

# DRIVE NACHO DRIVE

A Journey  
from the American Dream  
to the End of the World

BRAD VAN ORDEN  
SHEENA VAN ORDEN

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**DRIVE**  
**NACHO**  
**DRIVE**

A Journey  
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Brad Van Orden  
Sheena Van Orden



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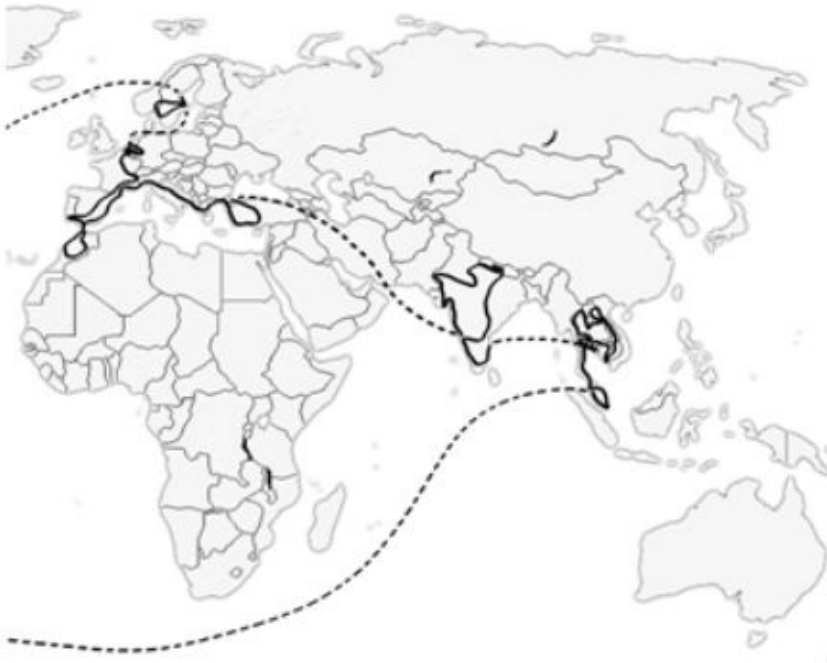
## Drive Nacho Drive,

Brad and Sheena's first book, tells the story of their drive from Arizona to the tip of South America. It is a tale about stepping away from the American Dream to drive as far south as it is possible to drive in the world.



## 927 Days of Summer

picks up the story where Drive Nacho Drive left off. It is a documentary of patience, nerve, and adventure along the highways and backroads from Asia's east coast to America's west coast, seen through the windshield of an aging VW van.



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*To Mike McKay*

*for teaching us that there isn't a moment to waste*

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# Part 1

## In a Past Life





~~— At 4:30 I dizzily stumbled out of bed. My skis waited in the car, and as I passed the table by the front door I grabbed the breakfast I'd set out the night before. By 4:45 I was coaxing my eyes open as I barreled through the snow, NPR on the radio, banana in hand, waking up to news of skiers lost in avalanches in California. Unseasonably high snowfall this year. At 6:00 I climbed steadily upward in the dark, the cold mountain air burning my lungs with each breath, the ski slopes illuminated only by the snow's reflection of the stars in the night sky. Through my headphones I was immersed in a podcast about traveling the world. This was part of the ritual.~~

After an hour of hiking in the dark, imagining travel to faraway places, I reached the top of the mountain. 7:00 – just in time for the rising sun to cast a shadow of the San Francisco peaks all the way across the high desert to the Grand Canyon, barely visible below the horizon. As I put away my climbing skins, pulled on my jacket, and kicked my telemark boots back into my bindings, I couldn't shake the silly grin from my face. With a nudge of my ski pole I sent myself sailing down the mountain I'd just climbed, crouching into each turn and springing up again, laying down the day's first tracks. At the “headwall,” half way down the mountain, I picked up enough speed to scare myself. *Yep, still alive!* I still couldn't get that silly grin off of my face.

By 8:00 I was back in the car heading down the mountain, just in time for an 8:30 meeting at work. There's just something about being in the mountains.

\* \* \*

On our first morning in the Colombian Andes I awoke to an unfamiliar crispness in the air. Having spent the last five months in Central America we were getting used to stifling heat and humidity. We crawled out of our down sleeping bags and put the coffee on. It was going to be a long day.

James and Lauren emerged from their truck bundled up like New York City hobos. Overnight their front tire had gone flat, causing their truck to tilt steeply to one side, so James had spent the night crushing Lauren against the fender well. Another night in the life of a homeless person, I guess. Sheena and I had slept like babies in Nacho's pop top roof tent, but the cold was a firm reminder that we had reached the Andes.

We donned our packs, bid adieu to our new friend Jeni — the tiny red-cheeked girl who lived in the rock hut next to our camp — and set off toward the towering, snow-capped peaks to the Southeast. The double track dirt road ended shortly beyond our camp, and gave way to a small singletrack leading up the valley toward *Pan de Azucar* and *El Pulpito del Diablo*, looming above.

The trail rose higher and higher over mountains of shale, and before long we found ourselves scrambling over boulders up a steep rock fall towards the first pass: *Paso de Cusirí*. If all went well we would complete two 15,000' passes before descending to the *Laguna de la Plaza*, a high glacial lake at 13,780 feet, where we would camp. We were told the hike would take about seven hours, but by the fourth hour dark clouds had moved in and cloaked the pass like a woolen shawl. The trail wound upwards in a series of steep switchbacks straight into the cloud.

