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REPEATING THE
UNTHINKABLE: WILL IS
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HOW COULD ANY-
THING EVER BE OKAY
AGAIN? THEN THE
MIRACLES BEGAN.**

BY GLORIA LIU / PHOTOGRAPHY BY BENJAMIN RASMUSSEN



BY THE TIME BONNIE GOT TO COLORADO, WILL HAD ALREADY BEEN CREMATED.

The call had come from her older brother, Scott. She'd been in Cape Cod, on a weekend away with her mom and her sister, and when she picked up the phone, Scott said, "Where are you?" and she knew something was wrong. In her estimation, she cried, nonstop, for 72 hours. She could not eat. She could not drink. She did not sleep. She threw up. She had diarrhea. "Your very insides are revolting against what you just heard," she says now, thinking about that time.

The Gunnison County coroner was a kindly older man who wore a cowboy hat. He escorted Bonnie as well as Will's father, Gary, and younger brother, John, into a bare room with a table in the middle. On the table sat a black plastic box labeled "William D. Olson" in neat, italicized type. On top of it sat Will's wallet. Next to it, Will's helmet and his CamelBak. In a flash it hit her: This is all I have left.

NEWS STORIES GENERALLY described Will's death as a freak accident. Forty years old, he was an expert rider, and the section of trail he crashed on during the Crested Butte Big Mountain Enduro on August 1, 2015, was smooth and mellow. He died of a traumatic chest injury. There were no witnesses to the crash. The first racers who came upon Will performed CPR and mouth-to-mouth for about 25 minutes until EMTs and paramedics arrived to the remote backcountry site. But doctors later told Olson's family that he was probably gone within the first few minutes.

His death also made news because it was the first in enduro, a popular emerging discipline of mountain bike racing, where participants are timed on long, technical, and

primarily downhill stages between untimed pedaling "transfers." Racers knew it was risky, that they might break bones or even suffer more serious injuries. But nobody expected someone to die.

Will had been relatively new to the enduro racing scene in Colorado, but he was well-liked and respected. Friends and family described him as a quiet, humble "soul rider" who was crazy fast and owned Strava KOMs all over his home trails in the Vail Valley, but wasn't the type to brag about his athleticism. Olson had been leading the highly competitive Vet Expert Men/30+ category in the Big Mountain Enduro Series when he crashed. The day after the crash, over 200 fellow racers and riders did a tribute ride for Will on the trails in Crested Butte. Some of the racers also started a GoFundMe for Will's family, which raised nearly \$24,000. The series retired his race number, 139.

There were other details that made Will's death especially tragic: That he had been just three weeks away from moving to Burlington, Vermont, to start a new chapter of his life with his girlfriend, Bonnie McDonald, after five years of dating and two years of long-distance. That he and Bonnie, who was then 38 and living in Boston, had hammered out back in April how she'd come out and they'd spend a couple weeks doing a goodbye tour, camping and riding with friends before driving to Vermont. That just 10 days before he'd crashed, they'd picked out an engagement ring. That he had just wanted to stay in Colorado long enough to do one more race: Crested Butte.

BONNIE AND WILL had shared so much. They had both been longtime Vail Valley residents, both bona fide badass mountain people. Will had grown up the second of three brothers in the backwoods community of Scappoose, Oregon (population 7,000), and his childhood was spent exploring the lush, dense timberland that surrounded his family's farm, by mountain and dirt bike. When Will first moved to Vail to snowboard and mountain bike in his early 20s, he lived in a ramshackle cabin on the side of a mountain with no running water or electricity. Bonnie had also been a middle child, growing up in the suburbs of Boston, and had been athletic enough to play soccer at Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire. She'd discovered her love for the mountains the summer after her junior year in college, when she worked in Acadia National Park. After college, Bonnie figured that if she liked those mountains, she'd like bigger ones, and moved by herself to the Vail Valley. She was hooked: Within a year she had recruited her older brother, Scott, to come out. They bought a coffee shop together, where Bonnie worked. In Colorado, Bonnie discovered backcountry skiing. She taught yoga. She rock climbed so much her back started to look "like a refrigerator." And she found her all-in passion: mountain biking.

