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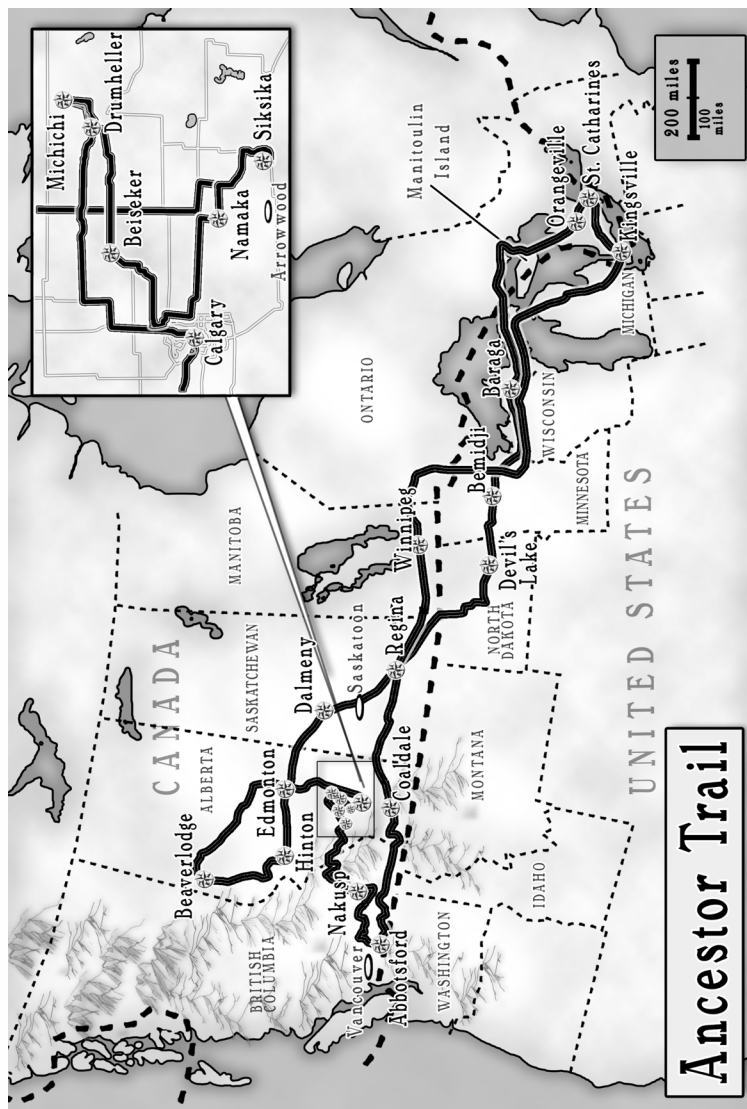
CRASH LANDING

The Long Road Home

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Crash Landing is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed.

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PROLOGUE

I'd seen the orange sign advising traffic that the 547 Bridge over Alberta's Bow River was out. No doubt the previous year's massive floods had damaged it as they swept through the valley. After a cursory glance, I assumed the warning applied to heavy trucks only and continued up the road. Motorcycles could get through where most vehicles couldn't. Two thousand miles from my Ontario home, I'd begun the fourth week of a twelve- to eighteen-month solo journey. At age sixty, I was on a quest to understand who I was before my culture *told* me who I was.

It turned out the sign applied to everyone. High waters had washed away an entire section of the bridge. I didn't want to backtrack all the way to the detour sign but didn't have many options. The roads in rural Alberta are set up in a grid as far as the eye can see. A side road I'd passed two and a half miles before the river might be a viable shortcut.

Township Road 205 led east out of the hamlet of Arrowwood, towards Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, my destination for the day. As soon as I turned onto its loose, deep gravel I wavered and stopped. Some riders love the thrill of their motor-

cycle dancing under them on unstable surfaces. I'm not one of them, especially when I'm alone. Yet my training had prepared me to handle these conditions and my 1200cc Yamaha Super Ténéré was the right kind of motorcycle to take them on. If I came across this road in Central or South America, I'd have to manage it, so best put my fear aside and get on with it.

Standing on the foot pegs as I accelerated, I fixed my gaze far in the distance. No tire tracks interrupted the deep bed of golf ball-sized gravel. Although my trajectory averaged straight, at any moment I felt like I could be carried anywhere on—or off—that road. I prayed that my wheels would be on the right side of center if a farm vehicle careened toward me.

