# FAM DAMILY

**Three kids, a nonriding spouse, 500 pounds of jerry-rigged bike train, swordplay and a truck stop full of wife-coveting roughnecks could only lead to disaster—or the kind of once-in-a-lifetime adventure that bonds a family in a way they'll never forget**

## NEXT 3326 MILES

By Joe Kurmaskie ◆ Illustrated by Ryan Snook

# We were, by my best guess, three—maybe four—hard-boiled eggs from Obed Summit, the highest point along Canada's Yellowhead Highway.

**"Egg!"** I yelled as my pedals labored against 15 feet of tandem, trail-a-bike and trailer that comprised, with gear and my three sons, a gross weight somewhere north of 500 pounds.

Quinn, my nine-year-old stoker, began shelling another egg by repeatedly smacking it against his bike helmet. From the seat of the trail-a-bike behind him, his younger brother, Enzo, seven, stretched forward and salted my unlikely energy snack. These portable protein bombs often made their way to me missing a few mouthfuls as the boys took a delivery toll—supplementing the chocolate milk that served as their primary fuel—but this time I prayed for an intact shot of energy: We were going to need everything we had to make the 3,819-foot crest.

Collectively, we seemed to have realized this without saying much about it. A typical day saw us on and off our rig a dozen times before noon for plastic lightsaber sword fights, swimming holes and moose sightings. Today, we hadn't broken our cadence once. It helped, I suppose, that one-year-old Matteo had buried himself in the caboose, sleeping off a full night of sleeping. Beth, on the single touring bike I'd loaned her, had replaced her usual back-and-forth riding pattern with a resolute pace off our rear. The ramshackle carnival of conversations we'd been enjoying across Canada had dropped off to a word or two—necessary commands, sometimes a grunt of encouragement. When Enzo would point out a hawk on a fence post or a circling eagle, we'd turn our heads in unison for an appreciative look, exhale a few "ahs," then go back to pedaling.

We'd managed to best some substantial climbs, but in comparison with Obed they were bumps in the landscape. I treated the preliminary ascents and infrequent flats like test runs, working the gears to find the ratio that would ring true to my legs once our final share of free momentum off the rollers ran out.

"Here it comes, boys!" I said, gearing down as the cruelest bit of the Canadian Rockies rose in front of our wheel. I wanted my sons to understand that I needed them as I'd never needed them before, that I had to believe without hesitation in their youth, in the supple hearts crashing around in their chests, in the power of their fresh, lean legs. Instead, I shouted, "All the Jack Johnson songs in the world won't save us now!"

The boys didn't have a clue what I meant.

Neither did I.

I actually started to come out of the saddle—my second-rate-racer's body forgetting for an instant that it was heading up not a peloton but a mule train—then told myself to sit down and do the time, to work with the equipment instead of against it. An out-of-the-saddle sprint would not only sap me, but also probably snap a chain, and maybe fold our whole contraption in on itself.

Obed has no switchbacks. It's a straight climb to a false summit—enough plateau to consider one's cursed existence—then onto the slope where the real work begins. I was busy negotiating the pain and focusing on a spot 2 feet off the front wheel when I heard Beth's voice:

"Mush!"

She'd dropped in close behind the trailer and, like a seasoned coxswain for rowers on a faltering crew, was barking timed commands to help us find a pace. In the face of such stark grit and stamina—this trip was way over Beth's head—I had a moment's guilt that, the night before, after she'd drifted off to sleep, I'd shifted some of my heaviest payload into her four panniers. I quickly shook off the feeling, because if we were going to summit without stopping or, God help us, walking, I needed my full concentration (and because I'm a shameful little man who, in my secret heart, always wants to crest first).

**I'VE CROSSED THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK, HALF A DOZEN AFRICAN NATIONS, BEEN ALL AROUND AMERICA. BUT I KNEW THIS TRIP COULD BE THE MOST ARDUOUS OF MY LIFE.**

"Mush," she barked. "Mush!"

