



# **Cycling, Wine, and Men**

**A Midlife Tour de France**

**By Nancy Brook**

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## Author's Note

While writing a memoir has been an experience of getting honest with myself, sharing my story with the world has required some modifications. Names and identifying characteristics of certain individuals have been changed to protect privacy. A few characters in the book are composite characters. Some time frames, details, and scenes have been adjusted for the sake of the narrative.

## Prologue



### *Bon Voyage*

He said goodbye the night before I left for France with a two-word text message: BON VOYAGE. Dante's message surprised me since we hadn't talked in two weeks. I imagined him sitting alone in his downtown Billings apartment as he tapped out the letters, perched on a stool, dark head bent down with his arms resting on the small table. A summer breeze would be stirring the curtains of his open window while muffled conversations hummed from the bar patrons on the patio across the street.

Now that I'm in France, I still wonder: why did he send the message? He didn't seem to care—at least not the way I did. Our past conversations now replay in my head. When I traveled with Dante to Montreal two months ago, I was completely enthralled with him. (What woman wouldn't be with a handsome doctor who whisked her away for romance and adventure?) Then Dante told me he couldn't see a future with me and he brought up dating other women. I was hurt, then angry, and now I miss him, which I realize is plain stupid after what he said.

Still, I don't mind dwelling on Dante to distract myself from the physical agony of climbing my bicycle up this giant mountain of Provence.

It's not working. Pain shoots through my thighs with each downward thrust. My upper back and neck feel stiff from hours in this hunched-over pose. My bottom is raw from cycling more than 600 miles across France. I'm moving so slowly that horseflies are circling my head. One lands on my shoulder and digs in through my mesh jersey.

I've reached mile four. Ten excruciating miles to the top.

*Keep pedaling*, I tell myself.

My heart pounds, and I gasp for breath. Pro cyclists have died climbing this mountain. I might be next.

The midday sun transforms the forest into a steamy sauna. I veer from side to side, seeking patches of shade to escape the heat radiating from the asphalt. I lick salty lips and squeeze water into my mouth from a plastic bottle.

Spandex cycling clothes cling to my damp body as my pores release wine-laced sweat, remnants of my Bastille Day celebration. My God, I *am* going to die. I stop pedaling, unclip my shoes, and anchor my feet on the ground. Standing with the bike straddled between my legs, I rest my throbbing head on the handle bars.

When I booked my French vacation, I envisioned cycling, drinking wine, and practicing French. Instead, I've become a *Survivor* contestant. After nine days on the tour, I've lived through a bike wreck, a car crash, and restless nights sleeping on the ground in a leaky tent. Now I'm facing sheer hell on this soul-destroying climb up Mont Ventoux.

Did a breakup really lead me to this folly?

## Chapter 1



# Looking for Love

It wasn't one breakup that drove me to France but all the failed relationships that had left me alone and longing for affection.

I'm now forty-three, but my search for love started when I was a teenager obsessed with romance novels. I'd swoon as I read about the handsome stranger rescuing the heroine from her struggles. I wanted a man like that—someone strong, good-looking, and passionate who could set me free.

My love life didn't turn out like the romance novels. I married at twenty-two, and a decade later, the man who had pledged eternal devotion betrayed me. We published a newspaper together in Billings, Montana, and without my knowledge he was withdrawing money out of the business checking account. I found out when a check I wrote to the printer for \$2909.11 bounced.

The business had been struggling, and suddenly my only option was to shut it down and lay off my employees. I felt terrible that the check had bounced and promised the printer that I would make monthly payments of a hundred dollars, even though I had no business, no job, and no child support.

Meanwhile, my husband took off and left a mess for me. Our mortgage payments were behind, so I sold the house just before it went into foreclosure. I traded a four-bedroom home

with a two-car garage for a two-bedroom apartment with off-street parking. I couldn't afford the payments on the lease for my four-year-old Honda Accord, so the car was repossessed. I rode my Schwinn ten-speed bicycle for a while until I saved \$750 to buy a beat-up ten-year-old Honda with faded paint, hail damage, and a hatchback held up with a broomstick. I worked odd jobs to make money. In my spare time, I crafted a business plan to resurrect the newspaper. Money became so tight that I had to choose between food and bills. With a nine-year-old daughter to support, I chose food and skipped paying the printer.

