

JAMEY GLASNOVIC

ADRIFT IN THE
CANADIAN ROCKIES

LOST AND FOUND



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Cataloguing data available from Library and Archives Canada

Published by RMB in paperback in 2014

ISBN 978-1-77160-051-4

This electronic version published in 2014

ISBN 978-1-77160-053-8

Cover photo: *Canmore by night* © ginevre

Maps: Jocey Asnong

Rocky Mountain Books acknowledges the financial support for its publishing program from the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF) and the Canada Council for the Arts, and from the province of British Columbia through the British Columbia Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.



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du Canada



BRITISH COLUMBIA
ARTS COUNCIL
Supported by the Province of British Columbia

Rocky Mountain Books
www.rmbooks.com

To my mother –
without her early guidance and inspiring
efforts in life, I would be much less.

CONTENTS

Maps 8

Part One: The Road Ahead 11

The Icefields Parkway 13

Part Two: Close to Home 17

Trouble in Paradise 19

Banff 35

Canmore 57

Gear Up, Get Out 75

Kananaskis Country 101

Mount Kidd and the Village 129

Nothing Like an Epiphany

to Ruin a Perfectly Good Day 147

Mount Engadine 171

The Auburn Rose West Coast Grill or, Joey and
Poncho's Ale House, Pool Pub & Golf Course
A.K.A. Every Bar I've Ever Worked At 215