We began to slip into a solid rhythm.

"Mush," she cried.

"Mellow," the boys shouted, seeming to argue for a slower pace, which made no sense to me, but I was beyond caring.

"Mush!"

"Room!" The boys yelled back.

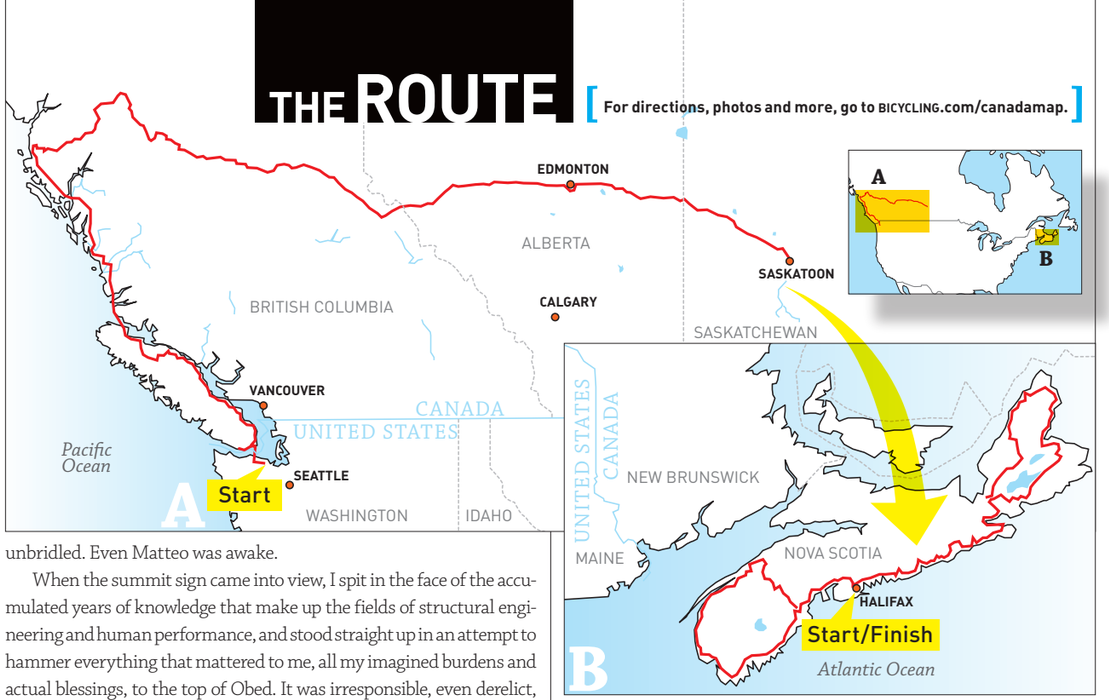
Ah.

I got it, located my groove and locked onto it. And on such trippy mantras our pace quickened and smoothed until—rare in life, even more elusive in the saddle—we somehow found that moment when a group, be it paceline, peloton, breakaway or family bike tour, morphs from mere teamwork into a single effort. For a few golden miles, it felt as if a cord were connecting us tighter than coiled steel. I howled with joy, Quinn whooped, Enzo rang his bell and Beth laughed loose and unbridled. Even Matteo was awake.

When the summit sign came into view, I spit in the face of the accumulated years of knowledge that make up the fields of structural engineering and human performance, and stood straight up in an attempt to hammer everything that mattered to me, all my imagined burdens and actual blessings, to the top of Obed. It was irresponsible, even derelict, behavior. But later, Beth would say that when Quinn and Enzo stood up and slashed at the pedals behind me, she'd never felt so proud.

## THE ROUTE

[ For directions, photos and more, go to BICYCLING.com/canadamap. ]




**Not one of us could have predicted such triumphs** when we wobbled out of the driveway of our Portland, Oregon, home for a shakedown of the bike before starting our summerlong unsupported bike trip around Canada. Rumor had a few neighbors taking bets on a quick return and slightly slower divorce.