Every inch of the next eight miles terrified me beyond anything I'd experienced. It's normal for the front wheel to wobble as it seeks traction, and there's a technique to manage it when the wobble gets too wild: Speed up slightly to lift weight from the front end and stabilize the movement, then lean back to transfer weight to the rear of the motorcycle. As you decelerate to normal speed, resume the normal standing position. I had the first part down pat. The next step not so much. I refused to reduce the throttle, fearing the front tire would dig in again and throw me off. That meant that with every wobble correction, my speed increased. By the time the road turned ninety degrees to the right, eight miles later, I was going too fast to maneuver the corner and lost control. The handlebars slapped back and forth against the gas tank. My eyes instinctively looked around the bend to where I wanted to go and my motorcycle tried to follow and stay upright. In vain, I applied a combination of muscle and will to regain control, calling to the animal spirit accompanying me, "Jaguar, help me NOW!", but he'd already leapt to safety. The motorcycle careened over on its right side, bounced up and over, and with me still on it—my hands clenched around the handlebars and knees fused to the tank—

continued the skid on its left side. After crossing the full width of the road, we came to an abrupt stop down a small grade.

Miraculously, I jumped up from where I'd landed, brushed the dust off my riding gear, and surveyed the damage. Somehow, my motorcycle continued to run. Distorted engine guards had protected the engine, and my legs. Headlights, torn from their mounting, stared back at me, their wires trailing like roadkill guts. Misshapen handlebars rested at a curious angle. Chrome mounting brackets splayed skyward, the only remnants of a mirror and windscreen.

With my right hand, I reached over and hit the kill switch, turning off the engine. Standing in the ditch looking at the twisted wreckage, I knew my plans had changed. Moments ago, the companion I'd trusted with my life had given its life for me. I felt no anger or fear, only bewilderment about the turn of events. My incapacitated motorcycle and my own, now palpable, injuries gave me a new reality to work from. But my quest hadn't changed.

My left arm hung at my side. I could make small movements with my hand and forearm, but the slightest upper arm movement shot excruciating pain through my shoulder. My right thumb tried but could not respond to commands. I needed help.

A car and a large grain truck passed by in my peripheral vision. They'd driven over shards of windscreen and mirror strewn on the road but hadn't noticed me. I had come to rest below the grade and they mustn't have seen the crash. I needed to take charge, starting by making myself seen. That meant clambering up the side of the embankment to the road.

A plume approaching from the west signaled hope. I waved at the driver of the silver Ford F-150 pickup and found my Good Samaritan, Bill Cormier. A self-employed contractor on the way to a job, he pulled over to the far side of the road and hopped out. He couldn't figure out how a woman wearing a helmet and

motorcycle gear had appeared in the middle of nowhere. Bill's day had just changed, too.

Hot and claustrophobic, I was desperate to get my helmet off. It had a modular chin piece, but my injured thumb couldn't undo the ratchet on the strap, nor could it work the button to flip the chin piece up. I instructed Bill to press the red button to release the chin guard, then pull the red tab to release the strap. Finally, he pulled it off my head. What a relief! Good gear had paid off.

Bill supported me down to where my bike lay. Under my guidance, he removed my tank bag and grabbed the few items in my pannier, including my laptop. Before leaving I wanted photos of the scene, but Bill didn't have a camera on his flip phone or know how to use my iPhone. Rather than try to explain, I asked him to steady me so I could take them. My right hand could hold the phone but not push the button, so I managed to press the button with my left fingers without moving my shoulder. Then I bid my motorcycle a quick farewell.

Bill had already pulled a U-turn, parked on the near side of the road, and opened the passenger door. The height of the bench seat presented a challenge because I couldn't grab anything to pull myself up. Somehow, between the two of us, we hefted me in, strapped on the seat belt, and got underway.

Bill outlined my options. He could take me to one of two small county hospitals, each twenty to thirty minutes away in different directions. Or, he could drive to a large teaching facility in Calgary, ninety minutes west. Calgary was the best and only option in my mind. I knew I had a complex shoulder injury and wanted the best trauma care possible. In a fortunate oversight, it didn't even occur to us to call an ambulance, which would have taken forever to arrive and then would have delivered me to one of the small hospitals.

