

## Day 1

LATELY I'VE BEEN FEELING CLINGY and sentimental. One thought away from inexplicably bursting into tears. But this morning—the day I'll finally begin my walk across America—I feel nothing. I just want to get it underway.

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At sunup, my brother Joel and his wife Brittany drive Katie and I from their place in Glendale to the Santa Monica pier. We park on Ocean Avenue, south of the boardwalk, then walk to Cafe Demitasse where we kill time before my scheduled start. Joel discusses upcoming work projects as my mind wanders. I imagine my blue Osprey backpack crushed in the trunk of his Prius. I visualize what's in each specific compartment: some snacks in the outside pouches, my raincoat in the main hold, a brand new Buck knife in the waist belt. This silent inventory removes me from the table conversation, yet briefly distracts me from the nervous energy constricting my chest. "Hey," Katie says. "You alright?" Her words startle me and I nod without looking at her. I reach for my americano, then raise it to my lips with trembling hands.

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Carrying a pack is definitely unnecessary today. The route will be loaded with restaurants and I'll be at Joel and Brittany's place again tonight. But starting this journey lugging no gear feels like cheating. So I'll be heaving a fully-loaded backpack as I take my first steps away from the Pacific. Katie's agreed to join me for day one and will carry nothing.

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I slouch in the rigid chair at the cafe four-top. Bursts of fever, then chills, then fever again roll over me like waves. I am overcome with doubt, and struck by thoughts I have not had before. Why am I doing this? Wouldn't I rather be home, relaxing? Who do I think I am? What the hell am I trying to prove? I sense that something bad is going to happen. And I sort of wish it would. Something dire and chaotic that will force me to change plans. Like maybe today the big one will finally knock California into the ocean. That would definitely be a good enough reason to quit before I start. Nobody would ever question my decision to throw in the towel under those circumstances.

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Amidst the whiz of the steaming espresso machine, and the circular chatter at my table, I fully disassociate and imagine my grim future. What if I get mowed over by a car going 80 mph? Or mugged at gunpoint? What if I am mauled by a hungry mountain lion or bit by a diamondback? Shit, I don't even have a snakebite kit—how can I possibly be ready for this adventure without something as simple as that? I visualize these fatal scenarios in an effort to jinx them from happening.

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The prospect of my demise on the roadside isn't far-fetched. Nearly 6,000 pedestrians were killed in the United States in 2016, a 10% increase over the previous year. This year, assuming the math remains constant, there will be more than 7,000 pedestrians killed. Maybe I will be one of them? Vehicles fly by at ridiculous speeds, drivers eat or text or sleep or try to grab something from the back seat, lose their trajectory, and take out whatever's on the shoulder. In January 2017, Mark Baumer, a young man walking across the country to raise awareness for climate change, was struck and killed by a vehicle as he walked across Florida's panhandle. It's very possible that my overall preparedness won't matter one bit.

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Gripping surges of panic pulse through me and draw me deeper inward. My vision tunnels as the rush pins me down. I sit motionless and hope nobody notices. I try to lift a finger, but I can't. Try to move my toes. Impossible. As the clamp tightens, I have one coherent thought—my efforts will very likely kill me. But rather than stew on this, I use it as a foothold. In a moment of clarity, I straighten up, look at my watch, and stammer, "Um...we'd better get going." Everyone jumps up as if they've been waiting for my cue. Katie looks at me and raises her brows. "I'm fine," I snap as we file out the door. A block from the pier, the solar-powered Pacific Wheel comes into view alongside the steel West Coaster. I hold up my hand to block the low sun as my pace quickens into the boardwalk's tractor beam. "Hell yeah!" I shout as my body rejoins itself. Then I clap my hands and holler, "Come on now! Let's get this fucking party started!"