Despite living in the same small community, the two didn't meet until 2010, on a camping and riding trip with friends in Crested Butte. Will was recently divorced, but Bonnie didn't know that. She simply thought the quiet guy with the brown eyes, who had been hanging off to the side as the



TOP: WILL RIDES NEAR PHOENIX IN 2013. BOTTOM: WILL AND BONNIE IN 2014. LEFT: IN BONNIE'S APARTMENT, HER BIKE RESTS UNDER A PHOTO OF HIM RIDING (CENTER) AND A PICTURE OF THEM TOGETHER (RIGHT).

“ Racers knew enduro was risky. But nobody expected someone to die.

Courtesy Bonnie McDonald



BONNIE RIDES THE BIKE WILL BOUGHT HER IN FRUITA, COLORADO.

group got ready to ride, was pretty cute. And when she saw Will, who was a wiry 5'9" and 140 pounds, drop everyone up the first climb, Bonnie turned to her best friend Amber and said, "I think I'm gonna date him." For his part, Will most certainly took notice of the woman with the chestnut curls and the smile that lit up her entire face. She was slender but well-muscled, like a dancer—but most impressively, she had a gutsy, get-after-it riding style. The next time they saw each other, Bonnie shouted her phone number to Will midride. He couldn't remember the first three digits, so he dialed every possible local prefix in the Vail Valley until she picked up.

The relationship blossomed quickly and naturally. They loved skiing and snowboarding, camping with friends, and of course, mountain biking. They took adventures in Will's black Toyota Tacoma, bikes and camping gear in the bed, Bonnie's feet on the dashboard. Riding with Will, Bonnie became an even stronger cyclist. In groups, Bonnie was the bubbly one who would work the room while Will was more reserved, watching and smiling at her antics. But they undoubtedly brought out each other's playful natures, skinny-dipping in alpine lakes and swimming holes, rarely fighting.

Even when Bonnie decided that, after 13 years in the Vail Valley, she wanted to move back to Boston, be closer to family, and use the master's degree she was working on, Will was supportive. He wanted to stay in Colorado, but he promised he'd follow her if she liked it. The long-distance wasn't always easy. They split up twice, but it never lasted more than a few weeks. They talked every morning—Will's alarm would go off at 5:30 a.m. and he would call Bonnie on her commute to work. They sent cards on holidays and birthdays. They visited each other so much "we should own JetBlue," says Bonnie.

In April, just a few months before Will died, they went to Acadia National Park. It would be one of their last trips together. They went hiking, snuck off the trail to have sex, and laughed like teenagers when they almost got caught. They shotgunned beers in the hotel room—Will's idea—but they were both so bad at it that they sprayed the bathroom with PBR. At dinner, when a couple at a neighboring table saw Bonnie wearing a white dress and asked if they'd just gotten married, they said yes, and milked the free drinks.

The night she found out, Bonnie had lain in bed unable to sleep, repeating the unthinkable over and over in her head: Will is dead. Will is dead. Will is dead. How could anything ever be okay again?

BONNIE CONTEMPLATED GOING to church. She tried going to a grief counselor. Living in a Colorado ski town, with its culture of rugged independence, she had gotten very good at projecting that dauntless persona, and she fooled the counselor, a matronly woman who "graduated" her after just three sessions. "I think you've got a great handle on things," she'd gushed, and Bonnie had thought, *You have a degree?*

Finally, Bonnie went to go see a medium. She's not the type to seek out what she calls "airy fairy crystal ladies," but the medium was recommended to her by Western doctors, and she was desperate for answers.

The medium could "talk" to Will, and in fact began doing

so almost immediately, as she and Bonnie were still walking to her office. Bonnie could hear only the medium's side of the conversation, and Will seemed to have a lot to say, which combined for a somewhat hilarious, theatrical effect, as the medium responded matter-of-factly to an apparently insistent barrage from someone who wasn't there: "Okay, okay, I got it, we're walking in the door." "Can you just go to the cards?" (Pause.) "Well, because I read cards." Bonnie had gone in to the medium with a healthy amount of skepticism, and at first she wasn't sure what to make of this behavior—she laughed and cried at the same time. But the medium knew too many details to laugh off: She knew that Bonnie had been looking for his watch, and at one point she'd tell Bonnie that the trouble with Will's truck was not the brakes as Bonnie suspected, but mud. (Lo and behold, when Bonnie later took the truck to a mechanic, he said, "Your brakes are fine, but holy shit do you have a lot of mud under there.")