Part Three: The Heart of the Mountains 239

Bow Valley Parkway 241

Into the Alpine 255

Laggan Station 277

The Backcountry 291

Merlin Meadows 307

The Wondertrail 315

Jasper 341

Part Four: Epilogue 351

A Winter Wonderland 353

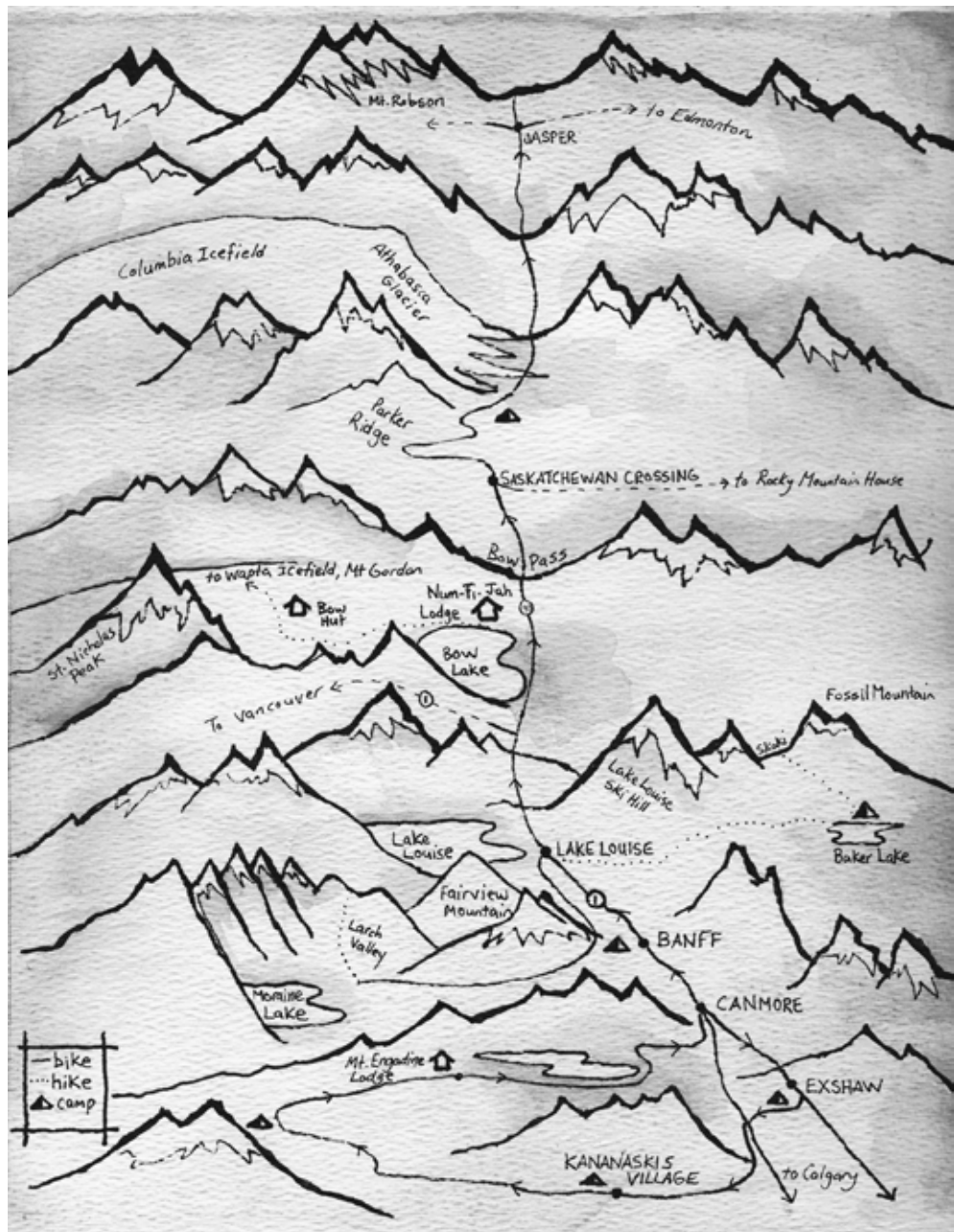
Acknowledgments 369

Recommended Reading 373

THE CANADIAN ROCKY MOUNTAIN PARKS WORLD HERITAGE SITE



THE AUTHOR'S ROUTE



PART ONE

THE ROAD AHEAD

1.

THE ICEFIELDS PARKWAY

*Sun's up, mm hm, looks okay, the world survives until another day.
And I'm thinking about eternity, some kind of ecstasy got a hold
on me.*

—Bruce Cockburn

It's official: I'm an idiot.

At least that's how I feel as snow continues to fall in an increasingly energetic fashion and the temperature drops at a rate even a seasoned meteorologist would find alarming. I've been thinking about the consequences of this turn of events for about 15 minutes now and can come up with no other conclusion than that I'm an idiot. The worst part of it all is not the cold, or the wind, or the even the snow, but the realization that my discomfort as a result of all three is entirely self-inflicted. There is no one to blame for the predicament I find myself in and no great conspiracy to pin my growing anguish on. I chose this and must now suffer the consequences. I can only hope the weather's downward spiral doesn't end up killing me.

Surviving a snowstorm is not an unusual accomplishment in Canada; millions of people do it every winter by simply staying inside. But getting caught in an October blizzard, miles from the nearest anywhere, while struggling up the side of a mountain on a bicycle – well, that's a different story. There is a measure of responsibility to it. Sure, this wind-driven squall has come out of nowhere,

but it is autumn in the higher elevations of the Rocky Mountains, a place where bad weather can be expected in any month of the year. It even snowed a little bit yesterday, and the day before that, and still I act surprised by this unpleasant development.

All around me, the mountains are nothing more than an ocean of white and shades of pale grey, and even though it is not yet three o'clock, the remaining daylight suddenly has a murky, menacing quality to it. Shadows and ghost images in every direction hint of the incredible scenery the storm is obscuring, but there are no solid reference points beyond the dark, sloppy asphalt beneath my wheels. With the availability of campsites on the road ahead far from certain, a single thought keeps pushing to the front of my consciousness: Why am I doing this again?

As I churn uphill at a pace that will never be mistaken for impressive, that line of inquiry simply begs another: Why can't I be like a normal person, content in my idyllic little mountain town, with a solid relationship, steady employment and favourite pub already sorted out? After all, who consciously abandons – no, actively escapes – what many often refer to as a “paradise on earth,” in order to subject himself to these harsh conditions? A question worthy of consideration on a deserted roadway, over a couple hundred laboured pedal strokes, and as big fluffy flakes work their way under the back of my collar, the only answer I can come up with is: an imbecile, that's who.

Things could be worse, I suppose. The gusting wind could be blowing downhill into my face, forcing me to push my bike uphill at a walk. A flat tire would also be a disaster right now, for sure; frozen hands desperately trying to manipulate small tools as sudden inactivity encourages a drop in core body temperature and flash-freezes

sweat and melted snow to my skin. So, in light of the precarious state of affairs on the back side of Parker Ridge, just above the Big Bend on a stretch of road appropriately named the Icefields Parkway, I have no choice but to carry on while pondering the mechanics of perception and, it must be said, my entire decision-making process. It is, after all, fully within my power to be splayed out on a familiar couch with a cold beer and a bag of chips, with nothing more challenging than three periods of televised hockey to worry about. But no, I'm determined to be out in the world, with all that that entails, and this is the reward for imagining there's more to life than to eat, sleep, work, repeat: a whiteout on a bike. As I may have mentioned already, I'm *not too bright*.