We'd just abandoned a mangled motorcycle at the side of

the road. Someone might notice and call it in to local authorities, prompting them to search for the operator. Prudence dictated we notify the police, in this case the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Bill made that call, while on my phone I punched in the numbers for friends and family.

I didn't know the extent of the damage to my motorcycle yet, so wanted to get it to a shop in Calgary that I trusted. I also had a campsite set up fifteen miles south of the city, and I'd need to get that packed up. I'd used it as home base while I explored the area for two days, and paid for that night, expecting I would leave the area the next morning.

The only person in Calgary I could think to call for help was Paul Williams. I'd been trying to pin him down for an interview for several weeks for a client's newsletter. Ever since leaving a corporate human resources career in 2003 I'd freelanced, leading motorcycle tours and hosting motorcycle events. My work transitioned to consulting, writing, and counseling; then, designing webinars and training programs, all drawing from the symbolism and spiritual insights inspired by motorcycling.

When Paul and I learned we'd be at the same event in Nakusp, British Columbia, we'd agreed to talk there in person; however, those events have too many exciting distractions to be sitting down for business, and the interview never got done. But Paul knew I'd planned to head to the Calgary area after the event, so we agreed to meet there. That hadn't happened yet but soon would, thanks to the crash, minus the interview.

I also needed to notify my insurance company, but my adrenaline rush ended during that conversation and cut it short. An hour after the crash and still twenty minutes away from the hospital, I felt faint. Without warning, and still on the phone, I began babbling like a baby, completely incoherent. As much as I tried, I couldn't form a word.

Bill turned to me in alarm, not knowing what to do. I, too, was frightened, thinking I had a head injury.

The insurance rep kept his cool.

“Sounds like now’s not a good time to talk. Call me tomorrow.”

I laid my head against the headrest and took a few deep breaths. Thankfully, it passed, but I stopped making calls.

My email had caught Paul, preparing for a few days away, just in time. Bill waited with me in the Emergency Room until Paul could make the one-hour trip to the hospital. Here, I’d have my shattered shoulder rebuilt and begin my rehabilitation.

I’d crashed on August 27th, 2014, the date my maternal grandparents had married ninety-two years earlier. I was on the western border of the Siksika Nation (the community changed their name from Blackfoot reserve to Siksika Nation in the early 1990s), near the land where my father had spent much of his boyhood. Clearly, my ancestors and the land had stories I needed to hear. Two years would pass before I’d resume that trip. When I did, it was from an unexpected perspective, and with a clearer focus.

July 31st, 2016, my first day back on the motorcycle journey, got off to a shaky start. Because I planned to follow my grandparents' 1920s migration after they arrived in Western Canada as German-speaking Russian Mennonite refugees, I dubbed my route the Ancestor Trail. Day One would take me north from my home in Orangeville, Ontario, and up through the Bruce Peninsula. At Tobermory, its terminus, I'd take the two-hour ride on the MS Chi-Cheemaun ferry to Manitoulin Island. A campsite on the north side of the island, where I'd stayed before, would serve as my home for the night.

But two hours out of the garage, a crisis of confidence had me ready to turn around, return home, and scrap the whole idea. Although I travel a lot, getting out of the driveway is always hard. You're leaving the perceived known for the unknown. This time that inner resistance extended beyond the driveway.

It wasn't the physical or logistical part that had me anxious. I had a one-year-old Triumph Tiger named Trudy, the first bike I'd named, and we made a perfect match. She was the same sky-

blue color as my Ténéré, the bike I'd crashed, and reminded me to dream big. Over the years, I'd taken care to select the fewest pieces of riding gear, clothing, and camping equipment that best suited my needs, added minimum bulk and weight, and worked in all kinds of weather. Even pared down, however, it added up. Packing was an art. The left pannier held my clothing and personal items; occupying the right were my heated jacket, spare gloves, footwear, tools, electronics, and a pair of two-pound barbells for shoulder exercises. My tent and sleeping bag got stuffed into a yellow dry bag strapped across the back rack. A blue dry bag, laid across the passenger seat, held camping and cooking utensils, and food. My cot, table, camp chair, and items I'd need during the day went into a yellow waterproof duffle that got placed on top of the two other bags, creating a comfy back-rest. Two straps cinched down tight kept everything secure. A two-liter water reservoir, so I could sip while I rode, took up much of my waterproof tank bag but left room for incidentals like coins, hand sanitizer, and my camera. Even with a GPS, I like to have my bearings, so I folded a paper map to display the area I was riding through and slid it into the clear vinyl pocket on top of the tank bag.

