



The First Step

When Ben Davis first started walking across the country, ocean to ocean, it was to change himself. A few months after he started, however, he found he'd changed someone else

BY MARIAM MAKATSARIA

March 22

It's Day 25. A nervous wind bellows and huffs. It stomps its foot like an angry child and sends everything on the ground flying into the air, then settling on Ben's skin, clothes and inside his shoes. Here in Arizona, there are a few resilient shrubs and a carpet of sand. Dust, thick as fog, drapes over the horizon like copper-colored garland. He can't see them, but behind the veil of orange, there are cliffs and rocks and vistas he'd likely enjoy if it were any other day. The temperature hovers around 30 degrees, and the wind cuts right through his red sweater, blue waterproof North Face jacket and olive-green knit hat.

A gust of wind catches his breath, the sand pokes at his eyes. He trudges through it, squinting. His brother, Jed, who's joined Ben for a week during his ocean-to-ocean walk across the country, is pushing a yellow stroller packed to the brim with the basics: water, granola, a portable charger, an extra pair of socks and underwear, a tent and the like. They stop by the side of the road often, rub their eyes, wash their faces with water. This is Jed's third day on the road—and also, the brothers' worst. Besides the storm, the blisters on his heels—not to mention the aching, sore muscles—are becoming an annoyance, the way Ben's were his third day, just over three weeks ago when he set off from Los Angeles.

In the close-to-225-mile arid stretch of highway across northern Arizona, there's only a handful of towns the brothers can stop at, and they're all spread apart. When they reach Tuba City, Ben locates the closest hotel and, though reluctant to drop \$200 for a room, decides that a long hot shower is a must after the day's 21-mile walk. He scrubs the grit off his skin with one wash cloth after another. The water turns brown. Next, laundry, to rinse the only clothes they have.

That night, he and his brother sit down at the adjacent Denny's, chatting about the difficulty of the day's walk. *That was awful*, Ben says. *That's as bad as it can get*. The waitress takes his order: eggs, sausage and toast. Behind him, a television bracketed to the wall flickers with images of chaos. Ben glances at the reports of bombings at an airport in Brussels. He frowns, then looks away.

Warm food arrives on a plate in front of him. He's hungry and worn out. Twenty-five miles a day is the goal—that's 65,000 steps on average. Sometimes, if he sees a town up ahead, he'll go an extra mile or two, just to get some proper sleep at a hotel or an inn. The walk was never meant to be arduous; hence the hotels, the restaurants, the days off that Ben allows himself to take advantage of. (It was very much a 21st-century walk, he later says). But other times, he camps just off the road—something he tries to avoid if possible. He's not afraid to admit that he's afraid—of the dark, the murmur of the wind, the faint rustling of leaves, potential murderers hiding in the shadows. Maybe he's spent too many hours watching *Criminal Minds*.

Quite often, he's alone, but he is never lonely—not in the full sense of the word. He is always in the company of Charles, a modified double baby stroller, which has father's friend engineered to hold extra weight. (A couple of times a week, random passersby stop to ask why he is pushing a baby in a stroller in the middle of nowhere.) On social media, strangers offer him their couches to crash on, and others drive for hours to deliver care packages. Some just join him for a drink or a slice of pizza whenever he crosses their neck of the woods. Others ask if his feet are OK, if his knees are holding up. But he likes that.

So when Ben posts photos of the storm in Arizona, his followers chime in with some motivation. They urge him to keep going, offer a place to crash and a home-cooked meal should he pass by their town and call him a "rock star." That night, per the recommendation of an Instagram user, Ben buys a pair of goggles at a nearby trading post, only to realize that he won't be needing them. On Day 27, the weather clears up, and the brothers take to the open, flat road and walk

until 10:30 p.m., their headlamps illuminating the way. They camp and sleep on the rocky, uneven ground, and at sunrise, they wake up and start walking again.

May 30

Tick tock. Tick tocks the lonely watch. Watch as it sits there on the bedside table, unscratched. Unscratched, like it's never seen disaster, like it's never felt a man's pulse weaken and wane against it. It sits there next to a pocket knife the same man sometimes wore on a chain around his neck

when he went hiking with his wife. His wife, Cameron Cain, is now curled up in the man's T-shirt—white, soft and down to her knees—on the bed beside the watch that's still ticking. Ticking, because there's no stopping time. Time, or at least the concept of it, is lost to her. Her meals are brought up and consumed in bed; the shades are drawn.