In the early afternoon we reached the top of *Paso de Cusirí*, and in doing so found ourselves in the middle of a snowstorm. A mixture of snow and rain pelted us like horizontal pellets from an invisible army of pellet gun-toting boy scouts. We hid behind the wooden plank summit sign, which announced that we'd arrived at the inhospitable elevation of 14,469'. We assessed the situation, running out from behind the sign to look beyond the pass to see what lay in store for us. The trail disappeared into a carpet of dark clouds and whipping wind and snow.

“Onward and downward?” I asked, hoping for dissenters.

“Uh...It’s decision time, guys,” James said. Seeing the out, we had a short discussion and decided to throw in the towel and head back down in the direction we’d just come. We weren’t prepared for blizzard conditions, and some of the team were already experiencing numb fingers and toes. Nothing says “killjoy” like frostbite. Or pulmonary edema.

When we reached the rock fall on the way down, the entire section had been turned into a freezing cold waterfall. I had a split second daydream of me waking up dead, wrapped in my soggy sleeping bag at the bottom of a raging, icy cascade, and silently lauded our decision to turn back.

The following day, after having returned safely, albeit very cold and very tired, we picked up camp and moved to *Hacienda La Esperanza*. Marco, a stereotypical woolen poncho-wearing Colombian cowboy, cooked us dinner in his kitchen and showed off his antiques and old photos. Outside the weather was drizzling and gray.

In the morning we awoke, threw our things together and departed camp through fields reminiscent of Switzerland, interspersed with rocky spires jutting up through the grass while long-haired dairy cows moseyed about.

We hiked through a glacial valley laced with streams before climbing upwards over a series of rocky plateaus. On our right, an enormous rock wall separated us from the sprawling mountains and the tiny towns we’d driven through to get here; Onzaga, Covarachia, Soatá, and El Cocuy. To our left, glacier-capped peaks shimmered above the rocky terrain, taunting me with their 17,000 foot untracked powder bowls.

After five hours of uphill slogging we reached our destination for the night: *La Cueva del Hombre*. I had asked Marco why it was called The Man Cave before we set off from La Esperanza.

“Long ago, ducks would stop at the lake for a rest from their migration, and the men would shoot them. The men would sleep in the cave after they shot the ducks, so it is called *La Cueva del Hombre*. The ducks don’t come any more.” I noted that Marco should make up a more titillating story about how the Man Cave got its name.

We all set up our tents within the cave, and then Sheena and I then set off for a hike up to the lake to have a look around while James and Lauren took a nap. We bundled up and bounced out from under the overhang feeling light without our packs.

The trip from the cave to the lake took a damn, dirty long time, but once we crested the ridge and the landscape spread out in front of us, we lost our breath. *Pulmonary edema? Nope!* The mountain to the left was capped by a massive bowl of untouched snow from top to bottom, where the glacier spilled over the edge of a vast chasm; a crashing calamity of building-sized ice chunks paused in suspended animation. On the opposite side of the basin, another glacier spilled down from the top of a 17,000 foot peak, terminating at the edge of a colossal sheer rock wall. The ice composing the second glacier bore a map of its ancient history in dirty veins crisscrossing its surface, and diving into its depths. Between the walls of the basin were a series of small lakes fed by the runoff from both glaciers. All we could do was stare in awe, a mixture of blood and adrenaline coursing through our veins.

“So, how was it?” James peered out of his tent as we ducked back into the cave, having just awoken from his slumber.

I was at a loss for words. “It was...I felt like my heart was going to explode.”

As evening rolled around, we concocted a feast of broken up lasagna noodles with canned tomatoes in olive oil, and soon the shadows engulfed our cave and a harsh chill pressed the warm air into the valley below. We all huddled into our tent and passed the evening playing the travel-size board game *Trouble*.

The feeling as we unzipped our tent in the morning to discover the ground covered in snow was a stew of surprise, nostalgia, and regret. The continued snowfall and resulting accumulation mea-

that there would be no more excursions to the glacial lakes. It also meant that, since we didn't know how much snow was forecasted to fall, we would have to make a mad dash for lower elevation. We hastily drank our morning coffee and packed our things. James and Lauren, both having lost their gloves, fashioned mittens out of wool socks, and we all pulled plastic bags over our feet before slipping them into our shoes – poor man's Gore-Tex.

Hiking in the snow is about as close as we can get to a state of total serenity. The snowflakes absorb any stray sounds and create a supernatural silence, while the muffled crunch of snow under our feet composes a rhythmic soundtrack to our movement. As we silently descended through the snowy landscape my mind wandered to our winter camping trips to Durango, filling our tent with good friends and sleeping in the snow near the ski hill. I reflected on my regular hikes up Agassiz Peak before work, the shadow of the peaks stretching across the desert, and the rewarding turns. I thought about our dear friend Mike who had perished in an avalanche while backcountry skiing near his home in California. I had heard about it on NPR while heading up to the mountain before work, but never imagined that it could have been my friend who was lost. I remembered the discussion that Sheena and I had on the way home from his funeral, which ultimately led to us quitting our jobs and setting off on this very trip.

I liked that it was snowing; It put a silly grin on my face. There's just something about being in the mountains.