My tailored black BMW riding suit was made of waterproof, abrasion-resistant textile, with impact-resistant armor (padding) at the back, shoulders, elbows, hips, and knees, and reflective strips on the arms and legs. The removable plum quilted liner was dressy enough to be worn as a casual jacket. Black BMW mid-calf waterproof and abrasion-resistant boots had extra reinforcement in the heels and shins. I had two pairs of gloves—for warm and cold weather—both BMW, black, and padded in the palms. A white Schubert modular helmet protected my head. To increase the odds of other drivers noticing me, I wore a high-visibility mesh vest over my jacket. Underneath, merino socks, leggings, and a T-shirt helped keep me cool in the heat and

warm in the cold. For coldest riding, an electric jacket and glove liners, which ran off Trudy's battery, fit under my jacket and gloves and kept me toasty.

This day it wasn't the riding that had me uneasy. True, it had taken nine months of recovery to get back on a motorcycle after the crash, then another month of patience, persistence, and courage to recharge my confidence to functional levels. What I questioned was whether I should even complete the interrupted trip.

Setting out on another solo motorcycle trip at age sixty-two didn't faze me. I'd started riding at sixteen, when I learned to ride my brothers' Honda Cub on my parents' fruit farm, and a motorcycle became my muse. Since then I'd logged many miles traversing Canada and the United States, most of them traveling solo in the past thirteen years. Every year, the exhilaration from riding intensified. It's like you think you can't love another person more than you do, yet as time goes on, that love deepens. So, too, it was for me with motorcycling.

Nothing matches the connection between Spirit and self that you feel when riding the open road. The endless blue sky permeates your being and dissolves any boundary between you and the elements. You can't help but smile as the wind caresses your face and delights you, dispelling all worries. The air informs you of subtle temperature changes as you dip into a valley or snake up a mountain. A drop in atmospheric pressure alerts you to an impending storm. Raindrops remind you that tears are part of life. The fragrant scent of lilacs or the sweet smells of fresh-cut summer hay invigorate every fiber of your being. Without effort beyond a slight twist of the throttle, you move through space and time, embraced by the energy of the land. You're free. Whole.

From the start, I knew with certainty that resuming my travels was right. But then, I'd also felt that confidence when

taking the original trip—the one that had uprooted me from my known world. Now I had to manage my self-doubt to prevent it from eroding my conviction.

Since, again, I'd chosen to leave on the busiest weekend of the summer, I factored in an extra thirty minutes to reach the ferry. Still, the traffic I encountered on two-lane roads through farmland was heavier and slower than I anticipated. The lineup of cars, trailers, and RVs was too long and packed together to overtake.

Arriving at the dock in time for my reservation began to look doubtful. Heat, traffic, time pressure, and self-doubt injected stress into what was supposed to be an exciting and enjoyable day. Then along came another thing to worry about. I made a pit stop at a Tim Horton's donut shop to stretch my legs and use the restroom. My lower abdomen felt crampy and uneasy, and my urine looked cloudy. I panicked, convinced I had a bladder infection, a condition that had plagued me for years. I was taking prophylactic antibiotics but knew from experience the infection-causing organism could become resistant to specific medications, allowing the infection to return. My greater fear was that bladder infections can lead to a potentially life-threatening kidney infection if not treated in time. I worried about needing medical treatment while I traveled out of the country, knowing my insurance company would decline coverage because of a pre-existing condition. I'd only be traveling in the United States for a few days but didn't want things to flare up during that time. I also didn't want to ride when I felt unwell but hadn't expected to use my time buffer to deal with an illness this early in the trip.

When I'd started out two years ago, I'd also been taking medicine for a bladder infection. The symptoms had cleared several days into the trip, but I'd crashed soon after. Had I missed the message? It seemed like whenever I was ready to

make a big step in this journey to find myself, I got knocked to the ground. Since the crash, I second-guessed myself about how to proceed on my life's journey. Was this illness another of those messages to wait longer before resuming my trip? Was I pushing myself too hard? Mind chatter ratcheted up my anxiety level beyond uncomfortable. The further I rode, as devastating as it felt, the more turning around seemed like the best idea.

