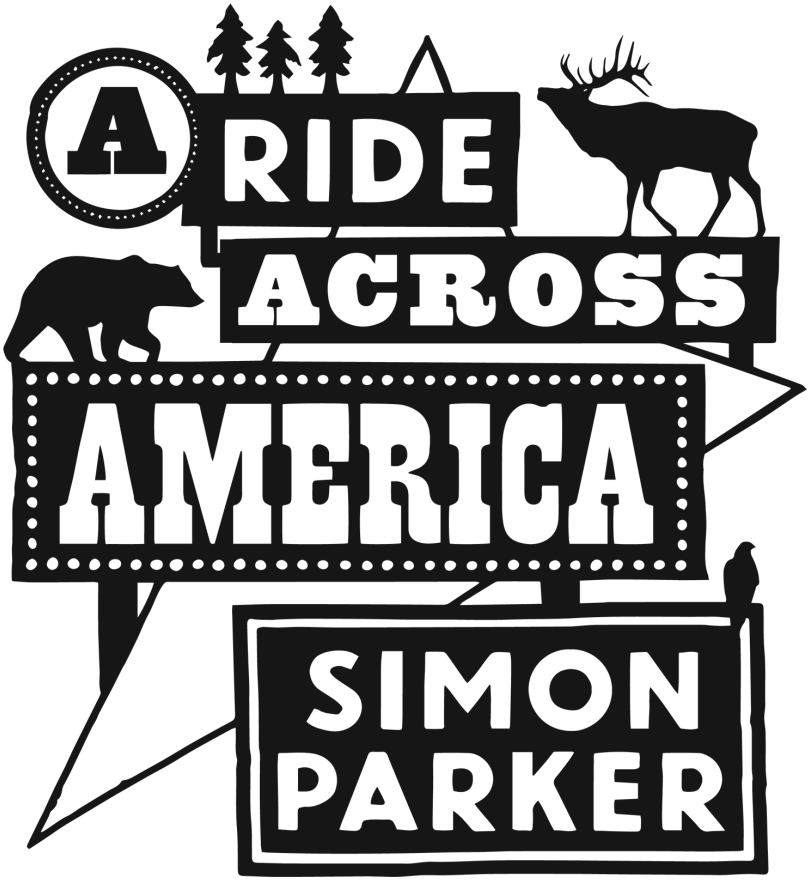

A 4,000-MILE ADVENTURE THROUGH THE SMALL TOWNS & BIG ISSUES OF THE USA

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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First published in 2024 by September Publishing

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, www.refinecatch.com
Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by Hussar Books

ISBN 9781914613593
Ebook ISBN 9781914613609

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Everything you are about to read is true. Every encounter, every saddle sore, every burger and fries. Every conversation in this book happened with a real, living, breathing human being (and the occasional angry dog). I have, however, abridged some long and rambling conversations in the interests of brevity.

I have also changed a few names to protect identities. People were extremely honest and generous with their time and opinions. That demands my respect and, in some cases, their anonymity. While in a handful of other cases, conversations were so brief that I didn't catch a name.

Before I go any further, I also feel it's necessary to state that throughout the following text, I naturally offer my own musings and opinions on America, its people, foods and habits. These ramblings are not intended to offend. This journey and book came from a place of intrigue, love and admiration. If you're American and I do touch the occasional nerve, I apologise and welcome you to visit Britain, to poke fun at our bad teeth, incessant rain and warm beer.

But for those of you who stick with me: I doff my cycling cap to you. Saddle up, apply a generous splodge of chamois cream, stay hydrated and don't forget to pack an extra inner tube or two.

PROLOGUE

Spring 2016

The curtains reeked of crack cocaine – a sour, acrid stench, something like burnt plastic or creosote. Where the carpet wasn't curling back from rotting floorboards, it contained islands of grime and detritus. Soiled napkins. Used cutlery. Splintered cocktail sticks. A Petri dish-like dinner plate, turquoise with mould. A crucifix hung from the wall beside a large American flag. On a table at shin level, two dozen empty beer cans, exclusively Bud Lite and Rolling Rock, had been coated in an avalanche of grey cigarette ash. At one corner, I spotted the sun-bleached pages of a firearms magazine titled, unequivocally: *GUNS*. 'Resurrecting an UZI', read one subtitle. 'Colt's 1911. More than a mere legend', stated another.

Less than an hour before, I'd been alone and – now with the power of hindsight – splendidly carefree, cycling solo and unsupported across the United States, along a desolate potholed highway with only the occasional swirling dust devil for company. In the thick heat of late afternoon, I'd spotted refuge for the night: a small town on the eastern horizon, a bulbous water tower hovering over its inhabitants like a UFO.