Slowly, I shoveled my way out of the financial blizzard. One heaping shovelful led to another. I had to keep moving before I became trapped in a cold, bleak world. After eight months, the sun came out when I found two investors for the newspaper. Then, on a warm June evening, Friday the thirteenth, the dark clouds rolled in.

I heard a knock on my apartment door. I looked out the peep-hole and saw a sheriff's deputy. I had been sorting laundry and clothes covered my living room floor. My daughter, Alex, lay on the couch watching the movie *Harriet the Spy*. I opened the door, and the deputy asked me to confirm my name.

"You're under arrest for felony check fraud."

I listened in disbelief as he explained the charges. I heard the words "printer," "\$10,000 bond," "jail."

"This is a mistake. My husband took money out of our account. I didn't know."

"I'm sorry," the deputy told me. "There's nothing I can do."

The deputy was kind considering the circumstances. He offered to let me call a friend to pick up my daughter so she didn't have to go into protective custody. He also didn't handcuff me in front of my neighbors. But he had a job to do, and he drove me to the county jail.

A strange series of events had landed me there. When I missed my monthly payment to the printer several months before, the printer had tried calling my business phone, but the line had been disconnected. I couldn't afford that monthly bill either. The printer, who was based in a small Montana town, must have thought I had run off, and so he visited the local sheriff's office looking for options. From there, everything escalated.

There probably hadn't been much going on that summer in that small town (think Mayberry from *The Andy Griffith Show*). Without the printer's knowledge, the sheriff's office had put out a warrant for my arrest. I didn't realize at the time that writing a bad check for an amount over \$500 is a felony in Montana. The maximum penalty is ten years in the state penitentiary, a \$50,000 fine, or both.

Neither my friends nor I had \$10,000 to spring me, so I stayed in the county detention facility in Billings with the mostly poor and uneducated women living on the margins of society. I started out in maximum security, which I assumed all prisoners did. My cell had a metal bed with a thin foam mattress, a metal sink, and a toilet without a seat. There were more than sixty women in the double-decker cell block, most housed two per cell. My first cellmate, a young woman charged with driving without insurance, stayed with me for one night. I worried that my next cellmate might be a violent offender. Fortunately, the jail staff let me stay alone when I moved to a less secure area.

Five days later, the county sheriff's deputy drove me, handcuffed and shackled, to the "Mayberry" jail. It was surreal. I rode in the front with the deputy while three male prisoners crammed the backseat. One of the men, a counterfeiter, spoke up for me and asked the deputy to release my shackles since I wasn't a threat. The deputy apologized to me, saying he couldn't. At least I wasn't in the backseat wedged between the other inmates.

I had been a member of the Chamber of Commerce and a respected newspaper owner. And there I was, handcuffed, dressed in blue jail pajamas, and charged with a felony. *How could this be happening to me?* I remember thinking.

Unlike the barracks I left behind in Billings, this jail had around ten cells. The staff at the detention center had been all business; the small-town deputies were friendly and jocular. I appeared before the Mayberry judge after a man charged with attempted murder for brandishing a sword at a party. A friend of mine knew the judge and had called two days before to vouch for my good character. The judge released me on my own recognizance. Eventually I proved my innocence, and the charges were dismissed.

Even though I hadn't knowingly written a bad check, I wouldn't exactly call myself a victim. I hadn't realized that my husband was withdrawing money out of the business checking account because I had paid no attention to my finances. I chose to shut my eyes—to the unreconciled bank statements, the unopened credit card bills, and the husband who freely used the business debit card. And while I should have called the printer to explain my predicament, I opted to ignore him, hoping he'd go away. Jail served as my wake-up call. It was time to release the shackles that had bound me to a life of denial and face reality.

My first priority became stable employment. I found a job in marketing and began climbing the corporate ladder. After six years in the business world, I made vice president of credit cards at a bank—ironic, given my past financial troubles. Those aren't the kind of things you discuss at job interviews or share over dinner with friends. I was too ashamed to tell my story to anyone other than my closest confidants.

It took me longer to pursue romance than it did to right my finances. I waited three years after my brush with the law before I finally agreed to a blind date arranged by a friend. The man treated me nicely, and we started seeing one another. I can see now that I was desperate to be loved and at the same time afraid to open myself up. I stayed aloof until he rejected me. Then I clung on like Saran wrap, which is surprising because he really wasn't anything special. At the time, I thought he was the only man for me, just like in the romance novels. And I suffered bitterly when we broke up. So did my then-twelve-year-old daughter, who had become quite attached to my boyfriend.