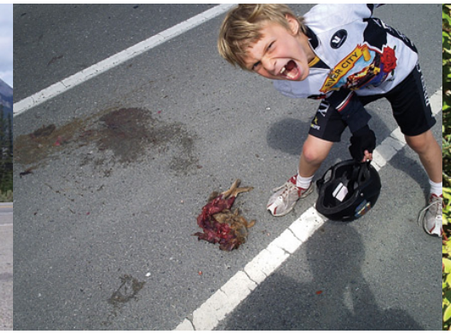
We had a friend following us with a vehicle from our front door to the Washington Ferry to work out any kinks. Then the plan was to jettison vehicle support and ride untethered as far as we could before snow chased us home. I figured we'd cover about 75 miles per day, camping about 75 percent of the time, then simply hop a flight home before the autumn leaves lost the last of their brilliance.

This was not wholly unfamiliar territory, at least for me. With 130,000 miles of bike travel banked, it's something of a calling. I've crossed the length of the Australian Outback, half a dozen African nations, been all around America (once even towing Quinn, Enzo and my dad's ashes), rolled through South America on road bike tires, rudimentary Spanish skills and not a lick of Portuguese, and even plumbed the depths of Copper Canyon, Mexico, one winter by mountain bike.

But Beth, my wife, is one of those people who can't decide if spandex is a conspiracy specifically targeting women or is just designed to make everyone look bad, who'd happily ride a singlespeed not to be hip but to avoid learning how to use a shifter. Add to that a son celebrating his first birthday, plus the unpredictability of traveling with kids of any age, and I knew this could turn out to be the most arduous adventure of my life.

Still, we had our reasons—good ones—to tempt fate. Beth and I had always agreed that we didn't want our progeny to become the kind of disaffected kids who grow up trapped in climate-controlled, overscheduled, hermetically sealed childhoods suffering Xbox carpal tunnel and nature-deficit disorder. I guess she figured it was time to put up or shut up. My excuse is that I'm restless and unpredictable on foot—spastic and unwieldy even—but atop a bike, I'm poetry in motion. I fit into the world better on a bicycle.

All I had to do to pull the whole thing off was deliver on the promises I'd made of fresh roadside fruit dripping down chins and full days of sunshine stretched around spring-fed lakes, that we'd for sure see a moose and even venture inside the largest mall in North America, and that I'd somehow keep them safe through one helluva adventure.





From left: Matteo (in trailer), Enzo, Quinn and Joe Kurmaskie; Quinn expresses a boy's appreciation for getting close to nature, though bear sightings were rare; Beth executes a wilderness diaper change.

**We botched it immediately, of course.** On the first morning, in a campground in Sequim, Washington, I rose early so that, as a surprise, I could brew gourmet coffee for Beth and hand it to her while pointing out the sun coloring the sky over the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Instead, I knocked the pot off the camp stove and as steaming coffee soaked my fleece pants I danced around in pain, disrobing and squawking obscenities—and our trip officially began with Beth emerging from the tent to find me wounded, pantless and cursing.

"Typical start?" she asked.

"Pretty much," I said. After dressing the injury and redressing myself, then taking a seat in the dirt beside her, I said, "Sometimes there's oatmeal, too."

Then there was our 437-pound rolling contraption, which was actually a stripped-down version of the original monster I'd concocted for the trip: a Santana triple (assembled with couplers), towing a one-wheeled trail-a-bike that would affix to a trailer—my own stroke of genius that would allow our entire five-person family to ride a single conjoined bike. The longest stretch limo in the cycling world. Unfortunately, riding that behemoth a mere 50 yards proved to be the most harrowing feat I'd ever accomplished on wheels. Picture a rolling Bowflex machine that tips from side to side without warning. After a morning of test riding, I was sweating buckets.