As I raced closer, across asphalt sticky with a day's solar energy, I passed a shuttered-up drive-in movie theatre, a spooky-looking scrapyard, then a baseball field coated in fine golden sand. After ten hours on the road, and 100-odd miles on the clock, I found a convenience store, grabbed a beer from the fridge and stumbled, thirstily, towards the teenage checkout clerk.

'You got ID?'

'I'm 28.'

'No ID, no sale.'

'Look at me,' I said, pointing to crow's feet at the corners of my eyes, a scraggly beard and chapped lips. 'I look 48. At best.'

'Sorry, Sir. No ID, no sale.'

I stared contemptuously at the boy's acne for a few seconds, then marched outside to my bike's crammed panniers and set about searching for my passport, which I'd hidden somewhere deep in their muddled bowels. Out came dirty pants, sweat-stained T-shirts, odd socks, half-eaten cereal bars, hydration tablets, bars of motel soap, ketchup sachets, sun cream, spare inner tubes, roll-on deodorant, a foul-smelling towel, a multitool, a Swiss Army knife, a sleeping bag, approximately 60 loose pages of Bill Bryson's *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-Town America*, seven AA batteries of unknown charge, eight spare spokes, a small bottle of chain oil, then – finally – my passport.

As I began throwing the contents back in, a cool shadow was cast across my shoulders. 'Beer?' said a stocky, shaven-headed man with a tribal neck tattoo, a farmer's tan and an oily black goatee, as he handed me a 12-ounce can, dripping with delicious condensation.

'Wow, thank you,' I replied. And without thinking, I ripped the ring pull clean off and began glugging at the rasping liquid. Within five transformative seconds, my elbows dropped and my toes tingled with glorious booze.

'British?'

'Sure am.'

'You got some place to crash?'

'Umm, no. Thought I'd camp.'

'I got a couch.'

'Wow. OK.'

'And beer.'

'Great. Thanks.'

'I'll drive. You follow.'

Thousands of miles from the familiar streets of New York, Los Angeles and the theme parks of Florida, I was traversing a land where foreign tourists seldom venture. I've no idea of the town's name. I don't even recall which state I was in. All I can say with confidence is that it was somewhere within a 1,500-mile tract between South Dakota and Ohio, in the northern reaches of the mostly pancake-flat American

Midwest, celebrated for its agriculture, industry and empty landscapes.

My fleeting exchange with a man I'd only just met could be described as foolhardy or blasé. Is a 30-second meeting enough time to judge a person's motives or character? Let alone agree to an overnight stay in their home? Almost certainly not. But travel, especially on one's own, has the peculiar power to cloud normal standards of human discourse. Alcohol certainly helps, too.

I had found myself in this situation umpteen times before. By opening myself up to the kindness, generosity and hospitality of strangers, and by throwing all normal cautions to the wind, good things only ever happened.

A film degree, majoring in American New Wave Cinema (1967–1982), had fostered a love of the USA, its landscapes and arts. But I'd also gorged on hundreds of horror movies, from Hitchcock to Carpenter, via Craven and Roth. As I followed the man's beaten-up Ford pickup, faded blue with a broken taillight and rusted towbar, travelling further and further from the town's centre, I began to catastrophise. Had I fully thought this through? Absolutely not. Was I about to be violently dismembered and dissolved in an oil drum filled with hydrofluoric acid? Maybe.

We passed a neon-lit diner, then turned left down a residential side street, pulling up to a weathered clapboard house, with wine bottle windchimes hanging from its cobwebbed eaves and torn net curtains chock-full with sundried flies. The mile or so between me and civilisation felt like a galaxy. Tentatively, I parked my bike next to a broken motorcycle, its wires dribbling into the dirt like the entrails of a large, disembowelled mammal, and entered through a porch strewn with unread mail, used pizza boxes and soggy cat litter.

I'd never smoked crack cocaine personally but I recognised its lingering, acerbic stench from assignments in the favelas of South America. Regular users can display volatile mood swings and set off on haphazard, ranting tangents.

'So!' shouted the man, as he clinked around his fridge and I looked for somewhere cleanish to sit in the adjacent living room, 'what do you think about Brexit? You're going to finally sling those

fuckin' immigrants out! I fuckin' hope so! Hey, can I fix you up something to eat?'

With assorted gun periodicals draped across the arms of chairs, the setting was so alien it was hard to comprehend. I felt like Louis Theroux without a camera crew.