She drifts in and out of sleep, and the hours pass by, but she doesn't know it. Everything barely mattered, and then no longer did. Bad things happen to good people, she knows. She can count the events leading up to the tragedy like pearls on a string. A call from her mother-in-law—the kind that divides a life into a before and an after. Then the news anchor, talking about bombs going off in the heart of the airport in Brussels, where her husband, Alex, and her sister-in-law, Sascha, were about to board a plane to New York. A confession to her family—she'd married her Dutch fiance in October 2013, quietly, at

the city clerk's office in lower Manhattan. A flight to Amsterdam and a three-hour drive to Brussels. The three-day-long search. A trip to the hospital. A look at the list of survivors, where her husband's and sister-in-law's names were absent. Then another look, just in case the paper changed its mind. Again, and again, 10 more times.

It's been two months and eight days. And between the lavender pink walls of her childhood bedroom in Raleigh, North Carolina, there is no forgetting. The watch is still ticking. She wears both of their wedding rings on one finger on her left hand—his, a little dented, probably from when he fell that day. A clutter of condolence cards and photos blankets her dresser and two desks. There's the stack of grief books people have sent her, unopened except for two. There are the two candles her mother saved from the funeral. There are the stones from Jerusalem where her husband was born—those, too, from



Cameron Cain and husband Alexander Pinczowski on a family trip to Scotland in August of 2015, just seven months before Alex and his sister were killed in the Brussels airport bombing.

She feels a tiny surge of something a lot like hope. How many people out there have an idea like his and actually go out and do it?



the funeral. On the dresser, there's a stack of index-card-sized notes he'd written while playing a board game. The night before the funeral, she'd played the game one last time and found the cards lying in the box.

But there are other things, too. Things she tucked away because she couldn't bring herself to look at them, like a love letter she had written to him after they'd been dating for six months that she didn't know he'd kept. His mom had found it in his charred wallet, blood-stained. Even this king-sized bed, where she sleeps next to her greyhound and white Lab mix, Winston, under a white duvet, is a reminder of him. His legs were far too long for the twin bed she'd had as a little girl, so they'd swapped it for a king. It seems so much larger now.

Then there's New York, of course, where she's lived for the past five years—in an apartment that's now lifeless. It's a hive of memories, Cameron later confesses, which is the reason she's staying with her parents, and in certain moments, the reason she struggles to summon an interest in life. Scrolling idly through the front page of Reddit helps her sleep at night. But today, something changes. Something catches her eye. An Arkansan by the name of Ben Davis, who's chronicling every day of his walk across the U.S. on foot, taking nothing but a stroller full of the bare necessities.

She feels a tiny surge of something a lot like hope. *How many people out there have an idea like his and actually go out and do it?* She watches a video Ben posted to YouTube back in 2010 about learning how to run and losing 120 pounds, a video that documented a very particular journey that spoke to the more than 1 million people who watched it and became proud of a man they had never met. She listens to an hour-long podcast in which he talks about his mastery of Mario Kart, his struggle with weight loss and, of course, his trek across the country. The interview was one by Chris Crosby, who had been a devout follower of Ben's weight-loss blog since it was launched in 2009. At first, Ben reminds her of Alex. Something in the way he speaks about health and food (she had met Alex at a weight-loss center), but also his eagerness to dive head-first into big, ambitious plans. But there is something else that resonates when he talks about the strangers who opened their homes, pulled out chairs for him at their dinner tables and offered him money when he ran out of funds. Something to do with the

notion of kindness in a world that, to her, at least in this moment, seems cruel and bleak. And then she gives in to an impulse. In the subject line of a blank email, she types, *My husband was killed in the Brussels airport terrorist attack—he wanted to do what you are doing.* And then the rest flows:

Hi Ben,

I wanted to write to tell you first of all that you are an inspiration to me.

Second of all, it was one of my husband's goals to one day cross the country, too, but by recumbent bike. He always hoped to get to his goal weight and be fit enough to complete that journey, along with so many other dreams. He was killed in the terrorist attack in Brussels this March at the age of 29, along with his sister. Their names are Alexander and Sascha Pinczowski. My world is shattered, but when I saw your post, it made me smile. It isn't Alex walking across the country, but someone is.

He and I spent a lot of time on Reddit together. I know I would have emailed him your post and commented on us doing this together one day. I would make a joke about how I would probably drive along beside him instead.