More importantly, the medium explained to Bonnie her view on life and death: that when we're born, we all get a contract. And when that contract ends, we get these opportunities—she called them windows—to leave. Will was presented with a good window, and he took it. If he didn't, it was going to be another one, not long after, that maybe would not have been as good—a plane crash, for example, or a car accident. The medium said that Will made his decision to leave quickly, that he tried to tell his first responders that it was okay, they didn't need to work on him so long.

The medium also helped Bonnie understand the concept that energies that were destined to be together would continually come together. In one life it might be as mother and child, in another it could be as teacher and student, or husband and wife. That Will was still out there somewhere; that he had not simply ceased to exist, that she might one day be reunited with his energy—these thoughts comforted Bonnie.

People look for these things, of course, when loved ones pass: signs and connections that can help to create sense from senseless tragedy. Even Bonnie, with her New England practicality, acknowledges this, and does not exactly publicize that she went to a medium. But that encounter was just one instance in a series of events that happened after Will's death that, even to an outside observer, inspire a strong sense of mysticism. A spiritual person might call them miracles.

But at their heart, they were gifts.

THE FIRST GIFT was the bike.

Two days after Will died, his best friend, Mike Pastore, called Bonnie. It was the first time they'd spoken since Will died, and he sobbed into the phone. "Do you know what Will has for you?" he asked, even though he knew she didn't.

Bonnie listened with disbelief as Mike told her that, just a week before the accident, Will had bought her a bike. Mike helped him pick it out: a carbon Specialized Rhyme, a new women's all-mountain bike. It was supposed to be a surprise.

Both Mike and Bonnie were already crying, but upon hearing this news, "she immediately went from level 10 to level 15 in terms of emotions," he recalls. Bonnie and Will didn't buy each other presents—they'd always preferred instead

to spend money on trips together. Why would he have suddenly bought her such a big, expensive gift—let alone a week before he passed away?

Bonnie's new bike arrived in mid-September. Will's friend Shannon built it for her with Will's tools. It was gleaming, perfect, the nicest bike she'd ever owned.

But her first rides were horrible. She took her new bike on a camping trip with friends in Moab, Utah. She felt like she couldn't pick a line without Will's wheel guiding her. She crashed over and over.

In fact, she felt like couldn't remember how to do anything without Will. At the campsite, she couldn't remember how to split the wood, build the fire, do all the things that Will used to do. Her friends all had partners. Bonnie was surrounded by people but she felt so alone.

Her friends left a couple days later, and Bonnie stayed on in the desert by herself. *Get your shit together*, she told herself. *You rode bikes before Will, you went camping before Will.* She was still the same fiercely independent woman who had moved to Vail alone; who had blown out her knee skiing and gotten herself down to the bottom of the mountain, gritting her teeth through the pain.

Bonnie built the fire that night, made herself food on the stove. The next day, she went for a ride and she didn't crash. As she tackled obstacles on her bike, it crossed her mind that maybe if she could relearn to ride, she could somehow process her grief.

Of course it didn't work like that.

THE SECOND GIFT was the ring.

Ten days before Will's death, Bonnie and Will had picked out an engagement ring while on vacation with Will's family in Hood River, Oregon. It was beautiful: a tear-shaped, uncut gray diamond, enclosed in hammered yellow gold. They didn't buy it that day—Will wanted to propose to her properly. But they were giddy leaving the shop, holding hands.

After Will died, the shop emailed him, asking if he was ready to take next steps. Bonnie informed them that Will had passed. When she returned to Oregon for his second memorial service, Will's family took her to the jewelry store. There, the shop owners and his family surprised her with the ring. The shop and Will's family split the cost. "We just thought she should have it," says Gary Olson, Will's father.

THE THIRD GIFT was less obvious.

Not long after Will died, Bonnie created a Pinkbike account under the username WillsGirl. She posted a message thanking everyone for celebrating Will. Among the replies was a message from a woman named Heidi Dohse.

Heidi told Bonnie that she and her friend, a pro racer named Flynn George, had also been racing in Crested Butte, and were among the group that assisted with the emergency response for Will. Heidi and Flynn had witnessed the logistical difficulties posed by the race's remote backcountry location, and were deeply affected by the experience. Afterwards, they started talking about how the rescue response could have been improved.