For the next half an hour, the man set out on a chaotic diatribe aimed at everyone and everything, from the *Washington Post* to avocados, via 3G phone masts and *Saturday Night Live*, stopping to take swipes at all the 'Latinos', 'Japs', 'Gays' and 'Blacks' in between. It was hard to conclude if the man had any discernible political affiliations or if he simply hated everyone. Fifty per cent captivating, 50 per cent terrifying, he spoke in explosive soundbites. All 'bullshit' this and 'cocksucker' that. Caught in his orbit, I only took my eyes off him for a few split seconds at a time, to survey for rodents in my direct vicinity and to determine if the cockroach on the wall was getting any closer. I could hear a dog barking in the yard and spotted occult-like doodles on a notepad peeking out from beneath the couch.

What made this encounter even more confusing, though, was how – when he wasn't being overtly racist, discriminatory or inciting violence of some sort – oddly *affable* he was. A volatile character, sure, but nonetheless desperate to make me feel comfortable and at home. A sheep in wolf's clothing, with hot-blooded political opinions, who delivered them with a warm smile and a side order of Pringles.

If I'd read this man's rants in an illicit dark web chat room, my mind's eye wouldn't have conjured up this living, breathing human, plumping pillows on the sofa. By the time I'd drunk half my beer he was already rooting around in the fridge, looking for another. This pattern played out for over an hour until I was half cut and dozy.

'They've got us just where they want us!' he whispered, as a thick blue vein bulged across his sweaty brow and he fiddled with a piece of smoke-stained tin foil.

'They? Who is they?' I enquired.

'Them. The elite. The Deep State.'

'To be honest, I'm not too …'

'Hey, can I make you a sandwich?'

'Umm, I think I should …'

'Who's your team? Chelsea? Manchester United?'

'Well, actually …'

'Hey, have you ever shot a Beretta before?'

My journalist brain was urging me to stay, to sit it out and hear his point of view. My heart, too, wanted to be polite. On a one-to-one level, this man wasn't a bad host. I just don't think he'd spoken to another human for a while. But with the adrenaline levels in my body beginning to fall, my words slurring and eyes drooping, my gut was telling me to run. Around 40 per cent of US households contain guns, and I got a hunch that this one had more than its fair share.

'You want to watch YouTube videos?' he asked enthusiastically, as I disguised a yawn with my grubby fist. 'There's hidden messages in them, if you watch closely.'

I didn't respond.

'Hey, man. Have you ever fired a crossbow?'

When he started slugging bourbon directly from the bottle and pontificating about the crooked, cabal-like nature of the mainstream media I knew it was time to leave. It was surely only a matter of time before he asked me what I did for a living, or at the very least challenged me to a round of bare-chested Russian roulette.

When he got up to grab another beer from the kitchen, I began nervously mumbling about how I'd promised to call my parents from a nearby phone box. I then made a handful of pathetic apologies and edged past him, through the front door and back out to my bike.

'I'm sorry,' I said, as I jumped into the saddle and began pedalling away. 'It was … lovely to meet you.'

1

AMERICAN DREAMS

A couple of months earlier, in the winter of 2015/16, I had finally landed one of the meaty mega-assignments that I'd daydreamed about for so long. A project, rather than just a shift. It was goodbye to the windowless studios of central London, the glitching autocues and egotistical editors, and hello to adventure, with its fresh air and unknowns.

I'd been commissioned by the BBC World Service to make a radio documentary about 'human endurance', to investigate what possessed people to leave the comfort of their so-called 'normal lives' and pit themselves against huge physical endeavours. However, rather than simply interview a handful of ultra-marathon runners, mountaineers and polar explorers, I'd dreamt up an idea for an expedition of my own. To sail and cycle halfway around the world, racing on land and sea with and alongside the 2015–16 Clipper Round the World Yacht Race – a 40,000 mile circumnavigation of the planet aimed at serious amateur sailors.

A journey within a journey. I would travel 15,000 miles from China to London, west to east, entirely wind and muscle powered. I'd be sailing in a team across the Pacific from Qingdao to Seattle and cycling solo across the USA to New York. Then I'd return to the yacht to sail the Atlantic to Northern Ireland and then cycle alone again for the final few hundred miles to London.

Straightforward, on paper, kind of. But having blagged myself a place as a journalist across the North Pacific, I quickly discovered that I categorically and indisputably despised a life at sea. Some adventures sound better in your head than they turn out to be in the flesh.