\* \* \*

In the early afternoon I had raced home in my 1979 GMC van. It was the first motorized vehicle that I'd ever bought, and I had spent a great number of evenings transforming it into what I had considered the ultimate roving bachelor pad for traveling to mountain bike races. Couch, entertainment center made of particle board, old school tube television, VCR, and two subwoofers. For some reason I had highlighted the interior with strips of foam covered in zebra-striped fabric. I suppose I should be forgiven, seeing as how I was a senior in high school and just coming to terms with my bad fashion and interior decorating sense.

It was Friday, and I had a mountain bike race in two days just a few miles from my house, so today's ride would be an easy spin into town and back, maybe fifteen or twenty miles. I threw on a pair of shorts and a blue long sleeved shirt, hopped on my bike, and headed out the driveway. I still remember what I was wearing twelve years later, because it turned out to be an important day. I also remember that I had a goatee, because Sheena later told me that she thought it made me look like a creepy old man. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

As my ride wound down and I spun out the final couple of miles before home, I passed by the race venue where I noticed the trailer for the Wolf Creek Bicycles team, which was run by my friend Jerry. I figured I'd swing by and give Jerry a hard time before carrying on home.

When I arrived at the trailer, Jerry was nowhere to be found and the only soul to be seen was a brown haired girl sitting in front of the trailer sketching something in colored pencils. I parked my bike and walked over in my stretchy spandex shorts, and asked if I could have a seat. The girl looked up at me, a creepy old man with a goatee, wearing stretchy spandex shorts.

"Uh, sure," she said, not wanting to be rude. "I'm Sheena."

I took a seat and watched her draw for a few minutes as she waited for me to get bored and leave. We chatted for a while and started to hit it off, and by the end of our conversation I had asked her if she wanted to come back to my place and share in my ritualistic pre-race carbo-loading dinner of spaghetti. Of course, being in high school, it would be prepared by and eaten with my mom. She opened the trailer door, peered in and asked her dad if it would be okay. Ernie peered out of the trailer

with the intense, wide eyes of a natural born killer and gave me a long, intimidating stare down. He begrudgingly agreed, and a half an hour later I returned with my creepy molester van to pick her up.

The following weekend happened to be the weekend of my senior prom. I had spent considerable time and energy planning it out, and to top it off I had even fooled a perfectly normal girl into actually coming with me to the dance. I had arranged for my racing buddy, Brandon, to drive up from Phoenix in the morning to do a mountain bike ride. I had found him a date as well, so we would all drive together back to north Phoenix for dinner, before driving back to Prescott for prom whereupon Brandon could drive back home to Phoenix. It was the plan of a stupid person, but I had spent considerable time and energy coming up with it.

When Brandon arrived, we took to the trails. Being that we were racing buddies, there was a high degree of one-upmanship going on, and we were both riding a little bit faster and trying a little bit harder than either of us was willing to lead on. The ride culminated in a three mile downhill trail which descended some fairly rough terrain with somewhat serious consequences for mistakes. We made it down the first set of twenty or so steep log stairs designed to divert runoff, past the drop off from the elevated tree root onto the thin trail above an arroyo, and around several tight, exposed corners. As we approached the hairiest part of the trail, a descent down the side of a dry waterfall, I thought it best to warn Brandon.

"Brandon," I yelled, "this part is really gnarly, so slow down and stay left!"

I had yelled these instructions over my shoulder as we both drifted at high speed around the rocky corner coming into the section, and just then my right foot clipped a rock, sending me out of control directly toward the waterfall. The last thing I remember before blacking out is slamming my front wheel into a log and becoming airborne.

"Where am I?"

"You're in the forest."

"Where am I?"

"Dude, you're in the forest."

"Uhh...Where am I?"

"Jesus man, you're in the forest!"

"Where am...what are you doing here? You live in Phoenix."

"I'm in town to go riding with you. We were mountain biking and you crashed. You've asked me where you are like twenty times now."

"We're mountain biking? Well then where's my bike, and how the hell did we get all the way out here? I can't believe you're in town."

"Yeah, today is your prom. I'm going there with you."

I could believe that he was in town because I could actually see him, but prom? I'm a scientist guy, and if I can't observe it or prove it through deductive experimentation, I find it very hard to place much credence in it. But what if? My first feeling was one of fear; I would need a date. I had no time to prepare. How was I expected to prepare for prom when I had only found about it now?

"You've been out cold for ten minutes, dude. I was starting to freak out because I didn't know how to get out of here to find help. Jesus, man, when you hit that log your whole body went limp and your arms went behind your back. You flew through the air like a ragdoll and slammed face first right into these rocks! I thought you were dead."

I looked around and took inventory of my surroundings. I couldn't remember a single thing from the entire day. My bike sat upright, leaned neatly against a rock at the bottom of the waterfall. When my rear wheel had hit the log, the force of the impact flattened out my titanium seat rails, snapping my seat in half in the center. My chin had a pretty bad gash and the bone felt cracked. My teeth had cut through my lips, and one of my upper teeth had broken off. I had lacerations all around

my mouth and nose, but my helmet didn't have a scratch on it.

~~—A couple of hours later I sat at my kitchen table while my mom picked gravel out of my face with tweezers and a Q-tip.~~

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the doctor? What if you have a concussion? And I really think this one needs stitches," she said.