Two long years of recovery, physical therapy, and sporadic feelings that life was on hold had passed since my crash. I'd done very little work in that time, focusing instead on healing. I'd so looked forward to getting back on the road.

How could this be happening?

Gary and Joanne, long-time friends I knew through riding, lived along my route about an hour south of the ferry. Before I committed to either continuing or turning around, I'd stop at their place and reassess my plans. They weren't expecting me, but as always welcomed me with open arms and hugs.

Ever compassionate, Joanne, a retired nurse, responded to my despair with a suggestion. "C'mon in and get cooled off. Then let me take you to the walk-in clinic. There's a doctor on call who can check you over."

I couldn't come up with a better idea, so I changed out of my riding gear and hopped into her car. As she drove, we chatted, and I tried to sort out my thoughts, bouncing my options off her.

To my surprise, my urine showed no signs of infection. That had never happened. Anytime I'd gone to the doctor with symptoms, I'd needed treatment. This time, an astute doctor treated me with empathy and kindness, reading the anxiety etched across my face. She offered compassion with wisdom. Physically, everything was fine. It was my fear that I needed to get under control.

The doctor's reassurance allayed my irrational thoughts and

fear-induced physical symptoms. Sure, I had a medical condition to watch, but my anxiety had blown it out of all proportion.

The ferry had long ago departed, but I rescheduled passage for the next day's early morning sailing. That gave me an evening to spend with friends and recharge my confidence.

THE SEEDS for this quest actually took root three years earlier, in 2013. That summer, I'd taken a six-week trip from my Orangeville home to the Pacific Northwest. I'd used it as an experiment to test the viability of living and working location-independent, traveling anywhere in the world, stopping wherever I wanted, for as long as I wanted.

A month before leaving, I'd found myself on The Four Winds website. Over the previous decade I'd researched many spiritual teachings, seeking a tradition that fit me. Those that resonated most came from the ancient wisdom taught by Dr. Alberto Villoldo. Educated as a medical anthropologist, psychologist, and shaman, he'd founded The Light Body School to train practitioners of Shamanic Energy Medicine. I'd devoured most of his books, finding the teachings simple, rational, and powerful. They held no dogma; rather, they espoused a way of living as one interconnected with all other life on earth, in harmony with the beings with whom we share it. I found the concepts grounded and practical, not "new-agey" or flaky.

In a stroke of serendipity, the first course in the program was being offered at the Stillwater Lodge in Park City, Utah, at the end of July. With my flexible itinerary, I could incorporate the course into my trip. I had nothing to lose, other than the cost of tuition.

Most attendees were staying in the lodge, but for budget reasons, and because I prefer to sleep outside, I pitched my tent at Jordanelle State Park, within walking distance of the lodge.

Light from floor to ceiling windows on two sides flooded the room in the lodge with a warm, calming glow. Our space overlooked the reservoir-turned-lake around which the park was built, and, further in the distance, the Rocky Mountains. As soon as I entered, I felt a strong sense of community, spiritual intimacy, and personal power. The evening fires under the stars awakened me. In all my years of attending the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church of my youth, I had never felt anything so sacred. Here in Utah, with a group of strangers, I'd found the communion I sought.

I'd signed up for a three-day course aimed at people embarking on a journey of self-healing. However, we weren't yet through the first day when I understood I was there for another reason: I'd been called to study the five-day training designed for practitioners.

The Illumination process lies at the core of the Energy Medicine sessions. It's a technique to combust the heavy energy of emotional wounds and ancestral imprints, healing the wounds and freeing the energy for constructive use. It helps clear psychic and emotional memories that influence your thoughts, beliefs, and choices you carry without knowing it. During the sessions, the practitioner guides the client into a deep meditative, dream-like state. It's not unusual to feel physical sensations or connect with spirit or animal guides. For clarity, no plant medicine, used as a revered sacrament by shamans to induce spiritual awakening, was involved during this or any later sessions.