After that I dated a new man every year or so, careful not to let Alex—or myself—become too emotionally involved with any of them. They all seemed perfect for me at the time: the railroader, the business owner, the lawyer. I was sequentially dumped by each of them—on the phone, in a car, in a snowstorm.

My string of revolving relationships peppered with Internet dates left me weary. Two years ago I reached a turning point when my engineer boyfriend dumped me. I didn't want to date anymore and swore off Match.com. It was September, and my daughter had just left for the university two thousand miles away. I was almost forty-two, and for the first time in my life I

was living by myself. I needed an outlet, something to stave off loneliness and depression: I took up cycling.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Within the past month, I had bought a new road bicycle on impulse. The Indian summer meant pleasant riding conditions. And physical activity had always been a good outlet for me during emotionally trying times. I began to tootle my bike through my neighborhood until the snow fell. Then I heard about a winter wind-training class, where bikes are clamped into special trainers for pedaling indoors.

I met Jeff there. I didn't know it at the time, but my friend, Charles, had encouraged Jeff to come to class to meet me. I swear I wasn't even interested in dating, yet how could I resist his soulful eyes, toned body, and dark hair with a natural curl? I'll be honest: attractive, athletic, and available men in their forties don't line the streets of my hometown of Billings. When he asked me out for a Saint Patrick's Day bike ride, I said yes.

Through the spring and early summer, everything seemed perfect. We rode our bikes together, took long walks with our dogs, and shared barbecues. Then my cursed dating pattern recurred, and we broke up. We reunited and then broke up again. By November, we had embarked on a third round of dating when his kiss delivered the knockout blow.

We had just finished walking our dogs along the banks of the Yellowstone. I loaded my hairy herding duo, Zimmer and Lucky, into the back of my SUV while his decaffeinated dog, appropriately named Sanka, jumped into his truck. After our walk, Jeff hugged me goodbye and gave me a chaste peck on the cheek.

“Why don't you want to kiss me anymore?”

He kissed me again, more passionately this time. Two days later, he called to tell me we were through.

“You’re a wonderful person,” he paused. “But the thing is ... you bug me.”

“I bug you?” I walked from my bedroom down the hall to my kitchen.

“Yeah, you bug me. I don’t know what it is, but I just can’t see myself being with you.”

“How do I bug you? There must be reasons. You just aren’t telling me.” My voice had a bit of an edge now. I stopped pacing and stood by the kitchen counter, my left hand grabbing the Formica to steady myself.

“I don’t know what they are,” he said.

“What do you mean?” My voice increased its intensity and my fingers turned white as I squeezed the counter edge.

He lowered his tone. “Nancy, I don’t know what to say.”

“We were happy. We had plans. We talked about a future. What happened?”

“I told you. There are just some things that bug me.”

“Like what?” There had to be a way to make this work. I walked back to my bedroom and slumped down on my bed.

“I don’t want to go over this again.”

I didn’t know what to say. I inhaled deeply and counted my breaths so I wouldn’t cry. After five deep breaths, he spoke.

“It’s getting late. I need to go.”

After I hung up, I didn’t want to be alone, so I called Kathleen, my former sister-in-law. I often joked that I maintained custody of my daughter *and* Kathleen after my divorce. She was

more than a relative—she was one of my best friends. Part hippy chick, part Dear Abby, Kathleen listened to my problems with ease and grace. I don't know how she could dispense such good advice considering the challenges in her own life. She was chronically underemployed, hadn't dated in years, and always had something breaking down—her car, her refrigerator, or maybe her furnace. But no matter what the situation, she always had time to listen to my dating woes, and now I told her the details about my breakup with Jeff.

“Cry for a week,” she advised.

I started right away. I put down the phone, rolled over to clutch my pillow, and sobbed myself to sleep.

After a restless night, Zimmer's nose nuzzled me awake at five. *Get up! Let's walk.* Though tired, as I stretched my arms to wake myself, I realized that I felt better—a lot better. The heartache from the night before had passed like a storm cloud moving east toward the wide-open Montana prairie.

I got up and dressed for a cold winter morning, bundling up in my ratty down jacket, fleece hat, and padded gloves. I leashed my dogs, put on my headlamp, and descended into the dark.