In my defence, pedalling up Sunwapta Pass on the Icefields Parkway in Jasper National Park seemed like a good idea from the comfort of my home a few months ago. And indeed, it was comfort that helped drive me out in the first place (or more precisely, an overabundance of false comfort) – but in alternating my hands up under the front of my warmest cross-country ski top to keep them from freezing while I grind up a climb that is going to take at least another hour to complete, it's impossible to avoid putting any and all motivations under the microscope. I believe they call it soul-searching, and in this preoccupied state I've failed to notice a vehicle – the only one I've seen in the last ten minutes – coming up quickly from behind.

“Hey! You're the mmmmaaaannnnnnnn!”

At least I think that's what the young man in the passenger seat of a new Jeep Wrangler just shouted as the vehicle sped along somewhat recklessly, his arm thrust out the window in the universal “thumbs up” salute. With the wind blowing all over the place in the tight valley, and the

Doppler effect dragging the words along the side of the mountain, it's hard to tell for sure, but for morale's sake I choose to take the shout-out as a compliment: a simple gesture meant to convey respect for the effort. Or perhaps it was an expression of sympathy and relief at not actually being me. Maybe he was just making fun of my predicament. Regardless of the true intent, it could be said that in addition to making foolish decisions that lead to unpleasant encounters with the weather, it's also possible I'm "the man," which admittedly is a boost to my sagging spirit and tired legs.

Re-energized by the improbable cheering section, I have no choice but to push on, with the hope of reaching the top of the pass, and the Columbia Icefield campground just beyond it, before dark – and of course to survive the night with my more distant extremities intact. Winter is not quite in full swing, but it is clearly getting ready to slam the door on the season for hikers, cyclists, dreamers and lost souls alike.

PART TWO

CLOSE TO HOME

2.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

*And I can't decide over right or wrong,
You left the feeling that I just do not belong.*

—Beth Orton

In April 2008, six months before my battle with the weather gods on Sunwapta Pass, I was inconsolable and most certainly was not “the man.” I’d been living in Canmore for close to four years and would have described it to the uninitiated as a charming, prosperous and obscenely picturesque community situated along Alberta’s mountainous western edge. From the balcony of my rented two-storey condo, I had an uninterrupted view of the mountains that started down the valley to the left, at the famous and oft-photographed Three Sisters, swept along the face of Mount Lawrence Grassi and Ha Ling Peak, hit a midpoint at Whiteman’s Gap, continued along the 12-kilometre eastern face of the Mount Rundle massif and ended at the imposing bulk of Cascade Mountain, off in the distance to the right.

The entire vista is part of the Front Ranges of the Rocky Mountains, and the section visible from my balcony is a small piece in the continuous chain of mountains that form the backbone of North America, from Mexico in the south all the way up to the Yukon Territory in the north. My personal bit of scenery sits about dead centre of those two extremes and is nothing short of world class. While

true summer often passes too quickly in the Rockies – especially compared to the long, sweltering summers of my youth back in eastern Canada – fall is generally mild, and winter’s chill is tempered with plenty of sunshine and more skiing opportunities than one person could take advantage of in a single lifetime. In fact, the Rockies are becoming an increasingly popular adventurer destination for outdoor sports enthusiasts year-round. Rock and ice climbing abound, and cross-country and backcountry ski trails shift seamlessly into hiking and mountain biking routes with every change of season.

My introduction to the Bow Valley Corridor, however, came nearly two decades ago, while I was riding a road bike, and I admit I never even gave Canmore more than a passing glance. I was headed out to the Pacific Coast from Calgary and in my haste to knock off miles didn’t even stop on my way through to Banff. At that time, I was obsessed with long-distance bike touring, even though it wasn’t the preferred, or trendy, way to travel in North America. Wherever regular people went by airplane or by car, the cool kids rode motorbikes, and a small percentage of fanatics, eccentrics and nerds pedalled. But I was infatuated with the mountain West, and in my mind the Canadian Rockies were a sanctuary of wonder and a revelation of nature that should be experienced at ground level – or as the legendary alpinist Reinhold Messner has said, by fair means. In my idealized mindset, planes were for people in a rush, and cars demonstrated a lack of imagination. RVs just made me nauseous.

At any rate, my heart was in the right place for a proper sweat- and grime-stained adventure, and my body was willing; I just wasn’t aware enough to take the time to appreciate what I was experiencing. Back in the mid-’90s,