Beth was pale. "You're the expert," she said, bravely. "If you think we can do it with this setup, I'll soldier on."

I looked her in the eye. "It's too white-knuckle," I admitted.

She actually did a little victory dance, then said, "When I wasn't terrified, I was panicked."

"I'll undo the couplers," I explained, "and convert the triple to a double. I can muscle all three boys that way. But it means you have to solo on my old touring bike."

We had a moment there. It seemed the whole trip might be off before it was really on. But in the end, Beth simply put her gloves back on and said, "Just remind me how these shifty things work again."

We also wrestled over luggage. While I'd steeled myself for a protracted battle with the boys over the impracticality of lugging along Pokémon cards and sporting equipment, it ended up that I had only to evoke the prospect of all the roadside hobo treasures we might collect—pool floats, rocks, collectible animals—and my boys, recreating a scene from *Lord of the Flies*, instantly offloaded excess baggage. And most of their clothing. Beth was the holdout. Her necessities included the most recent 900-page Harry Potter (in hardcover) as well as a stack of cotton T-shirts, multiple bathing suits and several pairs of jeans.

"Cotton kills," I said. "You might as well ride wrapped up in soaking dishrags. And they'll be bricks in our panniers the first time they get wet." I held up my entire wardrobe for the trip, which could be palmed in one hand. "Wash and wear. Bring two lightweight, multipurpose, quick-dry outfits, wash one by whatever means necessary—stream, rock, rest-stop sink or garden hose—while wearing the other."

Beth said, "My cute jeans make me feel like a woman." Then she stuck her tongue out at me. That was her entire rebuttal. Juvenile. But effective. I double-bagged the jeans with the coffee.

Our darkest moment, as it often turns out, was also our turning point: Seven days in, on the Galloping Goose rail-trail, a dream cruise from Victoria to French Beach on the western end of Vancouver Island, Beth dropped off the radar.

It took the boys and me a few miles to realize she was missing. In our defense, as soon as we noticed, we heeled our yacht around and set off at full steam on a search and rescue. In my mind, anything might have happened: Beth had already suffered her first pedal gouge and, more horrifying for her, the initial assault of a biker's tan. ("How am I going to look in a bikini now?" she'd asked.)

**WE SAW GOATS AND FEASTED ON WILD BERRIES, AND MET CHARACTERS, AND WE SANG AND TALKED ABOUT THINGS SUBLIME AND RIDICULOUS AND RODE ON AND ON, JUST AS I'D DREAMED.**

We found her lying in the dirt beside the road, fixated on the clouds, in a blood-sugar daze. Quinn and Enzo, having witnessed this behavior in their old man, began reviving her with bagels and cream cheese, plus sweet and salty granola bars for good measure.

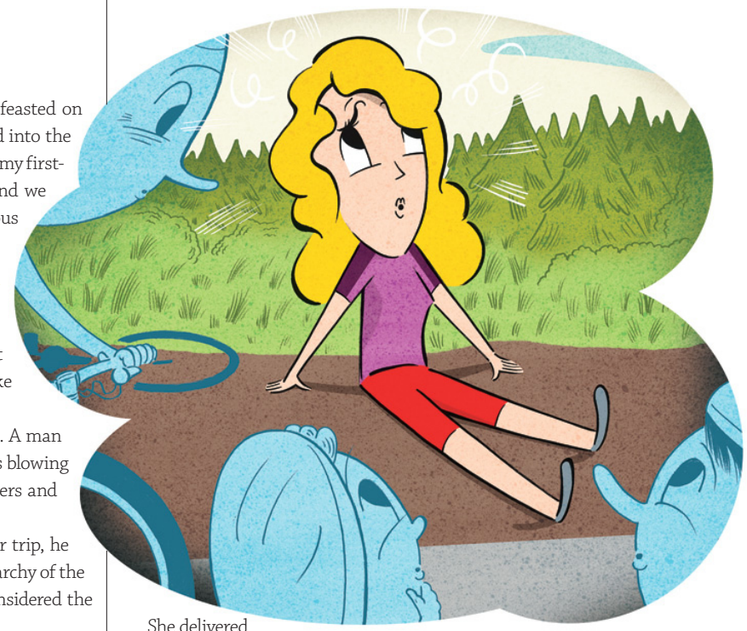
Beth's gaze was still slightly out of focus when she looked at me and said, "You bastard."