My thoughts turned to Jeff. This breakup marked the seventh bankrupt relationship in seven years. I was weary of my dating merry-go-round, going in circles and getting nowhere and finally falling off my plastic pony. If I wasn't cycling through men all the time, that would leave room in my life for something else. The thought of “something else” shook loose a string of questions.

*If I don't have a future with Jeff—or anyone—what do I want to do with my life?*

*I need to shake things up—but how?*

*Should I move?*

*Change my career?*

*What do I want anyway?*

I had no answers. Then another question formed, seemingly from outside of me.

*What would make you happy, Nancy?*

I smiled as I realized my answer: I want to go to France.

## Chapter 2



### My French Fascination

Ah, France. My bicycle gliding through lush landscapes, I'd stop at charming hamlets along the way where smiling villagers wearing berets would welcome me. "Join us," they'd say. We'd sit and drink wine at a roadside café, talking for hours in French. Finally, I'd tear myself away, explaining that I must continue down the road. The vision became so vivid that within a week I applied for my passport and searched for a bike tour.

I googled "Cycling Tour France" and found many options. Some Web sites showed photos of unathletic riders on fat-tired bikes with baskets. Not challenging enough. Other sites had images of lean, ultra-fit riders climbing mountains. Too challenging.

Then I found a site called Wide Open Road Cycling Tours that seemed just right. Cyclists would travel from Bordeaux to the Alps, riding on quiet back roads during the day and camping at night. I liked camping. The photos showed people on road bikes, looking somewhat fit. Other photos showed tour members smiling for the camera while eating gourmet dinners and drinking wine. I liked good food and wine. The tour lasted fifteen days, and riders were expected to ride sixty miles a day comfortably. I could do that already. And while there were two major mountains to ascend, I figured within eight months, I could whip myself into climbing shape. The tour tempted me. But I just couldn't convince myself to sign up, despite my urge to go to France.

My fascination with France began long ago with my French uncle, Clarence. As a teenager, I'd travel to Duluth, Minnesota, to visit Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Clarence during my summer vacations. I remember the discreet half-shots of whiskey my uncle gave me more than I remember him talking about his family's home country. But I loved Uncle Clarence for his warmth and charisma, and by osmosis, I must have started loving France.

French was not taught in my small Montana high school, but as a college freshman I began studying the language. Every day on my way to French class, I'd walk past a poster of the Notre Dame de Paris cathedral. Many times, pausing by the poster, I'd imagine myself in Paris visiting Notre Dame, the Louvre, and the Eiffel Tower.

For my work-study job, I had a key to the language building. One night, I snuck into the building and peeled the poster off the wall. Remorse struck the next day when I saw the unfaded spot where the poster had once hung, but the shame of my theft vanished that night. I hung the poster near my bed so I could view the Gothic cathedral each night before I drifted off to sleep. The gargoyles on the building had kept silent vigil over Paris for centuries, and now they would watch over me.

The poster became crumpled and tattered through the years, and eventually I threw it out. But the dream remained. When I turned forty, my thoughts returned to France. Despite four years of college French, I had never mastered the language. I decided to buy myself French tutorial CDs as a birthday gift. My bathroom became the perfect language sanctuary. I'd sit in my bubble bath with a glass of red wine and repeat simple French sentences.

*Je voudrais du vin rouge.*

*Vous parlez trop vite pour moi.*

*Où est la toilette?*

My then seventeen-year-old daughter made fun of my French practice.

“Oh, my gawd! You should hear my mom in the bathtub,” she would tell her friends, my friends, even our hairdresser. Alex would then mock me with her Peppy Le Pew accent. I didn’t care. Practicing the language roused my dormant fascination of France.

Conversation would improve my French, but I didn’t know any francophones in Montana. Then I came up with a great idea: I’d practice on Internet chat rooms and become proficient enough to chat *en français*. It didn’t go as expected. Simultaneous dialogue boxes would pop up with French greetings.

*“Salut!”*

*“Bonjour!”*

*“Ça va?”*

I panicked. How do I respond to all of these people at once? I learned some quick French responses thanks to an online French-English dictionary. Soon, my basic college French skills returned and I could carry on simple conversations. As the chat sessions continued, I met lonely men from places like Tunisia, the Caribbean, and Algeria. They desperately sought an American sugar mama—a woman lonely enough to marry a strange foreign man bent on U.S. citizenship. My French tutors became foreign suitors, wooing me with their sweet nothings. Here’s an English version of a typical conversation:

Me: Hi. Good to see you again.