Claustrophobic and constantly moving, the 70-foot fibreglass

yacht stank of burnt porridge and the viscous fluorescent urine of dehydrated bladders, which sloshed out of the toilet and ran through a channel beneath our bunkbeds. Heeling at 45 degrees to harness the wind as efficiently as possible and cut through the ocean like the sharp edge of a snowboard, we slammed relentlessly eastwards, jostling with 11 blinking dots on our navigation system.

Human endurance? This went way beyond what I'd had in mind. Sleep deprived and malnourished, factory-farmed chickens are kept in better conditions than ocean racing sailors. In a fleet of identical yachts, marginal gains are achieved by sailing close to, but not quite into, powerful storms, and by pushing the vessel and its components to (and often beyond) their limits. On a good, albeit uncomfortable day, we'd cover 300 miles, tacking and jibing in a zigzag motion on a northeasterly bearing. On a bad one, we'd race so close to breaking point that the inch-thick ropes holding our sails in place would snap under the immense tension and send us into violent, dizzying spins. This was not a pleasure cruise but a sprint from one side of the planet to the other, as every blunt object onboard attempted to maim or decapitate. Each morning, someone would be nursing a new sprain, cut or bruise.

I have never felt so lonely, so vulnerable and so starved of stimulation as I did on that Pacific voyage. I grew furious with myself for allowing my thirst for adventure to reach such a preposterous level. 'I'm going to die out here. I'm going to fucking die out here,' I said to myself, hundreds of times, as I retreated deeper and deeper into my shell.

To make my predicament worse, I was not blessed with sea legs, and for 30 days I was rendered mostly useless by incapacitating bouts of seasickness. With my eyes and inner ear thrown out of sync, I spent most of my time spraying partially digested noodles across the boots of a crew who considered me a superfluous dead weight. To this day, the mere whiff of sweet chilli sauce makes me retch. For 7,000 miles, it was the only thing we had to flavour our pasta, rice and porridge. Combined with stomach acid and bile, it was enough to leave my throat and mouth covered in angry sores. I just about managed to secure the handful of interviews I needed for the start of my documentary. However, unsurprisingly, I didn't

particularly endear myself to a group of sailors who were trying to race from one side of the planet to the other as quickly (and as cleanly) as possible.

When we finally reached Seattle, I'd lost roughly eight kilograms in bodyweight. Burning 6,000 calories a day, while ingesting almost none, will do that to a person. Worse still, my lungs rattled with a chunky green phlegm. The ocean had rusted me from the inside out. I was in the worst possible shape of my life, scrawny and emaciated. But waiting for me at the marina was a plywood box with a few chastening words seared into its splintered flanks: AIR FREIGHT. PROPERTY OF MR SIMON PARKER. 1 BICYCLE. 1 TRAILER. ASSORTED BAGGAGE. CUSTOMS CHECKED.

Now I had to cycle across America.

If I'd have visited a doctor, they would have almost certainly told me to throw in the towel and fly home. But naively, I'd promised the BBC that I was not just *sailing* but also *cycling* halfway around the world. As it stood, I only had a third of the content required for my assignment, and through fear of reneging on the biggest commission of my career, I set off less than a week later on the £500 aluminium bike I used to cycle around London, pulling a second-hand trailer sourced from eBay filled with all manner of unnecessary clobber.

Until then, I'd only cycled 1,000 miles in one go, across France and Italy, with a support vehicle carrying my luggage. But now, here I was, staring down a solo 4,000-mile bike ride from Seattle to New York. I needed to average 600 miles a week for the next month and a half if I was to stand any chance of reaching the Big Apple in time for the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race's final leg across the Atlantic: my ride back to Britain. In fact, there was no backup plan, or plane ticket booked, just in case. This half-baked idea was an all or nothing – fake it till you make it – endeavour.

Having been unable to coax any significant expenses out of the BBC, I had just $1,000 to my name, about £700 in crumpled cash hidden in and around my bike. For the first few days, I either slept in laybys or pitched my tent in national parks. Only later would I discover that spring is a notoriously dangerous season for bear attacks, who emerge cranky and hungry from their hibernations.

Anyone who has travelled on a shoestring, however, will

know that this penniless curse can become a blessing. Because without a financial nest egg to rely upon, I was forced to embrace a style of happy-go-lucky living that opened me up to a world of incomprehensible generosity. A brand of kindness and hospitality that I would come to regard as being profoundly and unambiguously 'American'.