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I had previously posted on social media that I'd begin my walk across America with a fingertip dip in the Pacific at 8:00 a.m. on the north side of the pier. I don't know many people in this area, and certainly none of my Orange County connections will want to brave early morning traffic into Los Angeles on the first workday of the new year. Nobody'll show, I'm sure of it. But as we near the pier I see familiar human shapes. People from my past and present who have come to see me off. My throat flutters and Katie puts her hand on the small of my back and tells me I shouldn't be so surprised. I tug at the straps of my backpack and am suddenly self-conscious of the *Walking Across America* sign around my neck. I wish I could duck into an alley and start without fanfare. Why did all these people come, anyhow? Don't they realize how uneventful this will be? I feel bad that they've interrupted their day to watch me hoof it from the Pacific waterline to the sidewalk. Walking really isn't much of a spectator sport—not anymore, anyhow.

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Back in the 1800s, pedestrianism, also known as foot racing, drew giant crowds. Competitive walkers trod endless circles on indoor tracks while onlookers waged bets on their cumulative distances covered. In 1809, Captain Robert Barclay Allardice walked one mile every hour for 1,000 hours. His feat drew more than 10,000 curious people to witness the endeavor. Another walker, Ada Anderson, earned the nickname “Champion Lady Walker of the World” after completing 1,500 miles in 1,000 hours. An accomplishment that, up until that point, had only been matched by her trainer, William Gale. Centurions walked 100 miles in less than 24 hours and earned celebrity status. In the modern era, runners compete in ultramarathons where covering 100 miles within a 24-hour span is a coveted triumph. I've attempted—and finished—a couple of these races in less than a day. But I damn sure can't imagine walking the distance in a similar span of time. I'm no Captain Allardice or Ada Anderson. I'm not trying to squash any speed records or break new ground. I'm just a guy with a heavy pack and a wobbly plan. And even though I'm embarrassed by the arrival of friends who've come to watch my first steps, their presence humbles me.

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Among the group are Frank and Mary, an older couple I refer to as my adopted parents. They arrived via limousine, an hour's ride from their home in Newport Beach. My best friend Kent and his partner Alicia make a surprise appearance, too. So does Chandra, an old work friend, who brought along her boyfriend, Kevin. None of these people know each other, so they stand around awkwardly, laugh graciously at my anxious jokes, then snap photos as I dip my hands in the surf, turn around, and backtrack to the wintry beach, trying not to fill my meshy shoes with cool sand. I love them all for being here, but what I really want to do is to put them in my rearview.

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My supporters peel off until it's just the original four of us standing where the pier meets the hardtop. I suggest we go back to Cafe Demitasse—I'd definitely enjoy my drink this time around. But that's not happening. Katie and I give Joel and Brittany giant hugs. I press the crosswalk button and choke back tears even though we'll all be reunited for dinner this evening. "Let it out," Katie says. But I don't let it out. I hold it in like I always do.

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We're barely across the street when a man reads my sign and asks if I'm starting here because Forrest Gump did. It's never crossed my mind that this was where his fictional cross-country running journey began. I chose this spot because it seemed like the perfect walking distance from my brother's place. Exactly 20 miles. Which, in actuality, is probably too far for day one. Moments later on Colorado Avenue, another man squints to read the sign dangling from my neck. "Oh, I see," he says. "You're one of those walk across America guys." In his tone I hear, *another one of those dime-a-dozen fools*. I say nothing in return because it feels ridiculous to proclaim my intention to walk to the Atlantic when I'm literally minutes into the journey. So I just smile and nod like some kind of moron. He shakes his head. More people break their necks to watch us pass and I bashfully wave like a C-list celebrity. I am a spectacle. Completely out of place with my clean clothes and pristine gear. To make things worse, my pack is already starting to hurt my back. And my new Dodgers hat, a gift from my brother, is so tight it's giving me a headache. I am conflicted. I badly want to share what I'm doing,

but I also want to hide from the attention its earning me. I know I need to get used to being vulnerable, but right now I'd give about anything to be invisible.