Him: Hi, baby! I’ve missed you! Can I get your cell phone number?

Me: Bye.

I did meet two real Frenchmen. One asked if I wanted to have an affair with him when I visited Paris. The other offered to show me his naked asshole via webcam. I declined both offers. I still wanted to speak French, but I realized that chat rooms weren't the place for me, so I put French practice aside.

Almost two years (and several break-ups) later I found my new obsession: cycling. I owe a lot of my progress to indoor wind-training classes taught by Coach Jay. The first night of class I had no clue what to expect. A classmate helped me clamp my bike into the wind trainer. Coach Jay, a super-fit man in his late forties and seven-time Hawaii Ironman finisher, walked by and told me my seat was too low and jacked it up three inches. I felt like I was toppling forward.

“Go to S-3 and pedal at 90,” Coach Jay instructed during our warm up.

What did he mean? Afraid to ask, I sat on my bike in the front row and pedaled.

“What are you doing?” Coach Jay yelled at me. “You're not a little girl riding through the neighborhood. Faster!”

I didn't think my legs could turn any quicker, but I pedaled like a maniac so this crazy drill sergeant wouldn't embarrass me again. Looking around, I noticed my classmates didn't seem to have a problem turning their legs this rapidly. They talked to each other as they cycled; some even had smiles on their faces. Meanwhile, my legs numbed and my face contorted itself into a grimace. This was just the warm-up.

“Come on. Quick and snappy!” Coach Jay shouted over his microphone headset as he paced through the rows of students. If this was how he worked out, no wonder he looked so lean.

We sprinted, simulated climbing hills, and performed endurance drills. Then Coach Jay had us do one-legged drills. That first night, I didn't have cleated shoes and clip-in pedals, so I skipped pedaling one leg at a time.

"You'd better get the right gear by next class," Coach Jay told me sternly.

I had never experienced such a challenging workout in my life. By the time I finished the one-and-a-half-hour class, I was as wrung out as my sopping wet cotton t-shirt.

My goal became to survive Coach Jay's class for the next nine sessions. Proper gear might help. At the next week's class I sported new cleated shoes and pedals, a new bike jersey made of technical fabric, and a new Cateye computer to measure my RPMs.

Arriving early, I set up my bike near a friendly-looking classmate. I asked him about the terminology used the week before: S-3 at 90. He explained that "S" referred to the small chain ring, "3" meant third gear and "90" indicated the RPMs, or revolutions per minute.

"Don't worry. You'll catch on."

"I really don't know what I'm doing."

He didn't disagree, but then he smiled and pointed at my new pink-flowered jersey. "At least you look better."

I faked it until I started making it. I'd watch everyone else and imitate their motions. Week by week, my legs learned to move quicker and my body handled a greater workload. I progressed from feeling completely exhausted after class to only somewhat wiped out.

By spring I was riding outdoors and making dramatic improvement. By summer I had completed my first century ride—one hundred miles. I had forgotten how much joy I could experience while cycling, but the riding brought back memories.

As a child I had pedaled a purple, banana-seat bike through Montana's countryside on dusty back roads, the same roads that are now paved for suburban neighborhoods. Sometimes my friends and I would bike to the Yellowstone River where we'd skip rocks and wade in the rapid waters. During the summer between my college freshman and sophomore years, I would ride my brother's hand-me-down Peugeot ten-speed to work and back, thirty miles round trip each day. I traveled on the interstate without a water bottle or helmet, but no one wore helmets back then. This was the early 1980s, before seat belts and car seats were even mandatory.

As a young mother, I had added a baby seat to the back of my Schwinn and had traversed the country roads in Minnesota, where I had been living at the time. Alex, who had not even turned one, would tip her head sideways to let the wind blow on her face.

By rediscovering my love for cycling, I integrated long-forgotten pieces of myself. The little girl on the banana seat had loved to explore and venture into the world. Why had I spent years denying her a bike ride on the back roads or the France trip of her dreams? By gathering these discarded fragments, I blossomed into the real me instead of the person I thought I should be. I was cycling into a whole new life.