

The Last Word

By Pam North

That final morning, we mounted our bikes and took a few deep breaths. For days, the 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, Newfoundland, Michelle clipped on her helmet. Fighting tears, 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.

Each of us was edgy. We had run the gamut of emotions over the four-and-a-half months together; now, at the end, I could sense trepidation, exhilaration, sadness, and maybe even relief. A niggling and persistent thought was struggling to reach the surface: *How had we made it?*

Nine days earlier, my husband Jeff and I, and our two friends, Michelle and Barry, crossed the ferry from North Sydney N.S. to Port Aux Basque, Nfld., 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—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 more than 8000 kilometre journey. We prepared for our last push up the steep slopes to the coast.

Whispers about the outlandish idea to cross Canada by bicycle had followed me from the outset: *you're too old; the roads are too dangerous; the social dynamics ... tricky*. But at this late stage of the journey, I'd learned to ignore the voices and focus on the final goal. Maybe without realising it, we'd all become increasingly cavalier about the dangers, and

maybe our hubris was enough to alert Nature's monolith, Cape Spear, to stake a claim on our ride.

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, and Barry, and maybe Michelle, 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. 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, 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 toed the line on both sides of us, casting shadows on the road. We began to climb.

With each pedal stroke, the Guardian Bell zip-tied to my bike, a talisman for safe travels, jingled. I reached below my seat and cupped it in my

palm. Prayer said, bell in hand, now I just needed my muscles and my mind to hold out for a few more kilometres. But my head was full and messy: 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. The driver slowed and rolled down his window.

“I just dropped ‘em off! They’re ready for yus!” His eyes crinkled with his grin.

We thanked him and gave him a thumbs up.

He slung his jowls further out the window and added, “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 taxi driver's report sharpened my focus on the finish. 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.. Noises burst from my mouth.

"Ouuuwooooo!! Yes! Yes! Yes!" I hollered, eyes concentrating on the rise ahead.

As if floating, I crested the hill, and there it was! The whole coast sparkled in the intermittent sun. Cape Spear—an explosive and 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. Ocean rollers, crashing sprays— the sky was misty, white-washed, and incandescent with the mix of sun and shadows.

I freewheeled downwards towards the beach and then pressed into the final climb, sprinting, no more struggling here. But when I topped the final

pitch, my stomach dropped—our gang wasn't there; then Michelle swooshed past me and I followed her. "They're down closer to the ocean cliffs, " she yelled.

One final descent towards the monument and viewing area! I could see them—moving forms, jumping and waving a banner at the tip of the cape. They looked wildly out of place—*the edge of the world*, I thought, the ocean behind them a moving backdrop. I couldn't get my breath.

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 and I was spinning, as if I was caught in time-lapse photography. I was a fallen leaf inside in a whirlpool, a swirl of lightness, lifted up.

We said we'd do it; we made it here. I felt a power and a fearlessness like I've never experienced. Invincible.

Briefly, the air calmed and I looked from Jeff to the kids; then 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.

We couldn't get down to the water. The ocean is 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 15 metres or so above the ocean. Barry had his eye on this pool. It was maybe about 10 metres wide and deep like a little pond filled by recurring ocean waves and spray. From here, it looked somewhat benign in the afternoon 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 little voice was warning me. *"It's not worth it."* The wind roared. I paused, almost ready to call out to Barry; but I disregarded the voice—after all we'd made it this far. Michelle's son picked up my bike, and we crossed the rope barrier, climbing down on big, ruddy-brown boulders, with crevices into which any one of us could have stumbled, broken a leg or worse.

I could feel the fury of the ocean with each step closer to the pool. 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.

Someone yelled, "she's done," and then our son, Ben, hoisted my bike over his head and carried her back up the rocks to safety. I didn't actually see her dipped! Jeff had finished his ceremony in a small puddle closer to the rope barrier, but Barry, Michelle and a couple others were still down by the rock basin holding their bikes. I decided to climb down near them to be a part of it.

Closer to the ocean, I could feel the rocking power of the roiling water. The waves stormed the fifteen-metre-high rocks on the bluff and yanked back with a deep clap that resonated in my gut, something like that feeling of a sudden drop during plane turbulence. The waves grew, building momentum with each surge, scattering ocean spray in the wind. Another huge wave crashed just behind me and I was knocked off balance. *Holy shit ... this is too much!*

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!"