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With the ocean out of sight, we break at a covered bus stop where I remove my sign and am immediately overcome with relief. For the rest of the day I'll be just another guy wandering through LA with my life on my back. But unlike vacationers, the homeless, and pretty much everyone else, I still stand out. My goddamned trekking poles are to blame. Trekking poles speed me up, make my walking form more efficient, and allow me to absorb miles with ease. But they also serve a diplomatic role. In my various test walks back home, passersby would notice them and replace iffy looks with cheerful greetings. Icebreakers like "Hey! Ya going skiing?" or "Where's the snow, buddy?" often led to folks sharing items on their own bucket lists. Had I been a guy on the roadside wearing just a backpack, I doubt I'd have received such upbeat receptions. The poles, it seems, give me purpose. They keep me from being perceived as a drifter. Though I generally feed off being in the limelight, today it's annoying. Each comment about my poles needles me until I'm tempted to pack them away, too.

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My phone's GPS guides us through Santa Monica, Westwood, and Century City. Soon we're in Beverly Hills walking past skyward mansions. Lawns are pristinely groomed, bushes and trees shaped just so. An excess of double-parked work vehicles makes it tricky for drivers to navigate the narrow streets lined with freshly waxed Ferraris and Maseratis. There's suddenly no evidence of people living on the street. No cardboard bed mats or discarded shopping carts. The surreal opulence resembles a movie set more than a neighborhood where real people live. In fact, we see very few people at all besides laborers. I interrupt their stares with a toothy "Buenos dias!" and get nonplussed responses.

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On Hollywood Boulevard, a car passes us honking then flips a U to park. My friend Derek jumps out of the driver's seat and runs over to join us. He's been zipping around for more than an hour, tracing the route he figured we'd take from the pier. The blaring sun beats down on our grinning faces as Derek points to a sagging adjacent building.

“Man, I used to go dancing there! Who’d have thought I’d be back here now cheering you on? Life’s so weird, isn’t it?” He gets back in his car and drives off, beeping more until he’s out of sight. In the wake of Derek’s uplifting energy, I nearly start to cry again. But, like before, I don’t. For a while Katie and I walk silently. My throat hurts as I don’t say a word. I keep having to slow down because my pace is too fast. Even when I try to stay mindful and keep a similar stride, the gap between us widens. And though I tell myself it’s fine, that it’s no big deal, it still bothers me.

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Katie and I are eight years into a relationship that has been themed by stagnation. We’ve spent the majority of our time together giving lip service to a partnership we’ve never truly worked on. Our platonic compatibility is obvious, but trouble arises whenever we consider a future together. There’s simply too much self-serving space dividing what she wants from what I want. Katie seeks a quiet and predictable routine with a limited footprint, while I tend toward a frenetic and unpredictable life on the move. Katie doesn’t believe in marriage and doesn’t want kids, and I find myself considering both possibilities with increased yearning. Any of our myriad compromises have fallen flat and increased the psychic distance between us. Now this rift has become a main character in our story. And though we are both aware of the negative effects it has on our tranquility, we allow it to persist, year after year. But we’ve reached a breaking point. We’ve grown more independent than ever and can’t come up with any particulars that make staying together make sense. So we’ve decided to officially end things. And even though leaving on this long walk would be a perfect time for us to finally cut the cord, neither of us want this day to mark the end of our togetherness. So we’ve agreed to hold off on things until I return home. For the next six months or so, both of us will exist on pause—in a liminal space. I trust the empty time on the roadside will help me figure some things out. But I also know that expecting a revelatory moment to appear is the plan of a fool. I worry our waffling is all going to come crumbling down at some point, but I’m still fine to push it all to the side. I’ll deal with the hard stuff later.

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We make it to Glendale as the sun sets. The 20 miles took longer than expected and my body is thrashed. My legs burn and my shoulders are chafed and raw. I take a moment to savor the pain because it's physical proof the walk finally exists. Katie's flying home tomorrow morning and, barring any sort of hitch in the plan, the next time we connect will be on the coastline of another ocean. This thought steals my breath. We set up our bed again on the hardwood floor and Katie conks out in a blink. I'm committed to documenting this trip with a daily Instagram post, so I knock out a quick recap. "Today I began my walk across America. Twenty miles are officially in the books. Can't lie, my body is a bit wrecked." I share a group photo from the pier and another of a gas station sign on Los Feliz Road that says, "Because your best miles are still ahead of you." Comments start ringing in. I read a few supportive hurrahs before tucking away my phone. Lay down feeling proud.