I nodded uncertainly. I was in agreement with the facts, but unclear where they were leading.

"Lying there," Beth said, now on her feet, "I realized something. You rented our house for the next two months."

She dusted herself off and accepted the handlebar—a promising sign—then said, "I can't go home." She looked at the Terry bike seat, patted it, and said, "This is my home now."

And so it became, and we rolled on, and we did see the moose I'd promised (at a relatively safe distance) and the largest mall in North America (too close for my comfort). We saw goats and feasted on wild berries, and met characters we immediately entered into the personal folklore each family develops, and through it all, my first-day's coffee searing remained the sole serious injury, and we sang and talked about things both sublime and ridiculous and rode on and on, just as I'd dreamed.



**A rain that came up fast and late on our 47th day** of riding chased us inside. I blinked away the last of it—cold, fat raindrops that made me stamp and shiver—so I could take in the truck-stop menu.

Beth eyed the flophouse motel beside the restaurant. A man standing outside the closed door of one of the rooms was blowing smoke rings into the downpour. A bar advertising dancers and "top shelf" liquor separated the two establishments.

"Is this a dump?" asked Quinn. Somehow during our trip, he had gotten onto a part-time quest to understand the hierarchy of the hotels and motels we passed. A true dump, which he considered the bottom of the scale, had not yet been checked off his list.

"There are different shades of dumps," Beth offered, in a bid for a teachable moment, a chance to instill our son with the wisdom that outward appearance might not so easily define inner character. That's when the waitress sauntered over and mentioned that if we wanted a room we'd need to see the bartender next door.

"It's a dump," I told Quinn. "But it's the only port in the storm."

We'd tried several other ports earlier. A campground touting a swimming pool and Putt-Putt golf had closed for renovations, and a provincial park by a lake was shut tight thanks to twin infestations of grizzly bears and mosquitoes. We'd have been willing to brave the bears.

"Order me whatever you're having," Beth said, then excused herself to the bathroom. I imagined she was hoping more for a hand dryer than a mirror.

In once-festive colors across a grease-stained marquee above the open kitchen I saw all the menu I'd need:

*TRUCKER'S DREAM*
*Prizes Awarded If Finished In One Sitting*

The waitress was not in the habit of asking people to repeat their orders. She merely leaned on her hip and waited for me to correct myself. I reordered mac and cheese for the boys and said, "And two Trucker's Dreams."

She delivered an unsympathetic smile. "You might want to think about this, Chief. No one's ever eaten two Dreams at once."

Beth slipped back into the booth at that moment, and I said, "The other one's for her."

Miners and roughneck oil workers in stained long coats crowding the adjacent booths took a closer look at us. I pointed at our bikes parked outside to explain our appetites, but every man was looking at my wife. A woman who can eat her weight in hash is a keeper in the North Country. You could read their skepticism though: By then Beth had lost the last of the weight she'd gained with Matteo, and hour upon hour in the saddle during our trip had carved her into performance art. She resembled an Olympic swimmer with a boob job. If Beth ate the Trucker's Dream I might have to fight our way out of there to keep her, but she would enter into undying legend in these parts.

I didn't even have to know what the dish entailed to be confident of our success. A cyclist pulling a bike with panniers eats like a termite. One hauling 15 feet of bike train, three children and hundreds of pounds of gear knows no mortal bounds.