I know you didn't know him, and you don't know me, but because you shared a similar dream with him, I think you would have gotten along well. If you could do me a favor and walk a couple of steps for him, or think of him for a brief moment when you look at a sunset while on your walk, it would mean so much to me. If he had made that walk or ride, he would have traveled with every small survival tool imaginable. He would have listened to audiobooks (Audible) the whole way. He would have played "Englishman in New York" very frequently. He would have loved the adventure.

I've attached a picture of him and me, and one of his sister, Sascha.

Stay safe, good luck, and thank you for reading my message.

All my best,
Cameron Cain

Tick tock. It's 5:41 p.m., the watch says.
Click.
Sent.

May 29-31

It's the last week of May, and Ben is wending his way through Missouri. It'll be two months before he gets to Boston, the endpoint of this audacious journey. The sun beats down his neck every day. He wears a trucker's cap that he's convinced makes him look youthful. He lathers himself with sunscreen every hour, coats himself with bug spray—the two congealing into some sort of sticky film by the end of the day's walk. But he pushes himself to get to St. Louis sooner, anticipating a week-long break from the walk, a little vacation with his friends and girlfriend who planned to drive up from Little Rock to meet him.

Every day, he gets messages and emails—from folks who want to be him and folks who want to be with him. Talk with him and listen to his tales from the road. The truth is, Ben had developed

Ben's 3,100-mile journey, as documented on Instagram

148 days
6,975,000 steps
430,000 calories
222 gallons of water
55 hotel stays
12 flat tires on Charles,
the stroller
5 pairs of shoes



a following long before he started his cross-country walk—people who had found inspiration in his blog, in his YouTube video, in the pages of November 2011's issue of *Runner's World*, where he posed with a smile so big it practically leaped off the glossy cover. "He looks like Bradley Cooper, the guy from *The Hangover*," the article said. It even claimed that Ben got marriage proposals through his blog.

But not every post on his blog is a motivational weight-loss anthem. The majority revolve around the minutiae of Ben's daily life: what he ate, what he's done that day, his annoyances, his weight that's gone up and down like a piston in the years since *Runner's World*. And it's all very candid, like this post from February 2013: A picture of Ben with a runny nose, blood trickling down his lips to his palm, cupped underneath his chin as if he were about to blow a kiss. Ben doing his taxes. Ben's encounter with a guy at Subway who once asked him how many cookies he'd like. ("Heh. I want 1 million. I won't take any, though, thanks.") If there's one thing Ben is honest about, it's his ravenous appetite.

In fact, if he swerved from the diet lane and ate a can of Cheddar Cheese Pringles one day, he'd snap a photo and post it on his blog, saying, *I'm not proud. But it was so good.* He would go from a months-long habit of clocking in his workouts and photographing the numbers on his scale, training for marathons and the like, to a months-long silence.

But in May of 2015, Ben had a new plan: He would trek across the country, California to Boston, on foot. The timing was convenient. His two-year marriage had just ended. He'd gained weight he said he could stand to lose, and he thought, *If not now, then when?* The idea of the walk had been brewing in his mind for quite some time. A friend of his had attempted to walk from Los Angeles to New York back in 2005 and didn't make it, and Ben wanted to see if he could do it. At its core, though, it was more than just that. Sure, it would be a testament to his endurance, patience—man versus the country, or at least a 3,035-mile stretch of it. But it would also be a sobering reminder of what it's like to give something—or in Ben's case, everything—up: his job, his family, his dog and even the smaller things, like Friday-morning drives to Waffle House for bacon-and-egg sandwiches. But three months before he sold his car, broke his lease and hit the road, something happened. He met a girl.

Leaving his new girlfriend, Alexis, especially in the midst of the so-called puppy-love phase, was just another obstacle. They'd make it work, he decided—a feat that required him to be even more connected to his phone, even more plugged in, even less alone.

On Day 91, he makes it to St. Louis after a long day's trek. The next morning, he sleeps in until 10:30 a.m. at his hotel, which sits a few hundred yards from the Mississippi River (he can even hear it churn and burble when he opens the window), the fatigue catching up to him. On May 31, Ben and Alexis decide to spend their time together at the St. Louis Zoo. His phone beeps. Another message from a stranger.