When I wasn't camping, I was taken in by complete strangers, for no other reason but pure and unadulterated altruism. An English accent certainly helped. Just asking politely for 'water' with a hard T in my best received pronunciation, rather than 'waaaarder' like most North Americans and Australians do, would turn heads in gas stations, diners and convenience stores. People would hear my voice, then queue up to tell me about a long-lost relative back in Blighty, their adoration of the British monarchy or an obsession with the long-running TV series *Midsomer Murders*. On one occasion, a bespectacled woman with tears streaming down her cheeks flagged me into a layby and forced a crisp $20 bill into my hands 'to get something decent to eat. You look terrible, and your mother must be worried sick!'

My bicycle became an esteemed wingman, a curiosity people could spot a mile away through swirling heat mirage or torrential rain. With its bulging panniers, chaotically packed trailer and fluttering Nepalese prayer flags – given to me by a lady in her seventies 'to ward off bad vibes' – it served as a conversation starter like none other.

'Where you headed?' said a few dozen people a day, as they surveyed my cumbersome, intriguing steed. It had a clown horn fastened to the handlebars and a bouquet of plastic flowers protruding from beneath the saddle.

'New York. I hope.'

Most were rendered speechless. One woman dropped her coffee. Another ran to the car and called her mother, who was dying of a terminal illness in a nearby hospital. 'Mom, you have got to talk to this crazy British guy I just met at the 7-Eleven … Hey, do you know Prince Charles?'

After the routine and claustrophobia of the racing yacht, the risk of death and the lingering scent of vomit, my bike unleashed a

sense of overwhelming freedom within me. Exposed to the changing elements, without protection from a window, a roll bar or airbag, I felt connected with the land and its people in a way I'd seldom experienced before. Most liberating of all, however, was the way I could pause for rest when I needed it. To stop and contemplate a landscape when I wanted to: the sleet-dusted Rockies, the grassy Great Plains, the forested Appalachians. When things got too tough, or too wet, or too cold, I could simply take refuge somewhere and wait for the next chapter of the adventure to unfold. Unlike the unrelenting monotone of the Pacific, and the mind-numbing routine of being stuck in a fibre-glass box, America was a kaleidoscope of infinite colour and variation.

That's not to say the cycling wasn't gruelling. Especially in my frail state. But at least the hard graft came with the payoff of pretty pictures: blistering sunsets, stacks of fluffy pancakes, straight roads gobbled up by the horizon. The sort of empty highways that Hollywood protagonists disappear on, at the appropriate moment in their blockbusters, to infer a sense of freedom, or sometimes a feeling of immense loneliness. Think *Easy Rider* (1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Thelma & Louise* (1991). With these strands of hot tarmac almost entirely to myself, I could ride and ride, from before dusk to beyond dawn, often in a blissful, trance-like state.

Fascinatingly, many of the small towns I found along the way seemed to be stuck in a time warp. I cycled past rusted 1940s Studebakers and big red fire hydrants that bore the scars of long, hot summers. I found derelict train stations, boarded-up art deco theatres, struggling local newspapers and stainless steel diners that served Coke floats, home fries and big slabs of blueberry pie. Even more intriguing, though, was that this otherworld was filled with millions of American citizens that I'd barely seen portrayed on the silver screen, let alone on the BBC, Fox News or CNN. Forty per cent (128 million) of the American population lives in its coastal counties, crammed into cities such as Los Angeles, New York and Miami. The rest, however, reside in the immense, and often ignored, expanse between.

When I wasn't cycling, I chatted to Middle America's farmhands, fishermen, musicians, checkout clerks, carpenters,

truckers, barmaids and bike mechanics. I slept in the pool house of a millionaire soya bean farmer and in a hammock on the porch of a Lutheran pastor. I stayed in the mice-infested hayloft of an evangelical rancher and camped in the backyard of a halfway house occupied by recovering heroin addicts. These people felt like forgotten Americans, living in the geographical and cultural hinterlands of mainstream society.

It's true that I did meet some extraordinarily intense people. Not least the hospitable skinhead conspiracy theorist with the neck tattoos and erratic mannerisms. Any long-distance trip has them. Heck, we're all weird in one way or another. But overall, I found kind and cordial people who wanted to do what kind and cordial people do best: chew the fat. Boy, do Americans love to chat.

It was just a shame that I felt in such a rush. Averaging more than 600 miles a week, I was moving faster than you would on most driving holidays. By turning this journey into a time trial, a race to sail home, it felt like I'd missed the point entirely.

After 3,707 miles in the saddle, I rolled wearily into New York. Above me, Manhattan's skyscrapers blinked and twinkled in the hazy twilight. Epic, no doubt. And a huge sense of accomplishment – I'd cycled across the USA. But if I'm totally honest, I felt deflated, underwhelmed. The city stank of rotting garbage and throbbed with noisy sirens. I yearned for Middle America and the people I'd met there.