The practitioner begins with prayers to create a sacred, protected space. That's followed with skilled questioning and assessment to help the client articulate what burning issue she would like to receive guidance on. For my first practice session as a client, I sought an answer to two related, entrenched, and personal trouble spots: I wanted to know why I feared losing

everything, and why I feared ostracism or even persecution if I exposed my true thoughts.

Imagine my shock when during the session, my maternal grandparents, Gerhard Reimer and Susa (Susanna) Koop, showed up in spirit form! It felt like being part of a Technicolor dream where I could interact with them. They were in their early sixties and looked like they'd come over after church, their black Vauxhall parked in the background. Gerhard wore a dark grey suit, white shirt, and tie, and held his fedora in his left hand. Susa's signature black hat topped her matching outfit—a wool, knee-length skirt with matching jacket fitted to her slender frame, a purse over her left arm, and black pumps.

Mennonite fundamentalist beliefs and Shamanism don't mix. In a Mennonite church, if I'd dared to ask, I would have learned that these practices came from the devil. But, thankfully, that wasn't the message Gerhard and Susa brought. They acknowledged my questions and let me know how grateful they felt that I was doing this introspective work—they had come to support me on my healing journey. They'd heard my questions and had no idea that the religious beliefs that had sustained them during years of terror in Russia had, thirty years later, created fear in me. They'd raised their children with the teachings that had been passed down to them and passed them on in the best way they knew.

When the practice session ended, I mentioned my experience to Chris, my teacher. She was not surprised.

"When we heal ourselves," she said, "we also heal those who have come before and those who have yet to come." I'd have plenty of opportunity to ponder her wisdom during the next six weeks of motorcycle travel.

That first course awakened my interest in understanding who I am. I felt a burning desire to peel back the layers of protection I had built to protect myself from getting hurt. The

teachings might help me understand repetitive patterns I'd migrated to. Over-planning, then working too many hours in a day to honor my commitments plagued me. Achievements motivated me, even when they drew me beyond the scope of my priorities.

Learning to live and work from the road on that 2013 pilot trip challenged me more than I expected. To help pay for my meanderings, I'd pitched six travel stories to a national motorcycle magazine. I'd planned to leave lots of time open for reflection and contemplation, especially after completing my course, but commitments got in the way. A professional travel article takes time to research, photograph, and write. Before I knew it I was rushed, with little opportunity to sit back and relax.

I became frustrated seeing these familiar patterns emerge. Just because I looked as free as a bird didn't mean I wasn't pushing myself. I'd cram too many miles into a day and commit to unrealistic deadlines. The milieu had changed, but my engrained behavior hadn't. The setting wasn't the issue, and that's what I needed to understand. Irritation with myself for falling into old patterns transmuted into insights. For that reason, I deemed the 2013 trip a success.

The Shamanic Energy courses, the motorcycle journey, the constructive and counterproductive patterns I'd observed in myself, and the space to think all caused me to question how my culture and early teachings had shaped me. Why had I made the life choices that had gotten me to this point in life? How could I lead a more fulfilling life that answered the call of my spirit? What did that look like?

When my marriage ended in 2002, I'd become a resolute renter, living alone in apartments on country properties. After travels, I returned to "home base," as I had begun to refer to these Orangeville-area apartments, energized and inspired. I'd learned a lot about living and working from the road, enough to

confirm I wanted to do more. I also wanted to continue my Energy Medicine studies.

The idea of a longer trip hatched after that exploratory excursion. Seeking ancestral history and Indigenous wisdom, I'd explore answers to the questions that had tumbled around in my mind, addressing my curiosity about how the experiences, beliefs, and teachings of my ancestors had shaped me.

Once you open up to new possibilities, the Universe sends more prompts. The teachings in the Energy Medicine training I'd begun came out of Peru. Nothing held me home, particularly if I could work from the road. I had no reason not to extend my trip and go all the way to South America. With a little luck, I'd study with the shamans in their home setting.

And so, what began as an idea for a quest by motorcycle to the U.S. Southwest grew into a plan for a twelve- to eighteen-month road trip through the Americas, beginning in 2014. With my Jaguar guide helping me track through the shadows and push my comfort zone, I'd have lots of time to explore life choices and patterns I'd been reluctant to face.