"No, I'll be fine. We can just bandage it up and deal with it later." It was getting hard to speak because my lips were beginning to swell, closing off my mouth. And she was right, I had a Class I concussion. Just then the phone rang. It was Katie, my prom date.

"Oh hi," I muffled, "sorry I haven't been in touch. I was in a terrible bike accident. My mom is picking rocks out of my face right now...yes, it's very painful...no, I'm not going to the doctor, we're still on for tonight. I'll pick you up around five, I'm taking you to dinner at Uncle Louie Pizza in Cave Creek."

"Ooh...yeah, about that," she said, "I wanted to let you know that I was invited to have dinner with a group of my choir friends."

"What? What do you mean you're going with your choir friends? We have a double date lined up, and my friend is already in town."

"yeah, I wish I could, but I kind of told them I'd come with them. See you at prom?"

I hung up the phone and stared blankly ahead. I heard the tinkle of gravel as my mom plunked it into the glass bowl, but all I could feel was the kind of pain and rejection that usually only exists in a high schooler's worst nightmare involving terrible outcomes to highly public social situations.

My mom finished picking the rocks from my face, doused my wounds in hydrogen peroxide and then wrapped my entire face in white bandages to keep my wounds closed in lieu of stitches. Below my eyes, the only thing visible were my swollen lips poking out of my mess of white bandages. As I reviewed her handy work in the mirror, I remembered. Sheena, the girl from last weekend, she lives in Cave Creek, and only a couple of miles from Uncle Louie Pizza! I dialed her up and asked if she had dinner plans.

"No, why? And why does it sound like you're speaking through a straw?" It was a date.

When we arrived in Cave Creek I got out of Brandon's truck, made a sad attempt to wipe the wrinkles out of my tuxedo, and then walked to Sheena's door. When the door opened, Sheena and her mom both peered out, and then recoiled in disgust.

"I thought, who is this guy? This isn't the same guy I met at the bike race," Sheena would later tell me.

We arrived at Uncle Louie Pizza and ordered. By now my lips had completely sealed shut from the swelling, and it would be impossible to eat. Starving, I politely parted my lips with two of my fingers and asked the waitress in simplified, halting English if they could possibly put a couple of slices of the Blue Bomber in a blender with some milk so I could drink my dinner. The waitress blinked a long blink and seemed to fight the urge to wretch, and then kindly informed me that they didn't have a blender.

The evening would continue to unfold in a most unpleasant fashion. The trip back to Flagstaff was awkward and silent — Brandon and his date didn't seem to have much in common — while I remained crammed into the extended cab folding child's seat, rendered completely silent by swollen lips, and trying not to fall asleep for fear of slipping into a coma.

Prior to arriving at prom, Brandon dropped me off at my house where I switched cars, and then I drove to prom all alone in the DeLorean. This seems like the right time in the story to mention that I had asked for, and been granted permission, to drive my grandpa's DeLorean. I had imagined my dad being very impressed by my bitchin' Back to the Future car, but as this was to be one of the worst days of my life, I was destined by fate to drive to prom all alone in the DeLorean, and then be asked by the

parking lot attendant to park it many minutes' walk from the actual prom, rendering the entire public display completely futile.

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The night would only get worse; my date would spend the entire night hanging out with his choir friends instead of me; Brandon's date would leave him the moment they arrived at the dance, preferring the company of others to his exclusive company; Brandon would get bored and inform me that things weren't working out as planned, and that he was driving home. The icing on the cake would come later, when it would emerge that most of my high school classmates had split their vote among the popular Prom King nominees, and I, who was nominated as a sort of joke by my friend Carissa, would seize the bulk of the nerd vote, securing for me the highest number of votes and thus the title Prom King.

I was horrified. I stood in front of a sea of my peers, each looking at me with sad eyes like those of people who have just witnessed the tragic clubbing of a baby seal by a heartless hunter. I waited for the bucket of pig's blood to land on my head.

I left early, and as I tried to stealthily slip from my front door to my bedroom carrying my ornate blue and gold crown, my mom asked how it went.

I painfully parted my lips with two fingers and mumbled, "I don't want to talk about it!"

Sheena and I got to know each other over the ensuing weeks, and by the time the National Championship mountain bike race in Big Bear, California rolled around, we were a couple. As a surprise, I made her a mixed CD, which I delivered to her on our drive from Big Bear to Flagstaff. When we arrived and parked under a big pine tree, she told me that a proper mixed CD needed proper cover art, so I grabbed a permanent marker and transformed the CD into a car tire. Across the sidewall I wrote the word *Goodyear*.

And it was a good year.

I moved from my home in Prescott to Flagstaff, to start my studies at Northern Arizona University. Sheena, being a year behind me, stayed in Cave Creek to finish off High School. Throughout the year we met whenever we could. We camped together at bike races on the weekends; she bought an old BMW and used it to drive to Flagstaff when she could, and on occasion I would surprise her by riding my road bike to her house unannounced. The trip was 130 miles, so I would typically collapse in exhaustion on her bed, where I would remain until she went to work at Barro Pizza, and could revive me with slices of pepperoni with ranch dressing.

When she graduated from high school, she moved in with me in Flagstaff, replacing Brandon — yes, the same Brandon — as my roommate. And my roommate she would remain.