Three thick slabs of meat—roast beef, Salisbury steak maybe and something else unidentifiable—formed the foundation of the Trucker's Dream. Gravy formed an adhesive layer between each course. Sitting atop the meat slabs were three over-easy eggs, gravy, three cuts of breakfast ham, gravy, three massive mounds of mashed potatoes, each with its own pool of butter but—in a delicate artistic decision—no gravy. Instead cheese formed the adhesive. In the same dollop shape as the potatoes there were scoops of canned veggies. Then those crazy bastards behind the grill went for broke: Gravy secured a hamburger to the center of the veggie mountain and lettuce, tomato and pickles reached for the heavens from the patty. In a white-capped peak of mashed potatoes on either side of this spire stood toothpick flags of the Canadian maple leaf and Old Glory.

The room was a powder keg of expectation. In the fixed, full view of the big, dull eyes of men who often forget to take off their work gloves while they eat, I winked at my wife and, so in love with life and each other at that moment, we went to town on those entrees.

*FAM DAMILY, continued on p. 91*

**From left: Beth and the boys show off their never-to-be-this-clean-again jerseys; with their metabolism revved up, the family's meals took up space on the panniers when picnic tables overflowed; Matteo had trained for this trip his whole life.**

*FAM DAMILY, continued from p. 65*

There was no sharing with the children, no talk of the meal's magnitude, no grim determination to soldier on, or rationalizing why we couldn't finish this or that part of the Dream. We savored it all, toasted our fortunes and handed out toothpick flags to the children when that was all that was left on our plates.

Then I ordered apple pie à la mode for the entire table.

When our waitress cleared the Dream plates she held them high and did a little ballerina turn for the room. Applause, hoots and a rumble of satisfied grunts filled the restaurant.

"I kinda like this dump," Quinn said.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

**We pulled over at Pirate's Cove for lunch and swordplay.** Back in Saskatoon, we'd been forced off our bikes by snow and subfreezing temperatures, and hopped by air to Nova Scotia. It was now perhaps a day's pedal to Halifax, where a plane would wing us home: Beth's mother was dying. We dangled our feet in the water while the boys skipped stones. Thirteen was the record so far. What waited for us back home no amount of pedaling could fix.

Beth put her arm around my shoulder. Our Trucker's Dream prizes were stowed deep in the panniers: two pristine mud flaps featuring silver silhouettes of naked ladies.

"Absolutely not," Beth had said when we were awarded with them.

"They're folkloric, culturally significant markers in our lives," I argued. "We could secure them to the bikes as extra fender protection against wet winters."

Beth had rolled her eyes and said, "They're not coming with us unless we're riding to a divorce court." I wouldn't have her any other way, even when I think I want another way.

We agreed to ship them to a friend in Arizona, a bachelor who will, without guilt or shame, secure them to his commuter bike and roll around the bone-dry desert. And a bachelor, I trust, he will stay.

The last miles of our family's biggest adventure ever, a shared secret between us, a permanent summer in our hearts now, where we were never apart, featured perfectly spaced rollers—the rare sort that, for people with the right attitude and stamina and, say, 3,400 miles or so of Canada behind them, can be run like billiard balls. Without so much as a pause to think it over, I started to run the table. My legs pumped with staccato fury, and just like that we were tucked and untethered, achieving a full head of steam down, the divine hand of momentum back up, and a state of grace throughout that is no less real for its being temporary and perhaps imaginary.

"We serve no hills, boys." I yelled at the approach of the next crest. "We serve no hills!"

"It's a roller coaster," Enzo howled back.

Which could be said of any of the rides, on and off the bikes, waiting for us back home. Ⓑ

---

*Joe Kurmaskie is the best-selling author of the memoirs* Metal Cowboy, Riding Outside the Lines *and* Momentum Is Your Friend. *His latest,* Mud, Sweat and Gears: A Rowdy Family Bike Adventure Across Canada, *features footnotes by Beth. Find more information at metalcowboy.com.*