuum cleaner. I donated and felt so weird because when I got married, my closest peeps gifted me a bicycle. I felt fortunate that my friends knew a bicycle would serve my marriage better than a Dyson. I spent most of that first year researching the perfect bike for me. We live almost two hours from a local bike shop, so it took some time. I drove to scoop up my brand-new Salsa Fargo in July, on the morning of my 34th birthday.

Its virgin extended-mile voyage was through the Medicine Bow Forest of Wyoming into Steamboat Springs, Colorado, in September 2010. The plan was to celebrate our first anniversary in Steamboat together, then Jeremy would head back to Wyoming while I pedaled myself on my first bike tour, from Steamboat Springs to Boulder, through Rocky Mountain National Park. I'd spend some time with my good buddy and her family in Boulder, and then they'd bring me back up to Wyoming and stay for a visit.

On our anniversary eve, we went out for a fancy dinner in Steamboat, the kind I got to wear heels for. Jeremy put a hold on the after-dinner martinis because he was certain I was pregnant. His premonition was validated hours later in the hotel room.

A day later, he drove back to Wyoming, and I headed toward Boulder on my Fargo. I had great company for Rabbit Ears Pass — my first mountain pass. My good buddy's husband was an actual bicycle guy. Like the kind with the outfit and the stiff shoes, the kind who rides a singlespeed for fun. He gifted me a pair of arm warmers and rode with me from our campsite outside of Steamboat Springs to a reservoir outside of Kremmling. I enjoyed the company and the support. I never attempted anything of the sort before. I wanted to for decades, though. Every Rocky Mountain pass I have ever driven over, I wondered what it would feel like on a bike. He took off ahead of me for the descent from the summit. A wind swept in from out of nowhere and released the golden aspen leaves in a curtain all around him and I pulled over. The sky was perfectly blue. The pine trees were perfectly green. The drying grass was perfectly whatever color that is. And I was perfectly united with it all. I dug riding my bike over that first pass more than I thought I would. As we rolled down the east side, I knew I had found the right bike. I wanted to do this forever. I wanted to quit my job and find a way to get paid to ride my bike around the whole wide world. A new light was sparked in me at the same time a new life was sparked in me.

We hugged goodbye in a lightning storm at the edge of the lake. We'd meet back up in Boulder in a few days. I set up my wee little bivy tent and slithered inside. There was a teeny-tiny window of time between the flashes and crashes of thunder and lightning. I snuggled in my sleeping bag, shoved my dry clothes in a hoodie for a pillow and let go. I placed my

hands on my belly and breathed. It was the first time I was all by myself alone since I found out.

I was never the girl who dreamed about children. I never dreamed about a husband either. Jeremy did not ask more than once if I wanted to bail on the bike ride. He knew that I needed to go, to spend four days alone (with Betty in my belly) on my bike over high mountain passes in some Rocky Mountain fall weather to process and reconstruct my world into one that had a baby in it. The moving meditation of cruising through a splendid Colorado autumn soothed me. It allowed me the space and time to notice and accept all the feelings, thoughts, and emotions that were bundled up and delivered in the form of a plus sign on a stick. I was still in the thick of processing when I ran into Maureen at the ranger station. It felt like such a heavy secret.

By the time I finally packed up to head over Trail Ridge Road, the mountain pass connecting Granby and Estes Park through Rocky Mountain National Park, the rain was drizzling down but picking up speed. I was up for it, especially since my panniers were being transported to a visitor center on the Estes Park side. It was hard work, but I enjoyed it. Each switch that I backed and each back that I switched widened my smile. I was allowing my ego to swell a bit. I wasn't sure if I had what it took to ride up a road like this — but I was doing it! Then the road construction crew made me stop at the Medicine Bow Curve just below the Summit, in the sleet, snow, and freezing rain, for 20 minutes. I hopped and jumped and paced but I was soaked through and freezing. When they finally allowed me through, it was too late. I made it up to the Alpine Visitor Center and tried all the tricks to get warm. I drank lots and lots of tea and ate snacks and continued to hop and pace ... no dice. My warm, dry clothes were sitting behind a desk down in Beaver Meadows.

I approached a ranger who pulled up in a pickup and asked for a ride down. The snow was starting to accumulate, the visibility was poor, and I was obviously struggling. He obliged and I tossed my bike in the back of the truck. It turned out we had a friend in common. He dropped me off at the visitor center, I retrieved my panniers, and I stood under the hand dryer in the bathroom while I changed. I called my friend in Boulder and asked if she could scoop me up. I pedaled over to the library and hunkered down with magazines in the cozy chair.

There were 36 miles to go, yet I felt no sense of defeat. It was enough. It was clear to me that this would not be my final bikepacking trip.

Six years and two children later, the summer I turned 40, my trusty Salsa Fargo and I set off for our second-ever bikepacking adventure: the Tour Divide. **AC**

Becki Neidens adventures in the wilds of Wyoming with her husband and two children. Her writing has been featured in Bugle magazine, the member publication of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. Becki shares pieces of her journey online at whybotherwithordinary.com.