Courtesy Brent Schnell

BONNIE'S TRAILSIDE FIRST-AID TIPS

Backcountry Lifeline wants to help riders be more prepared for medical emergencies while they're on the trail. Part of that is knowing how to use what you have with you. These two solutions need only bike gear to treat injuries.

Splint a Limb

Splinting provides comfort and protects any broken, sprained, or dislocated limb [arm, leg, finger, wrist] from bumps and jostles that can cause further misalignment of the bones.

WHAT YOU NEED:

Something rigid: back protector out of your pack, knee pads, a mini pump. Something soft: jacket, jersey, arm warmers. And something to tie it all up with: inner tube, straps off a pack, belt.

- ▶ Wrap the injured limb with soft materials.
- ▶ Align the rigid element alongside the injury.
- ▶ Fasten the rigid piece on each side of the injury (ideally, above and below the two surrounding joints; e.g., below the wrist and above the elbow in the case of a forearm) to secure the splint and limit movement.
- ▶ Pad some more! Stuff extra padding into any hot spots the rigid element may create and anywhere there may be extra space. The splint should be snug and comfortable, and prevent movement as much as possible.

Make a Sling

Immobilizing a dislocated or separated shoulder, or broken collarbone, keeps the injured person more comfortable.

WHAT YOU NEED:

Backpack or back-mounted hydration pack.

- ▶ Put the backpack on backwards, with the sternum strap secured on the back and the injured arm slung through the arm straps in front of the rider. —Bonnie McDonald, as told to Gloria Liu

“It crossed her mind that maybe if she could relearn to ride, she could somehow process her grief.”



BONNIE'S
ENGAGEMENT
RING.

Bonnie, Heidi, and Flynn met for the first time at the Big Mountain Enduro at Winter Park, about a month after Will died. Heidi and Flynn presented a seed of an idea, inspired by Will's crash: an organization that would provide mountain bike-specific first aid training to riders and race organizers. Immediately, Bonnie knew she was in. How could she help?

Over the next six months, Backcountry Lifeline was formed. Bonnie moved into Heidi's house in Boulder in January 2016, and with Flynn, they hammered out mission statements and plans. Bonnie took the \$10,000 or so that was left over from Will's GoFundMe, and invested it into the fledgling company. The organizers of the Big Mountain Enduro introduced them to big-name sponsors like Yeti Cycles and Smith, who joined up enthusiastically. Backcountry Lifeline ran its first clinic in April 2016.

While she was staying at Heidi's, Bonnie got an email from a doctor in Crested Butte. In Boston, Bonnie had managed business services for physicians. The doctor had heard her story, and offered Bonnie a job. Essentially, the email said, come work for me, as much or as little as you want. The doctor kept a sunny, one-bedroom apartment with big windows and a deck above her office. If Bonnie liked, she could live there for a decent price.

The timing could not have been more perfect. Even with Backcountry Lifeline in the works, Bonnie had been feeling unmoored—no partner, no home, no job. When she got the email, it felt like another instance of the cosmic intervention she'd felt after Will had died, that she would move to the place where she and Will first met, and the place where he passed.

In March 2016, almost eight months after Will's death, Bonnie moved to Crested Butte, and in the tiny, picturesque ski town, she started to build a new life. Through her new company, and the news around Will, Bonnie found herself suddenly embraced by a larger mountain bike community that was new to her. "Will and I rode, but we were mostly recreational riders," she explained. "Crested Butte was only his fifth race." Now, Bonnie was getting invited to cycling events all over, and everywhere she went, she received a warm welcome. "Everyone was like, 'I've heard of you, I'm so sorry, I love what you're doing, let's ride,'" she says. She became close friends with the organizers of both the Big Mountain Enduro and the EWS. She taught first aid to racers all over the country, including pros like Richie Rude and the Yeti factory team.

As Bonnie spoke more about the experience, she came to use the term "heart opening" instead of heartbreaking. "I never knew my heart could feel this much loss and this much love," she says. "I never knew my heart had this much capacity."

UNBELIEVABLY, INCOMPREHENSIBLY, BONNIE lost the ring.