All of us will look back on the moments that have shaped us: enlightening periods of our education, a particularly carefree summer, a formative teenage relationship. Often, it takes years or decades for us to fully appreciate their significance in creating who we are. But I knew – right there and then – that this journey had changed the course of my career. By practising journalism at the gentle(ish) pace of a bicycle, sometimes just five or six miles per hour, I'd experienced a professional epiphany. Without a camera crew, bright lights and scary microphones, people opened up to me – a grubby British bloke in shorts and a T-shirt – in a way I'd never experienced before. Most nationalities require a bit of warming up, a few minutes of foreplay. Not Americans. Most cut right to the chase. They say it how it is. Candid hot takes.

No-holds-barred opinions. Freedom of speech is so enshrined into the US Constitution it can sometimes be hard to get a word in edgeways.

As I continued my half-circumnavigation, this time sailing across the Atlantic on another 70-foot racing yacht, and once again spraying the contents of my stomach across anyone who dared get too close, I grew haunted by the thought of that tattooed Midwestern man and a missed opportunity.

'I should have seen it through,' I grumbled to myself. 'I should have stayed the night and heard him out.' My documentary about 'human endurance' was wishy-washy flimflam in contrast to all the meat I'd gnawed off America's bones along the way. 'He was the *real* story. Not this.'

On 8 November 2016, 100 days after I returned to Britain, the United States elected its forty-fifth president. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote with 48 per cent but lost the White House to Donald Trump's 46 per cent, due to the quirks of the American electoral college system.

Returning to the daily trudge of freelance journalism, I remember the period, perhaps not fondly, but well. The world's cameras focused on the USA. What might President Trump say or do next? America was box office, albeit often freakishly so.

Simultaneously, our newsgathering seemed to enter a cynical, toxic age. In the biz, perhaps more than ever, our interviewees needed to clearly represent one thing or another. If there had ever been an age of nuance, it was unequivocally now over. In a four-minute news segment, you could watch a mouthy newspaper columnist argue about primary school syllabuses with a shouty Mumsnet blogger, often for no other editorial justification than to ignite televisual dynamite.

The Twitter algorithm, too, pitted A versus B. With just 140 characters to make a point, users were forced to shout, rather than discuss. From President Trump to Z-list celebrities, via all the loonies with smartphones in between, online social and political discourse became a contest of who could say the most extreme thing in the quickest and pithiest fashion.

Fascinatingly, but somewhat irksomely, I saw a disconnect between the country I'd just experienced at ground level and the one I was now seeing portrayed on page and screen. Yes, most of the Americans I'd met were highly politicised and rarely shy about it. But the way the media and politicians lazily lumped people into camps – right, left, liberal, conservative, red, blue – felt like an erroneous over-simplification of a country that was considerably more complex. Rather than searching out America's softly spoken middle ground – its farmers, fishermen, drug users and teachers – journalists amplified the people screaming loudest. The pseudo-intellectuals, the think-tank clones, the fame-hungry legislators. All this did, however, was create an angry caricature. A parody of America.

In October 2018, halfway through Donald Trump's first (and, at time of writing, only) term, I decided that I needed to get back, to see America again for myself. To practise the 'slow journalism' I craved so much. President Trump had promised to reduce illegal immigration. Therefore, I cooked up another hairbrained idea – to cycle 2,500 miles beside the US–Mexico border. The journey would allow me to ask border officials, Mexican migrants, Texan ranchers, young people, old people, rich and poor, what life was really like at this geopolitical flashpoint. Rather than collect a handful of snappy vox pops, my plan was to conduct hundreds of long-form interviews with the people at the centre of the story. In theory, my plan made sense. So, I flew to Austin, took a bus to the Gulf of Mexico, and started my cycle west, following the border as closely as possible.

I'd studied long-range weather forecasts and average temperatures for the past two decades and concluded that I'd spend six weeks travelling in a very agreeable 22 degrees centigrade. Well, that was the idea. In 2018, Texas's autumn had other plans.

I got 300 miles in before I almost died of heat stroke in the Chihuahuan Desert, where temperatures exceeded 40 degrees centigrade. Dangerously exposed and overheated, I limped into a partly bulldozed house and collapsed in the shade of a garage. Some minutes or hours later, I woke up covered in ice, with a middle-aged man with shoulder-length silver hair and a crucifix dangling from

his neck encouraging me to take small sips of Gatorade. There is still a little part of me that wonders if this man was, in fact, an apparition, a hallucination in my over-heated imagination. But as a blood-red sun simmered into the horizon, he convinced me that my journey, for now at least, was a fool's errand. 'You'll die out there, dude,' he insisted. 'America isn't going anywhere. And it's definitely not going to get any less fucked up.'