THERE COMES a point when you settle into the rhythm of the road, and in the three weeks leading up to my crash, I still hadn't found it. I tried to shake the unease, but something felt off. I'd not planned in too much detail for two reasons. The first was to stay open to destiny and the inevitable serendipity of solo motorcycle travel. The second was more banal: I was trying to break my pattern of over-committing and squeezing too much into a day. Breaking my word to someone else was unacceptable. Honoring my commitment to myself to prioritize and pace myself better seemed somehow less important.

Even though I'd scaled back and given myself plenty of leeway, I had fixed dates I was working with for the first three

months on the road. First, I'd meet with and interview a Lakota author in South Dakota in early August. Later that month, I'd attend a Horizons Unlimited motorcycle travelers' gathering in British Columbia, where I'd give a presentation, and another in Yosemite in September. These events attracted the community of motorcyclists with whom I felt so at home. I looked forward to meeting friends who shared a zest for life and love of the road. After that, I could explore the Southwest before I'd have to head through Mexico and Central America, timing my travels with the seasons in the Southern Hemisphere.

By the end of the second week, I'd gone off track. The two days I'd expected to spend in South Dakota turned into five. To reach the Horizons Unlimited event in British Columbia in time, I'd have to go straight there. That meant back-tracking into Alberta for a travel article I'd committed to and to visit Dad's childhood farm. By walking the land, I'd hoped to get a sense of what his boyhood life had been like. I hadn't expected plans to unravel like this, at least not so soon.

Worse, I hadn't allowed enough time on that initial trip to explore my ancestral roots before leaving Canada. I'd placed the priority on exploring Indigenous wisdom. I thought understanding my relationship with the land would satisfy my craving for a closer connection with Spirit, something that hadn't happened through my Christian teachings. As it turned out, my crash, barely three weeks into that trip, set me on a completely different tack.

DURING MY TWO years of recovery, I'd had plenty of time to rethink my route. Initial planning for the 2016 Ancestor Trail route had me spending seven weeks on the road, meandering with purpose through Western Canada for six of them. The last week, I would come back to a retreat center in New York State's

scenic and tranquil Hudson Valley. There I'd take the final course to complete my Energy Medicine Practitioner certificate, a fitting end to an epic journey. The course and the setting would create the perfect place to assimilate what I'd learned on the Ancestor Trail and the history I'd discovered during my recovery. South America didn't even come onto my radar.

I had two landmark dates: a Siksika Pow-wow in southern Alberta in August, and the Four Winds course in New York in mid-September. Everything between was flexible.

Both of my parental lines landed in Canada in the mid-1920s. My grandparents then migrated along different routes through Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, before settling in the Niagara area of Ontario in the 1930s. There, the families, and my parents, met.

I intended to follow the Ancestor Trail from where they first settled to where they tried to reestablish their lives, again and again, until they made it. I wanted to walk the earth they had walked, trying to understand the lives of these penniless refugees in their twenties, fending for themselves in a new land. Those experiences, and those from the Russian homeland they fled under duress, had shaped me.

However, two weeks before my departure, in mid-July 2016, I realized a glaring omission in my route. I hadn't thought to visit Beaverlodge, the community in the Peace River district of northern Alberta where Dad had spent his first two years, and where his father had died. Dad had no recollection of these years and rarely talked of them. But this grandfather's blood ran through me. My DNA did not come from Dad's stepfather, whose name we carried and from whom his childhood memories originated. I *had* to include Beaverlodge on my route, but it meant adding 850 miles and scrapping the casual pace I'd envisioned. I had to get back down to southern Alberta in time for the Pow-wow and fit Beaverlodge in before that. I wouldn't miss

either for anything. Yet, already I was falling back into the pattern of cramming too much into my schedule. It didn't escape me that the additional stress had contributed to physical symptoms, leading me to question the wisdom of taking this trip. It frustrated me, but what else could I do? At least I'd built in buffer time.

After that rough first day that ended at Gary and Joanne's home, I was back on the road early the next morning, headed for the ferry, physical and emotional strength renewed. I knew that Spirit journeyed with me, looking out for my best interests.