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I spoon up against Katie one last time. Maybe ever. Her breath deepens as my mind races. I've finally started the thing I've been talking about for 25 years. I mouth words I hope to scream in six months or less. I did it. I did it. But there's so much between now and then. So much walking. So many unknowns. And even though I know better than to celebrate at the starting line, I can't help but do it anyway. I move my mouth like a puppet. I did it. I did it. Through a cracked window and beyond all that can be seen, I hear occasional remnants of people laughing. Quiet bursts of joy like shooting stars whisper into my fading ears.

## **Day 2**

It's like I'm hungover. Everything is swollen. My legs feel bruised, my joints ache, the soles of my feet have a twinge of plantar fasciitis. Maybe I should be using shoe insoles. Because I always use insoles. But I don't have any with me so I'll have to make do.

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Overnight I woke up coughing and this morning I'm hacking up gritty gobs of LA smog that stick like glue to the sink basin. I nudge them down the drain with a finger and splashes of warm water. If my immune system could talk, I know exactly what it would

say: You pushed too far. Twenty miles was a bit ambitious for the first day, don't you think? Still, I plan to cover similar mileage today. I want to get as far from the ocean as possible.

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Everyone is up before the sun, and we all pinball though the narrow hallway, taking turns in the bathroom and filling each others' coffee cups. Joel insists he and Katie leave for the airport extra early to beat rush hour, and I'll start my day when they hit the road. Silence blows in with cool air through an open window. I sit on the couch with my mug of French roast and watch as steam rises. My knee bounces. I wonder where I'll end up stopping today.

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Brittany goes back to bed while Joel, Katie, and I walk outside together. We exchange goodbyes and Katie takes me into her arms. Her embrace tells me everything's going to be OK. As she lets go, she says she left me an audio message on my phone's recorder. "Something to listen to later when you forget the things you shouldn't forget." They drive away and I'm alone.

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I consult my phone maps to get my bearings, then follow East Broadway out of Glendale. In Pasadena, temporary bleachers line streets littered with wilting red carnations. Leftovers from the Rose Bowl parade two days ago. I walk toward the sound of workers banging solitary hammers, then leave the racket behind as I cross Colorado Street Bridge, also known as the suicide bridge. I stop multiple times to look over the rail. I'm overcome by vertigo as I imagine plummeting 150 feet into Arroyo Seco. I wonder how long it would be before someone found my body. Not a single car passes as I walk the quarter mile.

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The dark length of the San Gabriel Mountains to the north keeps me oriented. I've spent a lot of time in Los Angeles over the years and this landmark is extra familiar. A few years back I attempted the Angeles Crest 100-mile footrace. Of all the events I ever ran, the AC100 remains the most problematic and yet the most memorable. Mistakes are easy to name after the fact, and these were mine: I didn't eat enough,

didn't drink enough, didn't pay attention to trail markings, and ran way too fast. I suffered from extreme dehydration, which led to hallucinations that included apparitions of Mexican cowboys on horseback who offered me endless words of encouragement. "Buenos suerte, amigo! Corre, corre, corre!" I recall their garb: glimmering coin-studded chaps, colorful vests, crisp ruffled shirts, the intricate embroidery of their hatbands. And though these spectral memories now make for a good laugh, they represent me spinning out of control. My desperate mind making it easier to accept the failure of my physical faculties. I eventually collapsed when I reached the aid station at mile marker 89. EMTs promptly took my blood pressure and cut off my wristband, disqualifying me. When Dusty, my pacer, said we were being evacuated off the mountain, I wept. But my tears were joyful. "So this is what the edge looks like," I said. How often do we get to witness the boundary of our human potential?