The man was on to something. Because since Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, followed by the 2020 administration of Joe Biden and the storming of the Capitol Building on 6 January 2021, the United States of America has – from a distance, at least – appeared anything but united. Between 2016 and 2023, the country's federal debt grew from circa $20 trillion to more than $30 trillion. All while the economies of China and India snapped at its Converse-clad heels. In December 2021, the final US troops withdrew from Afghanistan, where 2,448 American servicemen and women had lost their lives, alongside 3,848 US contractors, 66,000 Afghan national military and police, and 47,245 Afghan civilians. A success?

I grew up in the 1990s seeing the USA as the Big Daddy of geopolitics, the World Police. But seven years after my first ride across America, I looked across the pond and saw a nation that I didn't fully recognise. Had the country finally lost its swagger? Was its star finally fading?

Memories of my cross-country journey in 2016 were seared to the back of my mind's eye as halcyon days. But were they clouded in an unhelpful rose tint? A case of travellers' Stockholm syndrome, perhaps?

By late 2022, when the idea for this book developed from a few random daydreams into a full-blown obsession, I started to wonder if, psychologically, I'd somehow misremembered my time there. Had I been so focused on the physicality of the bike ride that I'd failed to scrutinise the country with the journalistic rigour it deserved? With its omnipresence in global popular culture, it can be easy to look at the United States and feel like you've worked it out. I have friends who would scoff at the mere suggestion of a holiday in the

'brash, samey' USA. Perhaps that's the greatest – albeit somewhat paradoxical – success of 'brand USA'. Its landscapes, products and accents are so instantly recognisable and ubiquitous within popular culture. You could show a photo of a cheeseburger, a baseball or a Cadillac to an Amazonian tribesman and he'd probably be able to point to the country on a map.

Nevertheless, even I now questioned how much of the American cultural landscape I genuinely, fully understood. And by 'cultural' I don't mean its films, books and TV shows. I could hold my own in a pub quiz. I know my Steinbeck from my Spielberg. But more so the big topics and so-called 'culture wars' that hogged most of its news coverage. Evergreen subjects we instantly associate with America: gun ownership, abortion rights, Christianity, private healthcare, big pharma, the military and freedom. But also emerging contemporary topics that have entered the lexicon in just the past few decades: election fraud, climate change, the alt-right, critical race theory, trans rights, the opioid crisis, Fentanyl, Covid-19, QAnon, and the Deep State. It was easy to hear these words and phrases on the news, day after day, and grow hardened to their meaning, without fully engaging with or understanding exactly what each issue entailed.

I believe, evangelically, however, that travel is the greatest form of education. I have learned more about people and place from week-long trips than I have from a dozen books. I am the archetypal kinaesthetic learner. I need to touch and taste to fully understand.

By spring 2023 I was hatching a plan: to ride across America. Again. A year before the 2024 presidential election. Only this time, to go slower, to look up rather than down and record hundreds of conversations along the way. To immerse myself in its beguiling yet fragile landscapes, while striving to better understand the country, its politics and problems. Notably, with the help of *real* people, met mostly on the roadside, rather than the same old talking heads on TV. How much had the country changed in seven years and nearly three elections? Would I find optimism and hope? Or discover division, doom and gloom?

I wanted to cycle coast to coast again, with a clearly defined A to B. An end-to-end journey would have the power to keep me enthralled and pushing forwards, even at the most challenging

moments. I liked the idea of returning to the Northwest again, to catch up with a few of the people I'd met on my first journey. Seattle is the most northwesterly point of the contiguous (the lower 48) United States, right?

Wrong. When I zoomed in on Google Maps, I was struck by just how far away it is from the Pacific Ocean. In fact, Seattle sits 160 miles east of the vast, pixilated blue of the planet's biggest body of water. To the west of the city, I saw a forested green peninsula, and at the furthest point north, a place called Cape Flattery, the northwestern-most point of the contiguous United States.

It was love at first sight. I'd been skewered by one of Cupid's golden arrows. I had my starting point, a place that made my eyes bulge with intrigue. But where to? Naturally, my next Google search was 'extreme points of the USA' and BOOM, up popped Key West, Florida, the southeastern-most point of the contiguous USA, and a place I knew very little about. All I could picture was palm trees and piña coladas.