In college I bought a cruiser bike from one of Flagstaff's mountain bike pioneers. The frame was from a 1970's road bike, and I outfitted it with a pair of rusty blue handlebars and old chrome fenders. I named it Clarence, because every old and beloved vehicle deserves a name, and used it to commute to my classes. Sheena's grandmother gave her an old bike, which she aptly named Peach on account of the color.

Sheena and I lived in an apartment complex in the woods in between North and South Campus, and we rode our cruisers through the hilly campus like untiring San Francisco bicycle messengers. In the snow I would slide wildly around corners while Sheena rode more carefully, laughing and scolding me not to hurt myself. On days when our classes were near one another, Sheena would sit on my rusty blue handlebars and I would ferry her from class to class. Sometimes she would lean back against my arms, straighten her legs, and point her toes rigidly forward like a needle point, a move that I called "The Torpedo," and we would ride as fast as we could spearing the air like the pointed mast of a Spanish Galleon.

By the time I was a Junior at university, I had been racing as a professional mountain bike racer for a few years. It should be noted that in most cases, being a professional at something implies

that one makes enough money at it so as to be considered a profession. It is not so in all professions, sports, and particularly in professional mountain bike racing. Most professional racers, with the exception of a select few, have other jobs. I fit into this second category, and while I was out on the bike for 15–30 hours per week, logging ten or fifteen thousand miles per year, I subsisted primarily off of money that was supposed to be used for college expenses. To move to the next level as a cyclist there were few things that worked better than moving to Europe.

And so, when Sheena was 19 and I was 20 years old, we moved to Europe. Once we had the idea, it didn't take much coaxing for us to start putting one foot in front of the other, and by the time the summer wound down, we were on a plane to Europe with two suitcases and four bikes packed in enormous boxes. We settled into a small townhouse with a mold problem overlooking the Bristol Channel on the south coast of Wales, unpacked our bikes, and signed up for classes at the University of Wales in Swansea.

For a year we explored Wales on our bikes, and did so in a constant state of disbelief in what we saw. The network of narrow, seldom-trafficked roads in Wales are extensive, crisscrossing the countryside and mountains like spaghetti thrown onto a map. From our house we could ride north into the rolling canyons of the Brecon Beacons, turn left and traverse a meandering stream flanked by moss-laden trees, and then pass castles and sheep pastures before climbing the eerie Black Mountain and then descending back to our home by the sea. Or we could ride east through Port Talbot, turn inland and ride through the Afan Forest and into the mountains, passing traditional stone villages before ascending a mountain pass, and riding across sweeping valleys before looping back through hills dotted with medieval coal mining towns. For the first time we became keenly aware that there really is a whole world out there to discover, and that the most rewarding parts are often subtle, only to be uncovered piece by piece after embedding oneself into a place and letting it reveal its secrets over time.

Sheena and I graduated from NAU on the same day in 2006. A few weeks later we boarded a plane for Europe, paid for with the very last of our student loan money, determined to discover a little bit more of the continent before settling down into our careers. On June 2nd, exactly five years after we became a couple, and after having hiked to a mountaintop overlooking Lake Como in Italy, I proposed to Sheena. To my great relief, and sparing us from a long and awkward hike down the mountain, she accepted my proposition.

Sheena had landed a job as a Credit Manager for a bank, a job which she grew to despise with steaming passion. Her job was to sell lines of credit to anyone and everyone that called her, regardless of whether they should have been taking out more lines of credit. I gently teased her and called her a loan shark to lighten the mood most days when she would return home in tears, owing to how much she hated her job.

I had started a software company for the renewable energy industry during my final year at university, but it wasn't self-sufficient by the time of my graduation. I got a job as a mechanical engineer in the Medical Products Division of W.L. Gore & Associates, better known as Gore-Tex, where I went to work designing catheter delivery systems for atrial septal defect occluders. In layman's terms, I designed fancy straws that could be inserted into patients' legs and guided into the heart, through which really fancy and really expensive umbrella-like objects could be deployed, plugging unwanted holes in the heart's atrial septum.

Each afternoon I returned home from work, and then went to work writing software until Sheena would come home. I would stop for an hour to comfort her with regard to her bad day at work, and then we'd eat dinner before I retired to my computer for further software development.

One day, things improved immensely. This happened on account of Sheena being hired by Gore-Tex, just like me, to do worthwhile work that she very much enjoyed, and henceforth ended her

ritual of hating her job. We carried on, worked hard, and moved into a relatively large house in downtown Flagstaff. We got married, honeymooned, and each year we took a two week vacation in Europe.

Eventually my software company started picking up, owing much to the fact that I finally finished tweaking the code and started focusing on selling it, a necessary business transition that most engineers find gut wrenching and endlessly nerve wracking. I hired a network guy and together we nursed the company along, helping it find its feet. Soon, I got a call from the CEO of a wind turbine company, and he wondered if I'd mind if he bought my company.

When I got the call I was opening a gate for my grandpa on Mingus Mountain, where he had built a cabin. I had heard about this new CEO—he was a "turnaround guy." Companies that needed that extra push would hire him, and he would come in with a new management team and bring the company to the next level. When he arrived on the scene, the newspapers reported that he had big plans to go public with the wind turbine company. He reiterated this to me on the phone.

"Tell you what," he began. "I like what you've created, and I think it would help us take the thing to the next level. I'll buy your company, but under one condition: you come with it." He then confidently spelled out the steps he'd be taking over the next 18 months, which would culminate in him taking the company public.