But there's something different about this one. *My husband was killed in the Brussels airport terrorist attack—he wanted to do what you are doing*, the subject line reads. Ben scans the email, and it hits him. The dust storm in Arizona. The dinner at Denny's. The news anchor reporting the tragedy. He had given it such little thought, and it suddenly guilted him. *Too many disasters happening nowadays*, he remembers thinking. Paris, San Bernardino, Syria. Passing his phone over to Alexis, he mulls things over. *What can I say? How can I respond to something like this?* He gets back to his hotel and rereads the email. It's a little past midnight when he types a response into the little keyboard on his iPhone screen:

Cameron, thanks so much for this email. It hit me hard, and I just want you to know I haven't stopped thinking about you or Alexander since I read it. I will for sure continue thinking about you both. Do you mind if I write about the email? In the book I'm writing or on Instagram or both?

Thanks again, so much.

June 1

It begins with the tap of a single step and the thump of another to form a rhythm—the rhythm of something as simple and elementary as walking. Cameron's mind works with her legs, wandering. The memories resting somewhere in her head need only a light touch to awaken, a small cluster of neurons to fire up and bring Alex and Sascha to the forefront of her brain.

She breathes deep and thinks of Alex—of how much he loved the outdoors—and also of herself, of how strange this feels. All this light and all this air. This tiredness, this good kind of tiredness. Earlier, she'd hooked a leash onto Winston's collar, hopped into her dad's silver Cadillac and drove here by herself. It didn't come easily after three months of immobility, so that alone was progress.

It's only two days after she sent her email to Ben. The temperature is in the mid-80s on this Wednesday morning. The park, a place where people go canoeing, kayaking or fishing from the boardwalk, isn't as crowded as usual. Cameron had read Ben say on Reddit that he prefers not to listen to music while walking. (Only partly true, since Ben has posted a video of himself lip-syncing to "I'll Make a Man Out of You" off of *Mulan*'s soundtrack for some much-needed motivation). She decides not to listen to music either, because there is a possibility of noticing more, more of everything, the sounds under other sounds—the things that whisper and stir around her. She listens to the tags on Winston's collar jingle, the soft pitter-patter of her shoes treading the ground, and the occasional giggle of children playing with their parents.

She walks the paved trail lined with oak and pine trees, stopping midway at a spot by the lake where Winston likes to swim. She throws a stick into the water, and he fetches it. She had always been the one to take him out to parks, and it feels good to have him outside again instead of at the foot of her bed. Throughout the past three months, the smooth-coated dog—or her best friend, as she calls him—has comforted her in the way that only dogs can. Two birds glide over the lake, and she wonders if it could be some sort of sign. Lately, she's become aware of these little things, hoping, despite logic telling her otherwise, that they were sent from Alex and Sascha.

Toward the end of the walk, her foot begins to throb. Cameron's hammertoe—a foot deformity that causes the joint of the middle toe

to bend and curl like a claw—has been a stinging pain for years. Every time she'd tried to wear tennis shoes or heels or even flip-flops, they'd rub and hurt. But today she plows on, and when she loops back to where she took her first step, she thinks, *This is going to be the thing that helps me.*

That day, Cameron schedules a long-overdue surgery on her foot so she can walk properly again. And that night, she writes back to Ben—a long and open email, considering that Ben is still, somewhat, a stranger. A stranger who sometimes reminds Cameron of someone she knew so well. Ever since her husband died, Cameron has felt compelled to tell everyone she meets—folks who never knew Alex—about his life. *People have to know*, she'd think. It's a little past midnight when she types this:

Hi Ben,

Thank you for your email. Absolutely, you have my permission to write about him. Thank you.

Some more background on Alexander: He was an avid reader, writer, photographer and travel enthusiast. He loved to create things with his hands. He was an independent thinker and a gentle soul who was kind to everyone he met. He challenged everyone he touched to be a lifelong learner. He was the guy who had all of the answers. You could ask him any question, and he could answer it, with great passion. I knew life would always be exciting with him. He treated me like a queen and made me feel like I was the sexiest woman alive.

He loved animals, as did his sister, and he had recently adopted his first dog, Nelson, three years ago (Instagram @nelsontheviza). He was Dutch by birth but lived all over

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the world. He thought of himself as a true nomad. It was his dream to work for NASA, and I do believe that given the chance, he would have reached that goal. A biology professor once told me, "Man, your boyfriend has such a mind for science." He loved Carl Sagan's "Pale Blue Dot." Check it out if you haven't read it. I started a NASA space camp scholarship in his memory, and we've raised enough so far to send four underprivileged kids to science camp this summer in his memory.