Cape Flattery and Key West were a whopping 4,000 miles apart. Surpassing my first cycle across the USA (3,707 miles), it would be my biggest ever bike ride. The journey would take me through roughly a dozen geographically and culturally diverse states, through great swathes of agriculture, over lofty mountain ranges, across vast plains and into hundreds of small towns. Better still, the route was unlike anything I'd seen before. The popular cross-country itineraries followed either a northern, central or southern path, on a mostly horizontal trajectory. In contrast, mine wiggled diagonally, from top left to bottom right.

For the first time in my life, I actually trained for this journey. Albeit, somewhat under duress. My normal approach to these big bike rides was to use the first week or two as 'training', to ease myself in gently. However, since 2016, my life had changed considerably. I was no longer a single man, wandering around the world from one hotel room to the next. I was happily married.

I'd met Alana through work, while setting up a story for the BBC in Arctic Finland. And within a few love-pained weeks, she made me realise there was more to life than filling a passport with

stamps. My thirst for adventure would need to be balanced with my responsibilities and vows as a husband. She was adamant that I not only prepared for the ride beforehand but then looked after myself adequately while on it.

I therefore agreed to a few sessions with a personal trainer, to build up my quadriceps, calves, hamstrings and shoulders. I also had my bike's saddle and handlebars professionally fitted to my exact shape and size and settled on a handful of health supplements that – ever the sceptic hack – I'd previously dismissed as baloney. Namely:

- Branch chain amino acids. To help reduce muscle breakdown.
- Glutamine. To remove excess ammonia and assist with immune system function.
- Magnesium. To maintain healthy muscles, nerves, bones and blood sugar levels.
- Zinc. To help recover from strenuous exercise and clear free radicals.
- Electrolytes. To stay hydrated before, during and after exercise.
- Whey protein. To repair and rebuild weary muscles.

All these extra powders and pills had to be counted, weighed and measured. Even just a few weeks' worth squished tightly into a transparent freezer bag took up half a pannier. It looked as though I was preparing to traffic a 2kg brick of uncut Afghan heroin.

Our spare bedroom became a hectic mission control. Cycling jerseys hung from bookshelves, spare tyres looped over the back of my office chair, a freshly waterproofed cagoule was sun drying in the window. I packed a spare bicycle chain and half a dozen drybags filled with socks, insurance documents, tyre levers, puncture patches and emergency $100 bills.

And then the tech. Essential for my job as a journalist but a lot of extra weight:

- MacBook Pro laptop (2.14kg)
- Sony RX100 video camera (240g)

- Rode Go 11 microphones and transmitter (96g)
- Zoom H4n Pro Handy Recorder and Tascam omnidirectional microphone (650g)
- DJI Mini 3 Pro drone, remote control and spare batteries (884g)
- Assorted memory cards, power cables, microphone windshields, travel plug adapters, spare batteries, camera lenses, neutral density filters and protective cases (3kg)

Before I'd even packed a single set of 'civvies' – the non-cycling clothes I'd wear in the evenings and on rest days – or a morsel of food, I had over 13kg of stuff, just to get started.

As summer waned, my commandeering of the spare room became a bone of marital contention. Occasionally, this manifested as tears. Sometimes we argued about chain oil on the carpets. But mostly about how distracted I was by the trip, when I should have been making the most of every precious moment left at home. Growing increasingly aware of each other's physical presence, Alana and I touched, held hands and cuddled as much as we could. Nevertheless, the slow packing of my bags became a stark and obvious reminder of my imminent exodus.

In many of these books about brave adventurer types pitting themselves against the elements, not enough is said about the people left at home. The spouses that made a commitment to spend their life with someone, only for that itchy-footed partner to disappear for weeks and months at a time, often causing great emotional, logistical and financial strain. In Alana, I had a wife who, within reason, supported me and my crazy ideas. Travel writing has afforded us some mind-boggling holidays: five-star hotels, helicopter rides, safaris. Albeit, with barely a pension between us. Travel is in our bones. But this trip felt different. Risky.

Life also has a funny habit of sneaking up on you when you least expect it. The morning she drove me to Heathrow, lugging a bike in a cardboard box, we finally got to the bottom of the 'food poisoning' she'd been suffering. Alana was a month pregnant.

As we stood at Terminal 3, vomit smeared across Alana's cuff and tears streaming down both our cheeks, our life was about to

change forever. It was hard to conclude if this was a brilliant or terrible time for us to have a baby. I had a 4,000-mile bike ride and a book to write in the interim. Nevertheless, the bun was in the oven. And by hook or by crook, I was determined to ride across America.