

STORIES OF THE ROAD SYNOPSIS

Part One

After Kara Portola learns of “Bikecentennial,” an organization planning a 4,250 mile ride across the United States during the 1976 Bicentennial summer, with several thousand bicyclists expected to participate, she dares her boyfriend, Tom Steadman, to bicycle cross-country. Much to her surprise, Tom accepts the challenge. They decide, however, that rather than follow the Bikecentennial route, they will each pick one place they would like to visit and plan their route accordingly. Kara picks Yellowstone, while Tom picks Mount Rushmore. With limited experience, almost no time to prepare, and little money, they fly from Washington, D.C., to Portland, Oregon, to begin their three-month-long trip.

Tom and Kara spend their first two weeks on the road learning how to get along. They struggle through steep mountains and near-constant rain along the Pacific Coast and across the Cascade Range. Tom has a near accident when a logging truck passes him. Kara takes a bad fall. Tom is constantly frustrated by Kara’s slow pace and typically bicycles far ahead. She pushes on, numb from her painful injury and loneliness.

After Kara’s bicycle develops mechanical problems, they aim for the nearest repair shop, several hundred miles away, in Boise, Idaho. Their route takes them through the harsh eastern Oregon desert, where they have a terrible argument over whether they should have come on the trip at all.

Part Two

At the Oregon-Idaho border, Tom and Kara cross the Snake River, to their thinking, the beginning of the “Wild, Wild West.” They bicycle through extraordinarily beautiful country — the Northern Rockies, Craters of the Moon, the Grand Tetons, Yellowstone, the Black Hills, the Great Plains, and the Mississippi River headwaters.

Nearly every day brings a new adventure — steep mountains, nude hot springs, encounters with bears and bear lore, swarming mosquitoes, long desert rides, the Teton Dam collapse, a mountain snowstorm, bicycling on the interstate, a rogue longhorn steer, rattlesnakes, stampeding buffalo, and extreme plains headwinds.

Along the way, Tom and Kara encounter stories from the mountain men era, the 1854 Ward Massacre on the Oregon Trail, and frontier gold rushes; are saddened by the impending extinction of the Redfish Lake salmon; re-imagine the Mormon pioneer travels during the early winter storms of 1856; and become spooked upon learning of the Sioux legend of Sica Hollow, in which an entire community sacrifices itself to atone for killings committed by its young men.

They have great fun, but also contend with disappointment, petty jealousies, loneliness, fear, and exhaustion. After a romantic evening at a remote hot springs, Kara realizes that she does not share Tom’s interests in settling down. When Tom becomes sick in the mountains, Kara takes

responsibility for getting them re-organized and back on the road. While taking a layover in Fargo, North Dakota, Tom flirts with women, regaling them with stories of the road. He also asks Kara to telephone home for money.

Part Three

After diverting to Minnesota's Twin Cities to pick up Kara's money wire, Tom contemplates breaking up with Kara. They make their way to Wisconsin, where they spend a perfect summer afternoon tubing the Apple River.

The next day begins with a series of roller-coaster hills. When a German shepherd chases Kara up a steep hill, she accuses Tom of stirring up the farm dogs by riding up ahead. He does not deny that he prefers to bicycle on ahead, as if riding solo. Later on, with a local festival underway, the Ladysmith police send Tom and Kara 20 miles out of town to camp. During the night, Tom and Kara hear strange noises. The next morning, Tom realizes that he has lost his wallet, containing nearly all their trip money. They return to town and Tom telephones home for money. Towards evening, they set out again on the lonely highway. Two intoxicated drug dealers repeatedly stop and threaten the bicyclists, circling back on farm roads and finally coming up behind them and ramming a car into them. Tom's bike is smashed and his ankle badly twisted.

The police take Tom and Kara to the hospital, where the emergency room doctor invites them home. Tom and Kara make arrangements to leave Ladysmith on the weekend bus. They file complaints against the drug dealers, but the DA is not interested in their case. Tom and Kara need to find lodging for one more night, and the police agree to let them camp out in the courthouse. Troubled by their memories of the incident, the DA's reluctance to bring charges, the drug dealers' angry demands to be let out of the basement jail, as well as a persistent draft, wavering shadows, and odd noises, Kara asks Tom if he believes in ghosts. Unable to sleep, they return to the police station, where the officers on duty inform them that many of the area residents have very active imaginations, having reported a variety of hauntings.

Come morning, Tom and Kara take the bus to Green Bay, where Tom's uncle, a mechanical engineer, helps them repair their bikes. Their injuries heal. They spend time loafing around and visiting an idyllic swimming hole.

A week later, they are back on the road, taking the Lake Michigan carferry to Ludington. They bicycle across Michigan, following the shortest route possible. Tom's bike begins to break down. The scenery becomes familiar, and they encounter increasing traffic congestion and signs of environmental decline. The fun and adventure has gone out of their trip.

Within a week, they cross into Ontario, where a customs official grills Tom and Kara, making them take their bicycles apart for inspection. Disheartened at being treated like drug smugglers, they stop at a Lake Huron beach. They conclude that the Atlantic Ocean probably would not look all that much different. Later that night, they decide to end their trip in Toronto, three days away. Tom and Kara realize that once they leave Toronto, they will be going their separate ways.