

You might have heard about me. I'm the kid who biked straight across the United States from Seattle to the Florida Everglades – 3,784 miles – in seven days. For comparison, the previous record holder's cross-country trip was a measly 2,800 miles, and it took the dude seven-and-a-half days. In other words, I did to that record what Alexander the Great did to the Persian army at Gaugamela. I demolished it.

My name is Julian, by the way. Julian Flame. And yes, I know. It's the coolest name I've ever heard, too. With a name like that, you've got to become a legend. Even if you're only 11 years old and the shortest boy in your grade. It's kind of your destiny.

So, back to the story. My mom and I had just cleaned out Grandma's house in northeast Seattle. She lived two blocks from our apartment, so I had basically grown up in that house. After the heart attack we went over to visit like we did every evening but this time there was the whole funeral thing to deal with, plus sorting through about seven million boxes in Grandma's basement, throwing out half the furniture or selling it on eBay, giving away trunk-loads of books and kitchen items, taking legs off of tables, and jamming everything we decided to save into the back of a 13-ft U-Haul moving truck we now had to drive all the way to Randomtown, Florida so we could (in Mom's words) 'start over'.

I was mad.

I was so mad, I'm not even sure I can tell you how mad I was, because we had just scavenged Grandma's house like a pack of vultures and buried all the bones in the bowels of a truck. Grandma loved her stuff. She hated it when her stuff was lonely. She would talk to her plastic ferns every day while she watered them. She would make sure every chair and every sofa cushion got sat on once a day so that no one felt left out or unloved. She gave all her pots and pans a bath once a week even if she hadn't used them in months, just because she knew they preferred to be clean. And now all her stuff was piled like junk in that evil pit of darkness and if Grandma was watching from wherever she was, she would've been crying for sure.

That was why I had to do something about it.

'You're crazy,' said Mom, when I told her my plan, as we sat on Grandma's front steps drinking tea at 5 am on moving day. 'You'll die of exhaustion and then I'll have no one left.'

'You'll still have Bald Bill.'

'We broke up, Julian. You know that.'

'Well you can just find Bald Bob or something. Or Hairy Henry if you want some variety. I'm sure there's plenty of hairy people in Florida.'

Mom didn't have the strength to fight. She had to drive a gigantic coffin on wheels for the next week, so she needed to save her energy.

And that was how I stepped into the Cave of Destiny and climbed onto the cracked leather seat of Grandma's UltraSpin 3000, known to Grandma as The Chariot of Alexander the Great, which of course Alexander stole from Darius III after kicking his butt at Gaugamela. It was the great-great-granddaddy of exercise bikes. It was a fossil. Honestly, it should have been in a museum. But it was Grandma's best friend, apart from me. She would pet it like a horse and wish it goodnight every evening. She was sure it was what had kept her alive until the age of 77.

At first, I wasn't trying to break any records. My goal was simple: don't let the Chariot or any of Grandma's other beloved stuff get lonely back there in the cargo hold. So I strung up Grandma's giant cord of battery-operated LED Christmas lights, made double-sure the feet of the bike were so tightly wedged between Madam Poof (the armchair) and Caesar (the sofa bed) that it wouldn't slide around when we made a sudden movement, then finally put on my battle armour, a.k.a. my kneepads, elbow pads and helmet. And when Mom gunned the engine and we pulled out of the driveway for the very last time, I started pedalling.

'You okay?' Mom asked. Our phones were on a continuous call on speaker, so we could talk between the front and back of the truck.

'Coasting,' I replied. 'Holding steady at 65 rotations per minute.'

I didn't stop until Idaho.

By that point Mom had called up the Guinness Book of World Records.

We camped the first night in Lolo National Forest, Montana. Next night in Yellowstone. By day three, my butt felt like a slab of petrified wood. Did I stop?

Well, did Alexander stop on his way to greatness?

Never.

So neither would I. I was mighty. I was invincible. I was going to keep pedalling till Florida, and maybe for the rest of my life after that.

But weird things do start to happen when you're biking down interstate highways in the back of a giant U-Haul lit only by your dead grandma's blinking Christmas lights.

Her stuff starts talking to you.

'Julian?' said the big plastic fern (its name was Lucy) somewhere near Mt Rushmore. It had a soft, quavery voice. 'You'll branch out in Florida, right? Turn over a new leaf?'

I groaned. 'Predictable.'

'He's not ready for that, Lucy,' said Dawn, the old-fashioned alarm clock. 'He's still in mourning.'

'I'm not mourning,' I said. 'I'm breaking a world record.'

Soft chuckles from the furniture.

'Quiet, troops,' I ordered.

I kept pedalling. The Chariot purred as I pushed it to 70 rpm. It might be ancient, but it rode like a dream.

The cornfields of Nebraska. The Gateway Arch in St Louis. The Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, like camping inside of a cloud.

'Isn't it beautiful, Jule?' Mom would say over and over. 'Grandma would have loved this.'

'Sure, Mom,' I'd say. 'Can we get back on the road now?'

And every morning I'd hop back on the Chariot. Push myself harder than ever.

80 rpm. 90.

But the troops wouldn't stop talking to me.

'I miss the smell of her shampoo,' said Grandma's favourite feathered hat, Robin.

Pedal faster.

'I miss how she made me feel that being weird was wonderful,' sighed Bruce the Moose, a gigantic tea kettle.

'Stop, okay?' I said. 'You're distracting me.'

Pedal faster.

'You know what I miss?' said Aristotle the bookcase. 'How she used to read ancient history books to Julian every night.'

'I said stop it!'

'Julian?' said Mom over the phone. 'Did you say something?'

'No.'

'You're crying, Julian.'

'I am not.'

And then I felt the truck turn. We were exiting the highway. Mom slowed down and I figured she had just stopped somewhere on the side of the road in Middle of Nowhere, Georgia.

I was so not crying.

'Just breathe in deeply,' said the vacuum cleaner, Marcel.

Mom pulled up the sliding door of the cargo hold. Sunlight poured in, and a smell like the grass after it rains. She climbed inside and sat down on Madam Poof, the big purple armchair.

'Julian. What did Alexander the Great do when his best friend Hephaestion died?'

'What?'

'Didn't Grandma teach you this?'

I shook my head.

'Alexander the Great, mightiest military commander of all time, cried for days. Then he mourned for months.'

'Is that true?' I said, rubbing my sleeve against my face.

'I can confirm it,' said the Chariot in a raspy, leathery croak. I nearly jumped. The Chariot was a vehicle of few words. 'I would know, wouldn't I?'

I stopped pedalling.

'It's okay if it takes a little while to sink in,' Madam Poof added.

Without even meaning to, I curled up next to Mom on the armchair.

'She'd be so proud of you, Julian,' Mom whispered, wrapping her arms around me.

That only made my eyes start prickling again. I knew I had to jump back on the Chariot. If I wanted to beat the record, we had to reach the Everglades tonight.

But first, a quick break, I thought, the tears stinging.

Just a minute to be like Alexander.

To do something heroic.



Illustration: Isabel Otten