When I hung up the phone I was ecstatic. We were one year into the two-year execution of our savings plan for our big trip, but if I played my cards right this would put an end to all of that. We were home free!

A couple of days later we sat down to negotiate. I was asked to stay with the company for at least two years, but was able to talk it down to one. For my company, my partner and I would receive some cash and some stock in the wind turbine company. With a fair level of confidence that the 2 year old company would soon go public, we opted for less cash and a majority stock agreement. If things went well, we'd be rolling in it in a short 18 months.

It was a risk and we knew it, but the potential reward was huge. As a gesture of good will, I gave half of my cash to one of our early investors who had taken a chance on us, because you should take care of the people who take care of you.

The day after I got the call from the wind turbine company's CEO asking me if I'd sell my company I walked into work at Gore-Tex with sweaty palms. It was time for our morning stand up meeting, in which each team member would disseminate their day's work plan to the rest of the team. By random chance I was to go last. Each person talked about what testing they'd be doing that day, which ISO standards they'd be reviewing, and the like. When it was my turn, I made it quick.

"Today I'll be quitting my job. I haven't thought much beyond that point. That's all I have."

A couple of months later, tax time rolled around. As it turns out, our agreement was rather unique in the world of business acquisitions, and our tax man determined that we should pay taxes on the value of our stock as though it were cash income, which ate up nearly all of the money I had left from the acquisition. All of a sudden my stock held much more importance than it had before. We would indeed have to finish executing our savings plan, but we'd keep our fingers crossed that one day in about 18 months we'd find ourselves bloody rich.

Given Murphy's law, combined with the fact that renewable energy is a politically volatile industry, it will come as no surprise that the wind turbine company failed to go public. And not only did it fail to go public, but the CEO was fired, replaced by another CEO who was soon fired, to be replaced by a board of directors who relocated the company, missed the mark on a big new product offering, and then abruptly went out of business, rendering my stock valueless.

It all goes to show that the world behaves in strange ways, and that nothing is certain. The only certainties are those things which we can control, and we can't control all that many things outside



our own will and determination.

~~With each passing year, our lives bore a closer and closer resemblance to the ever-promoted American Dream. We were both working professionals, the living was easy, and we were occupying a relatively nice house with four bedrooms. Just like the song, there were even two cats in the yard. But after several years passed, we started to realize that time seemed to be passing more quickly than ever before. We would think back to events that had happened two or three years prior, and they seemed like they had happened last month. We knew that something needed to change, that we would have to do something interesting and adventurous to shake things up. But we didn't know what. And Sheena's biological clock was ticking, so we'd need to do something soon, before we had a really good excuse not to do anything. Children or some such.~~

Initially we had the wild idea that we should move to Germany. It was at a time when both of us were working for Gore-Tex, and they had a location just outside of Munich. Sheena immediately gravitated toward the idea, and we started preparing. I started taking German lessons on the BE website, and we investigated living costs and good neighborhoods. I researched bus schedules for getting from Munich to the Alps to go skiing. I decided to fill out an *Associate Development Plan* at work, which I formally declared my desire to transfer to Munich, and then had it signed by leadership. I would later find out that these plans are filed away and have no real importance or authority. But I didn't know this, and in the end it didn't matter.

It didn't matter because after a few months we got used to the idea of moving to Munich, and it no longer seemed like a the big pre-children adventure that we had hoped for; we would simply be doing the same thing in a different location. We quietly filed the idea away and I eventually stopped taking my German lessons.

Mike's funeral was held in his high school auditorium. Outside snow covered the ground in an accumulation from the recent storm that had dumped record depths on the Sierra Nevada range. It was this very storm that had tempted Mike and a fellow ski patroller into the backcountry only a few days prior, into Government Canyon, where he would drop in and trigger the avalanche that would take his life. Ski patrollers had later scoured the canyon with their avalanche probes and shovels looking for Mike's skis, but were only able to recover one, and it leaned against the wall behind the podium where Mike's friends and family would spend the evening recounting all of the things he'd accomplished, and all of the lives he had touched in his 23 years. He had certainly left a big impression on us, and we still couldn't believe that he was gone.

On the way home from the funeral, driving past Big Bear Lake where Sheena and I had begun our relationship together, we had the discussion that we felt compelled to have when a young life is lost. Are we really living each day, or are we taking them for granted? We had wanted to do something big and memorable before we had kids, but we had procrastinated about it. If we were going to do something, we'd need to be more proactive. We'd need to think of something and just do it. But what to do?

A year later I was standing at my desk when Steve walked by my window. Steve is a happy guy who drives a Volkswagen van. As he passed I blurted out the first thing that came into my head:

“Hey Steve, let's drive your hippie bus to Tierra del Fuego.”

He paused for a second, and then without blinking said “I don't think so” and continued on his way. A minute later he sent me a link to an article about a couple who drove their VW camper van through the Americas and Africa. I took one look at the article's title, and quickly sent it on to Sheena along with the question “Want to do this?” She immediately responded with “Yes!”

That evening we decided that we would buy a Volkswagen camper van, save a bunch of money, and drive around the world. We would call the van Ignacio because Ignacio is a dignified name, and because every old and beloved vehicle deserves a name. It would be "Nacho" for short. We scribbled

out a savings plan and set the wheels in motion. On the fifth day of December, on opposite sides of town, Sheena and I each walked into our respective places of work and quit our jobs.