We had both struggled with our weight our entire lives, and in love, we pushed each other to be healthier. I have lost my life partner, my adventure companion, the love of my life. I am hoping to do right by him by doing many good things in his memory, starting with myself. I'm having foot surgery in the morning so that I can start running again. I took my dog on a 5-mile hike this morning and thought of you, walking somewhere, too.

All my best,
Cameron

July 12-19

It's July 12, Day 137, and Ben is sitting on the edge of a planter by the steel double doors of a brownstone building on East 71st Street in Manhattan. He's waiting for Cameron's friend to deliver a key to her apartment. She's late, but he's never in a hurry. In fact, just resting and passing time has become the norm, and this is no different than any other break he's taken during the walk. Cameron, on the other hand, is uneasy. She texts him from Key West, where she's now staying with her grandmother after recovering from surgery, saying, "I even told her that you're a celebrity, so please be on time," and he laughs at that. After an hour, her friend arrives with the key.

The space is small, but cozy. A one-bedroom, 20-something-year-old's place with exposed-brick walls and modern furniture. It's quiet, and Ben has the place all to himself—at least for one of the two nights he's staying in the city. At this point, he's bedded down on couches in countless living rooms and dined with strangers who opened their doors to accommodate him. So when Cameron's parents stop by for a day on their way from the Hamptons to their home in North Carolina, it doesn't really faze him that they have never met before. In his cargo shorts and T-shirt, he joins them for dinner (at what he now remembers to be an upscale restaurant), enjoys crab cakes and good conversation.

The next day, Cameron's father—a former U.S. ambassador to Denmark and the former president and CEO of the Carolina Hurricanes—joins Ben on a 4-mile walk from Harlem and into the Bronx. Cameron's dad pushes the stroller, Charles, for all of those 4 miles before sending him

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WHERE FAMILY
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off with Ben to Connecticut. A few days later, about 125 miles into rural Connecticut, Ben slows down on the road alongside an open, grassy field.

Every day, Ben tries to document what he sees on the road, whom he meets, what he learns, scribbling thoughts in his journal with the goal of compiling a book out of them someday. Whenever he sees a ramshackle house or an old, dilapidated barn, he stops, whips out his phone and takes a picture. He sends it to Cameron, if there's internet, and they ponder the last time the structures were "used and vibrant," and, as Ben later mentions on social media, "how nature just sort of eats them up and returns the land to its original habitat after a while."

The images make Cameron think of her grandfather, of his stories about sleeping in the barn and watching over the tobacco as it fire-cured on his farm in North Carolina. Last Thanksgiving, she drove up there with Alex, her father and grandfather to see the old barn. Even though she left North Carolina at 15, she felt at home there, surrounded by pasture, on the land that nurtured her parents and grandparents. Her grandfather's house had been flattened and rebuilt, but the barn still stood, tired and gutted. Alex bent down and picked up a rusty nail from the ground, as a reminder of sorts. Now, if there's ever a run-down, cool-looking vehicle or a weathered, decrepit building that she passes on her walks in Key West, she, too, pauses and captures it. Like Ben, she finds beauty in broken windows and walls scrawled with vines.

Ben pauses because he knows this. An abandoned red barn sits by the side of the road, the barn's color striking against the background of blue and green. There's a gaping hole in the roof, slabs of wood pressed in and broken, as if a giant fist had thrown a punch to its side and knocked the breath right out of it. Ben scans the structure before raising his phone and framing it in the shot.

September 13

The sky brightens, and everything is golden, as if someone flicked a light switch on. The long branches overhead trap the sun, like a yolk caught between spindly fingers. A ray drapes over her forehead, which glistens with sweat. Her face is vaguely similar to something you'd see in a Renoir painting—luminous, a little flushed, framed by a cascade of blonde curls, the same thickness as those captured in the painter's *A Girl Crocheting*. Cameron's almost-neon pink blouse is darkened a shade or two by a ring of sweat on her abdomen.

They sit at a picnic table—Ben straddling his seat like a motorcycle—here in the shadow of Pinnacle Mountain, which towers behind them inside a frock of trees, surrounded by the static of cicadas. Here, in Little Rock, where circumstance had thrust them. And in looking at them from afar, it seems like they've known each other for years—as if they've weathered grubby knees and hormones together, celebrated many firsts and pulled through the lasts. But until yesterday, they had never



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