Traveling with me on my motorcycle was an entourage of unseen, energetic beings, their excitement matching mine. I pictured them with my mind's eye, as in a dream; they were in their late twenties, and I sensed their presence as vividly as if they were with me in person. My paternal and maternal grandparents Johann Klassen and Elizabeth Friesen, affectionately known as Liese (lee-za), and Gerhard Reimer and Susa Koop would stay with me for the duration of my travels. They sat behind me atop my yellow duffle, animated as they relived the old stories while I chauffeured. When they all got together to talk, especially when they got excited, they lapsed into *Plautdietsch*, the Low German language used for informal conversations, and I only understood the odd word. It was somewhat like a non-rider joining a conversation with a group of motorcyclists and not understanding the lingo. I had to remind them to please speak English.

More than a decade of introspection and learning had brought me to this point. My Shamanic Energy teachers had opened me to the experience of tapping into unseen energies that surround us. They'd always been available—I just hadn't been aware of them.

Johann, Dad's father, exuded a quiet strength. Tall with short dark hair, Johann wore the muscular physique of a farmer. He'd

come into my consciousness mere weeks before I left, eager to go along on this mission.

Liese was the youngest of my grandparents. The shock of red hair that crowned her at birth forecast the fiery temperament that would become her ally and savior throughout her long life. She dealt with the prevailing superstition that her red hair, and mine, was a sign of the devil by calling it reddish brown. Yet she kept the hue into her nineties.

Susa was slight, fair, and willowy. She wore her waist-length medium brown hair in a *Schups*—a long braid, wrapped around the back of her head and kept in place with long hairpins. As the oldest grandchildren, my cousin Jude (Judy) and I, born two months apart to sisters, and more like sisters ourselves, reaped benefits, like overnight visits. We'd gape in awe when Susa let her hair loose to brush it and it would cascade down, almost to the floor.

True to form, Gerhard joked and talked rapidly, almost non-stop. When they had tea, he'd pour from his cup into his saucer and slurp from it like he always had. Susa would nudge him and giggle when he teased her. Johann and Liese contributed to the lively banter whenever they could get a word in. Johann had never met Gerhard and Susa in life, but here they were long-time friends, enjoying each other's company, bringing to light stories that had lain dormant for many years.

Besides my ancestors, four animal guides of my Energy Medicine practice came on board. Serpent—who brings renewal and teaches us how to shed behaviors and beliefs we've outgrown like she sheds her skin—curled up on the skid plate under the motor. Jaguar invites us to push our limits and boundaries and investigate the unknown. Jaguar, who represents the power of transformation and shows us how to leap into who we are becoming, sunned himself on the back luggage, behind my grandparents. Tiny Royal Hummingbird, keeper of ancestral

wisdom and source of courage and guidance for epic trips, tucked into a crevice in the instrument panel. She teaches us how to trust the gentle calling we hear, and to trust we'll reach our destination, even if we must pass through tests and challenges. Eagle, who reminds us of our connection with Spirit, perched on either my front fender or shoulder. Eagle sees the finest details without losing track of the big picture and shows us how to avoid getting caught up in minutiae and old stories. He teaches us to spread our wings and soar over mountains we only dare to dream of. True to his nature, he'd often fly off, not wanting to miss an opportunity to glide the thermals.

Being sidelined by the crash had given me time to research my cultural history and the lives of my ancestors, while deepening my spiritual practice. My grandparents had extended the first overture of support for my reconciliation by appearing during my course in Utah three years before. Since then, they'd rarely been out of my mind. While Spirit was omnipresent, they and the four animal guides felt like a personal core team, available for support, guidance, and teaching. Other guides were also available; all I had to do was ask and listen. And to bring them on my motorcycle was sensational, like having someone along on the trip to share special experiences.

Many motorcyclists hang a gremlin bell—a small silver talisman—on the lowest part of their motorcycle to keep the road gremlins away. I'd had one on my Ténéré, but it had disappeared during the crash. That didn't compare to the powerhouse I carried now.

Thankfully, all these unseen beings didn't add physical weight to an already loaded bike. And I didn't have to pay an extra fare for my entourage. They'd come along simply as emotional and spiritual support, ready to pitch in when needed. I'd gotten off to a slow start on the Ancestor Trail, but now it was Day Two. I climbed onto Trudy, bowed my helmeted head in

prayer, expressed gratitude for the journey, and prayed for safety. Then I started the ignition, released the clutch, and pulled away, waving good-bye to Gary and Joanne. Fueled by curiosity and a renewed passion for the quest, we headed to the ferry.