She doesn't know how it could have happened. She was on a riding trip in Moab. She zipped it carefully into a pocket for safekeeping. But later when she looked it was gone. She was devastated. On the three-year anniversary of Will's death, she did a podcast interview about Backcountry Lifeline, and the interviewer said, that ring must be your most prized

possession, you must wear it every day. She was so ashamed that she lied and didn't tell the interviewer that she had lost it.

Later that day she made up her mind that she had to replace it. She was ready to spend \$5,000 to do it. Bonnie emailed the ring maker, a woman named Margery Hirsche. She explained what had happened to the ring, and asked if Margery could make her another.

On Labor Day of 2018, exactly three years from the day that Will's family had presented her with the original ring, Bonnie got a package. In it was the new ring, and a handwritten note from Margery: "This ring is a gift. I am honored to be part of this story." Bonnie broke down sobbing, for both loss and love.

WRITER JOAN DIDION, who lost both her husband and her daughter unexpectedly in less than two years, wrote that the bereaved have a certain look about them: "one of extreme vulnerability, nakedness, openness." To meet Bonnie McDonald is to recognize that look in her wide, amber eyes, to see it glint behind her infectious smile and the jokes she gracefully deploys at just the right moment in conversation, when all the talk of grief has gotten too heavy and smothering. (This is for the benefit of the listener, of course. Bonnie is all too familiar with the constant presence of grief.)

In the months and years following Will's death, Bonnie came to know how little she, and most others, understood grief. Someone told her she was young and attractive, that she'd find someone else, not at all understanding that she didn't want someone else, she wanted Will. People assumed that she would heal as time went on. After the first year, they left her more to her own devices. And she did put on a brave face and try to focus on the positives. In her Facebook posts she celebrated Will and the time they got to spend together; expressed her gratitude for all the kindness, the beauty. But she did not post that some nights when it got really bad she still held his photo and cried, stroking it, trying to remember what his skin felt like, begging the photo, "Just come back." She did not post about how she sometimes felt angry—angry at the circumstances, angry at Will for leaving, even angry at cycling, the thing that had brought them together, the source of the community around her, but also the thing that had taken him from her.

Bonnie learned the crushing isolation of her grief's uniqueness. When someone said, "I know how you feel, I lost my uncle," she thought, *Were you planning to marry your uncle?* Or if she heard that someone lost a partner to cancer, she would feel envious that at least they got to spend time together, say goodbye. She felt horrible thinking this. She would never have wanted to see Will suffer like that. But to get to hold him one more time, kiss him, say everything she wanted to say—she would have given anything for that.

In the three years since Will's death, Bonnie has felt herself drawn to Will's friends and family, others who love and remember him, too. She talks on the phone regularly to Mike Pastore; she visits Gary Olson, Will's dad, in Oregon. And when they are all together, when Bonnie is with Will's family or his friends, and they trade stories and laugh and imitate

Will—that funny voice he'd make, or how lovably cranky he was, or how much he always hated dancing at weddings until he finally taught himself by watching YouTube videos—it's almost like he's there.

BONNIE HAS DATED, but nothing serious. Last summer, on her 41st birthday, her boyfriend at the time—a manager at the local bike shop with kind eyes that crinkled at the edges whenever he smiled, which he did whenever he looked at her—posted a loving message about her on Facebook. Her first thought was, *I'm not ready for public declarations yet*. And then: *Will's family and friends can see this*.

Bonnie doesn't know when she'll be ready, when it will stop feeling like settling to date anyone but Will. In her darkest moments she wonders if she'll ever be ready. She wants companionship in her life, of course, and she knows she'll probably have it. But as for being in love, really in love, she wonders if maybe that ship sailed with Will.

Maybe she already got her shot.

IF YOU ARE riding up Trail 400 outside of Crested Butte, up toward Star Pass, Will Olson's crash site will come up suddenly. Four centuries-old pine trees stand watch in the midst of an alpine meadow. A string of colorful Tibetan prayer flags hangs between them. On the biggest tree, a plaque made of six interlocked chainrings reads, "In loving memory of Will 'The Thrill' Olson." Star Peak rises in the distance.