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In Monrovia I stop at a Mexican restaurant. And even though it's brisk and breezy, I sit outside. The server is curious about my backpack and asks what I am doing. It doesn't feel right to tell her I'm walking to the east coast, but I do anyhow. She stops chewing her gum and stares at me, incredulous. Then she asks why. I stammer over words as I try to offer a coherent answer. "Because I can. Because I want to. Because life is too short not to do the things that make me happy." As the statements blurt from my mouth, I realize they are meaningless. She tells me I'm "straight-up crazy" as she sets down a heavy plate of cheese enchiladas.

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I take a big scoop of salted rice, lean back, and bask in my reality. I can eat when I want, where I want, and what I want. I can walk if I want to, or sit on my ass if I want to. This is freedom, I think, as I savor the server's words. I finish my plate, mindlessly scroll through social media feeds, and enjoy another few minutes of doing absolutely nothing before formulating an afternoon plan. I leave my business card with a cash tip for the server and hit the road again.

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Back on the sidewalk, a truck driving past slows for a red light. A man wearing a cowboy hat hollers at me from his passenger window. "Hey! What are you doing?" I tell him I'm walking to the Atlantic Ocean. His face squinches. "No really, where are you going?" I rephrase my answer and say I'm walking across California, then eventually all the way across the United States. He pauses. Looks away then back at me with giant eyes. His voice bites in disbelief. "Across the US? No fucking way!" He waves his hand dismissively. "You're fucking nuts, man!" The light turns green and he peels off. A bellow of black smoke fills his truck's wake.

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My pace quickens when I see the Asuza Starbucks sign ahead. Today's stopping point. When I arrive, I send Joel and Brittany a pin. It'll take them at least a half hour to drive the 20 miles I walked, so I go inside to order a drink. I fidget with backpack straps as I nervously tell the barista what I'm doing. "No kidding? Why?" My answer is about as jumbled and unintelligible as the one from lunch. "That's cool," she says, obviously unimpressed. "How about a name for that drink?"

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Outside I sit in the shade of a green umbrella and watch the lowering sun spark the mountains aflame. My calf muscles twitch, and for the first time all day I'm aware of pain. I pull back the neck of my T-shirt and find a length of raw flesh from shoulder to chest. The thought of tonight's shower makes me cringe. I pick a crumb of salt from my hairline. Touch it to my tongue. Then, out of habit, I pull out my phone and mindlessly check Instagram, Facebook, email, texts. I even click on an app that lists the earthquakes that happened today around the world. There was a cluster of little ones near Mount St. Helens this morning, which reminds me of the little bag of ash my grandparents sent me after the 1980 eruption. I remember being in awe of the minuscule pouch of gray dust. My imagination piqued by the thought of its provenance and how it ended up here in my hands.

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When I run out of new things to click on, I remember Katie's audio message. Nobody's around, so I play it at full volume through my phone's speaker. Her voice is clear but a little shaky. "Hey, I'm just going to give you a few brief reminders. First, I love you. For a

long time. And second, I am not the only person who loves you. Don't be afraid to ask for help—and not just from strangers, but also from your people. Remember that you are physically and mentally strong and you've done a lot to prepare yourself for this trip. But that doesn't mean everything's always going to go smoothly. It just means you are ready to deal with things as they pop up along the way. You'll make good decisions, I know that you will. I know you want to be safe. And don't forget to drink water! I hope you really enjoy this experience and feel alive and connected and engaged and I look forward to hearing about it as you go. It's just walking! Everything's going to be alright. OK, bye now!"

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I can't hold back any longer. My belly and back shake uncontrollably as water spouts from my eyes. My high-pitched bellyache sounds like laughter and I look around to make sure nobody sees me. When it passes I feel lighter. "I should do that more often," I say out loud. Then I sip my iced americano and pass the remaining time considering the difference between happiness and sadness. I wonder if they can be mistaken for each other?

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When Brittany pulls into the parking lot, I raise my drink to her. She parks and pops the trunk for my pack. I apologize in advance for stinking up the car. "Dude! I can't believe you walked this far," she says. Which is funny, because I can't believe it either.