Sheena posted a quote on our refrigerator that said “Those who wish for the weekend are wishing their lives away.” We may have taken the quote more literally than its author intended, but we wanted to be damn sure that we weren't wishing our lives away.

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# Part 2

## Wanderlust



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# 1

*Arizona, United States — December, by Brad*

The other day I went to lunch with my company's CEO. He looked down into his Chick-Korma, and then up at me. "I think you should see a shrink," he said. It was obvious what he thought of our idea to drive Nacho around the world. "I'll even pay for it. Just lay on the couch for an hour and let's see what happens." We'd received a wide variety of responses to the news of our leaving, but this one was unique, suggesting that our desire to live meant that we must be crazy.

The response from Sheena's coworkers fell to the opposite extreme. She gathered them all together in a common area between the office cubicles and told them all at the same time, which resulted in the entire accounting department breaking into tears simultaneously. The following day one of her coworkers wrote her a poem about our trip and laminated it. It occurred to me that a graduate student in sociology would do well to write a thesis about the varying reactions to shocking news among different office professionals.

I do enjoy observing the responses that people have to the news of our trip; a person's reaction is telling of their experiences and outlook on life. If they've never traveled, they tend not to see the point in our decision. The young and well traveled tend to be enthusiastic and encouraging. Those who have done something like this before become nostalgic and evangelistic in their encouragement for us to get underway. Members of my grandfather's generation have the most predictable and consistent response: their eyes relax and seem to focus on some distant object, they nod their heads, and say something to the tune of "Do it now before it's too late." My actual grandfather had this same response, but then followed it up with, "But you'll never make it through the Middle East because they'll set your car on fire." Thanks Grandpa.

Some people don't like what we're doing, or perhaps they find it infuriating that young people are doing these things when they themselves have not found the courage or means to do so. Coupled with the anonymity that the internet affords, we've received some downright spiteful feedback, like this from Donalie in Florida. We have no idea who she is.

*"...considering all the people who don't have a car of any age to live in or the gas to go from one town to another, I don't give a hoot. I guess you just don't get it, Brad...There are much more important things to do than to travel for years. The one good thing is that they quit their jobs, hopefully opening up jobs for people who need a job to work. I wish them well but I don't admire them."*

I haven't been able to figure out what must have been so bad about her life to give her this kind of outlook. We tend to find the advice of people who have been in our shoes more motivating and relevant. The letter we received from a guy named Todd was more encouraging.

*"Reminds me of the trip I took in a different mode of transport. After college I fitted out my 26ft sloop and headed over the horizon to points south from Morro Bay, CA. I was gone for the better part of the year, cruising the*

coast all the way down to Zihuatanejo and back, solo. Of course I had my mask, fins, and sling, not to mention a quiver of boards. Otherwise, I didn't have a clue. Literally. See, I had not sailed at all before this, and had acquired no knowledge from books. Oh the horror I put my mother through... Sorry mom, I love you.

What I got was an adventure of the grandest sorts; what 23 year old wouldn't? I loved Baja – my favorite place by far. So many good right hand point breaks, lobster, and amazing sunsets and sunrises. Eventually warm water called, and I ended up posting up at an anchorage in Puerto Vallarta. It was heaven. Good anchorage, good wave, little town... Of course the people are super kind and friendly as well. You will have more of the same.

One thing I found out was that exploring and riding waves from a boat is a very romantic idea, but very difficult. A boat can get you into some places where a car cannot, but for the most part, all of the good breaks down the coast are reachable by 4 wheels. And guess what? There is no rocking or creaking when the swell is up. No worry of dragging anchor into the impact zone or out to sea. No wondering if you're going to find that sandbar that shifts with the rain and tide.

Sorry for the ramble/reliving the past, but I've done what you've done. Pinched the pennies, scrapped a few, saved. Gone against the flow of the norm to do something that leaves most people with more questions, even after you've answered them all. I told my then girlfriend and now wife (I can't believe she married me after this story I am about to tell) that I couldn't take her out to a nice dinner, because that meant another week in Mexico. Mind you, this was one of the last times I would see her before jumping over the border. The family pressure and guilt can be heavy at times, and seems strange and misplaced because in the end, you're fulfilling and living out your dreams. Just keep telling them you love them! And hey, with Skype, wireless, Facetime, etc, the world is a lot smaller in many regards.

Finally, I met so many older couples who reveled in what I was doing. I specifically remember Peter from Canada who said, "You've got it figured out Todd. Take off now while you can. While your body is still young, while your mind and perspective are still fresh. While you're open to everything." While I still don't think I have it figured out (I mean, I bought a Vanagon...) my trip, my experiences – the people and places I visited and met – will be with me for a lifetime. In the end, that's what it's all about."

I prefer to think that our experience will be more in line with Todd's. I hope that our trip helps us to understand people better by experiencing their cultures, seeing how they live, and seeing how and why they do things differently than we do. I doubt that any shrink could provide this kind of insight, so I think we'll stick with the plan.

When I was a kid, the purse strings were tight. I recall often eating one of my mom's signature dishes: "Tuna and Crackers"; spread saltine crackers out on your plate, cover them with a creamy tuna concoction, and then eat it. If my mom taught me one thing, it was that you never breathe with your mouth open when it's freezing cold out. If she taught me one thing relevant to this discussion, it was how to be frugal.