It's a wild, beautiful resting place. Bonnie drives me up here in Will's truck on a rugged dirt road, deftly maneuvering over giant boulders and past potholes as deep as a kiddie pool, crossing two fast-flowing creeks. Even after all that, we hike nearly an hour to get to the site.

Bonnie has been up here maybe a dozen times. She's tried to recreate the scene. She's lain on the ground at various spots on and off the trail, looking up at the light filtering through the trees, wondering if this was what Will saw in his final moments. She's tried to track down what he could have hit—was it this unassuming blip of a root? Was it this rock? Did he hit this tree, then bounce back? Then she thinks, *Why does it even matter? Will is dead*.

It's fall, and already chilly. The clouds have parted, and the sun illuminates them dramatically. Bonnie kneels on the ground to open her backpack. "I always have ashes on me," she says. She pulls out a velvet drawstring pouch, the kind that jewelry comes in, and out of that, a mini zip-top bag full of gray-white ashes. She offers me the bag, and I pour a little pile into my palm. I expect them to be light and fine, like what's left over after a campfire. Instead the ash feels like white sand from the coarsest beach, tiny fragments of bone like pieces of shell and coral. I follow Bonnie's lead, sprinkling Will Olson's ashes lovingly on the ground. When we're done, my palm is still covered in the dry, chalky dust. I fight the natural urge to wipe my palms against one another and instead, I do the only thing that feels right. I hold my hand against my heart. I hold it there until the dust is gone, traces of it on my puffy jacket, on my camera case.

THE ASHES STILL live in the black plastic box, the one that reads "William D. Olson" in neat italicized type, which sits on top of Bonnie's refrigerator. Some nights, when she misses Will too much, she sleeps with them. Why don't you put them in something more comfortable than, a friend once asked. "I like to feel the hard edges," Bonnie said.

One night this past fall, Bonnie had a hard conversation with her boyfriend, the bike shop manager. After he left, she took the box of ashes down from the top of the refrigerator, and she brought it to bed with her. She lay there, curled up around the box, in that bright, one-bedroom apartment with the big windows, the one that came with the job in the mountains, which had come to her as a way forward, when she needed it the most.

Around her, hanging on the walls, held to the fridge by magnets, were photos, glimpses of her current life next to her old one: Here are Bonnie and Will smiling at one another at a Christmas party, when she flew to Colorado and surprised him with a fancy new dress shirt and tie to wear. Here is Bonnie, cheek to cheek with her nephew, who is growing up so fast. Here she is during that regretful short-hair phase from several years back, posing with Will for a selfie in their trail helmets. Here she is in the backseat of a car on a road trip, next to a close friend of Will's whom she only met after he died, who is doing unspeakable things to a Barbie doll. Next to him, Bonnie is doubled over in laughter.

Here is her bike, leaning against a wall in her apartment. The gleaming, perfect bike. The one she learned to do drops and jumps on after Will died, the one that gave her the confidence to charge off sandstone ledges and down jumbled rock gardens. She wishes he could see the rider she's become. She wishes he could see her fly. She's a different person now, too. She no longer believes the illusion that anything in life is guaranteed. The woman who hated displaying vulnerability is now more raw, open, and honest—she tells people what's on her mind. She tells them that she loves them. She knows that you just never know.

Here is Bonnie, asleep in her bed with her box of ashes. In the morning, she'll wake up and go to work at a job she loves. In a few days, she'll go to Boston for Thanksgiving. She'll pick her niece up from school, carry her to the car in her arms, think this in itself was worth the long flight. She'll horse around in the living room with her sister, doing "gymnastics" like they did when they were kids, and laugh so hard she cries. A couple weeks after that, she'll go back to Vail for a weekend with her girlfriends. Bonnie will dream of Will, and wake up before everyone else in the house. She'll be glad for his visit, and sad. But then she'll go skiing with her friends, and she'll laugh. She'll offer this up to him: her smiles, her happiness.

Someday, she doesn't know when yet, she'll leave Crested Butte. She's not sure where she'll move—maybe back to Vail, maybe somewhere totally new. But she'll move.

Here is her life, her beautiful life. The life that was not given to her but was something she had to build: out of the gifts, out of the love, out of the strength that had always been hers.

It's what she has left. It's what will be there in the morning. It's so much. **B**

“I never knew my heart could feel this much loss and this much love. I never knew my heart had this much capacity.”