“Let’s move up!” I yelled—I knew this was bad, really bad.

Michelle and I looked at each other. We both knew it. 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.

Another deep clap, and Barry and his bike were snatched off the edge, lost in a gush of ocean spray. He and the bike disappeared in an envelope of white and were flung into the pool of water like a crumpled wrapper. His head came up, spinning in the turbulence.

Another roller smashed just below us. The force of the spray and water didn’t hit me directly, but it picked up Tori and launched her into the pool. At the same time, Michelle slid from the edge but managed to cling to a boulder, her legs dangling behind her in the water. 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!” The waves were too powerful to fight. I stood there, watching, holding my breath.

We were bits of wool, seed-heads, feathers, buffeted by air, some blown across surfaces, others suspended or swirling. I could feel myself calling

out, mouthing words. "Help them! Save them!" Who would hear me? I was clear minded enough to know 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 breaks in the surf two of the young guys crab-crawled down to the edge of the pool. Tori's boyfriend jumped in and grabbed hold of her and Michelle's son-in-law locked arms with Michelle and pulled her out. I'd scooched another 10 metres up from the rock pool, just out of the range of the waves. Michelle clawed her way up and collapsed in front of me.

During the next brief calm between 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 been thrown in too and he was twirling away from the edge. Barry caught his hand and helped him climb out.

Now out safely and standing up on the other side, Barry and Christian started cheering, fuelled by adrenaline. On their side of the pool they were closer to the drop-point to the ocean, but they didn't see the danger, and they couldn't hear us over the roar.

“My God Barry! Get back from the edge.” Michelle yelled, red faced, shaking, hair wet and plastered against her cheeks and neck.

“My GoPro is down!” Barry motioned to the bottom of the pool, the depth of which could swallow a school bus.

“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 of our trip at almost any cost.

As if he couldn’t hear us, he dove in and swam down to the bottom. He was lost to us for a few seconds, the surface of the pool churning, and then he came up smiling, holding the camera above his head—triumphant. Then he and Christian fixated on saving Michelle’s bike, also in the pool, and he couldn’t hear our calls, or see the huge Fiona-fuelled rollers we could see from our side of the rock pool.

“Mom, come on, get up further!” Ben yelled from behind me. His voice broke through the chaos and I shimmied further up, keeping my eyes on the two still battling the waves from the pool’s edge.

Michelle’s bike lifted with each swell and then retreated in the pull. Barry and Christian refused to give up and eventually caught hold of it, and hiked it back up the rocks to safety.

Somehow, we all climbed our way up. Michelle had lacerations on her legs. 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. “Why did we do this? How did this get so out-of-hand?” We stayed there beside her as she relived the overwhelming tug, the desperate clawing to hang on, head immersed in water, and the realisation that she, or any of us could have been washed out over the rocks to the ocean below.

Barry was bleeding from gashes as well, and his face was now wearing the trauma. He was the last to climb up from the rock pool carrying Michelle’s bike.

In the midst of this confusion, I needed to do something. Maybe I needed to block out what had just happened and retrieve some level of normalcy.

I saw Jane, grabbed her hand and dragged her over to my bike by the fence. Inside the pocket in my handlebar bag I felt the two stones, smooth and cool—the ones that I picked up four months ago on the beach in Victoria, B.C. I pressed one into 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 studied the smooth, round, black stone again—*From one ocean to another*. I looked at Jane and threw it out over the bluff. "Take that!" I yelled, not even sure what I meant. The ritual I had anticipated as a celebration now turned to an offering. Jane threw hers. And then she pointed to the ocean out beyond the infamous rock pool 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, 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 shaking bodies. Each of us was left with individual wounds and lessons.

Later, Michelle noticed her Guardian bell was missing from her bike. Had the ocean required this exchange, a toll for our trespassing? Or perhaps its loss was a warning. We made it across the continent on bicycles, and then jeopardised ourselves and our loved ones in an act of hubris at the finish line. The warning continues to resonate through my bones. Saints, trinkets and rituals—I have embraced them with enthusiasm and dismissed them with scorn. But as reminders of humility, they are best not to be left at home, or forgotten on the journey.

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