Throughout this process, people have asked us how we're able to afford to pick up and drive around the world when we're so young. Trust fund? Ponzi scheme? Nope, just good old fashioned penny pinching. It's actually not so hard. The toughest part is making the "all or nothing" decision to actually do it.

We decided to do this trip right before leaving on vacation to Spain. We scribbled out our savings plan before we left, but perfected it on a long hike in the Alpujarras mountains. By that time we had realized that we were in the midst of a vacation on which we were wasting money that should have been going into the Nacho Fund. By the end of our hike we had outlined our plan. We identified the expensive aspects of our life, and created an attack plan to kill (or severely maim) each one. I now bequeath to you our savings plan so that we may get this out of the way once and for all.

### **Nacho Fund Expedient Growth Step 1: Move into someone's pantry**

When we first got ourselves into this mess, we were renting a house in downtown Flagstaff, Arizona. We had 1,800 square feet with a sizeable yard, and it was pretty expensive. We set out to find something smaller. What we found was something MUCH smaller. We named our mini chateau *The Dollhouse*.

The Dollhouse is roughly 420 square feet, and is half the price of our old place. It used to be a Mormon family's food pantry. Seriously.

The Dollhouse is 10 minutes from downtown on a shared property with two other young couples. It has a garden, chickens, horseshoe pit, campfire ring, and an outdoor dining area in an aspen grove. Its small size forced us to spend a lot more time outside. You know, playing horseshoe, lighting fires, and falling off of the roof while shoveling snow from atop our sagging abode.

### **Nacho Fund Expedient Growth Step 2: Ride more bike**

It's pretty easy to spend a couple hundred dollars per month on gas if you're not careful. We decided to ride bikes to work instead of driving whenever possible. Like so many aspects of this plan we liked to make a game out of it; "Okay, we're only allowed to fill up once this month. You in?"

I know, sometimes you just don't feel like riding bikes. "It's freezing and my kidneys ache. Okay, crybaby. For those days we have our Vespa, Cicilia. She's a 1963 VBB 150, and get

somewhere around 75mpg. If you fart within 10 feet of this thing it'll take you to the store. So efficient. So sensible. So...feminine?

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Just so that people don't make the mistake of thinking that I take myself seriously on little things, Cicilia, I wear a cute pearly white helmet that matches her paint job. I may look dainty, but I still give a nod and pound the air with a clenched fist when Harley riders pass me.

### **Nacho Fund Expedient Growth Step 3: Stop eating like Donald Trump. Or some other rich guy.**

As a present to ourselves when we graduated and got good jobs, we allowed ourselves to spend freely on groceries. It's important to eat well. Turns out spending freely doesn't necessarily equate to eating well. It just equates to spending freely.

We had these little dinosaur-like beasts (chickens) running all over the place, so we let them pull their weight by feeding us. We ate one of them early on, but decided that eating their eggs was a better investment.

We also inherited a nice organic garden with the property. Sheena took to the garden like Batman to rogue justice, seasonally eliminating our produce bill.

When the garden wasn't producing, we joined a co-op called Bountiful Baskets. For \$15 every two weeks we took home two laundry baskets full of fresh fruits and vegetables. If we were vegetarians we'd be home free, if not a little chronically tired.

Last, but not least, Sheena started making bread. Now, instead of paying \$4/loaf for the good stuff, we paid \$0.25/loaf for the great stuff. Little things. They add up.

### **Nacho Fund Expedient Growth Step 4: Stop paying people to make dinner for us.**

Like every American, we were spending a large proportion of our income on eating out. We started by cutting back to once per week, but by the end we were down to once every two weeks. Now our restaurant bills are down around \$100/month. When you only get to eat out twice per month, you must make it count, so thanks to our friends at the Himalayan Grill for feeding us just about every week for the last two and a half years.

### **Nacho Fund Expedient Growth Step 5: Stop buying so much crap.**

As consumers we get a lot of stuff pushed our way, and start to believe that we need it; cars, clothes, electronics, toilet paper. Well, one of those things is important. How else are you supposed to play video games with your friends?

We started by affording ourselves the luxury of spending \$300 per month on anything that wasn't rent, food, or gas. It sounds easy, but I challenge you to try it. Not easy. After a while we got used to it, so we continually reduced it until we got it to \$100, which is where it's been for almost two years. Strangely we don't even notice any more. It doesn't feel like we're sacrificing.

One way we minimized our spending was by entertaining ourselves in ways that didn't cost money. We used Netflix and consciously spent more time with friends at home rather than going out. We started a dinner club, where four couples would take turns hosting dinner, and started a beer tasting group with a bunch of friends.

### **The verdict**

We were ultimately able to reduce our spending by more than half. This allowed us to put a ~~of my paychecks into savings while we lived off of Sheena's~~. In the end it only took us about two and a half years to reach our goal. You heard correctly: two and a half years of saving will allow us to buy three years of freedom.

The other interesting outcome of this ordeal is that we found ourselves enjoying life much more at the end than we did when we started. Everything we did to save money made our lives immediately better in some way. We ate better, spent more time in the sun and with good friends, and distanced ourselves from the consumerism cycle. Simplify.



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