



VINTAGE

EVERY SECOND COUNTS

LANCE ARMSTRONG

WITH SALLY JENKINS

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About the Book

In 1999, Lance Armstrong made world headlines with the most stunning comeback in the history of sport after battling against life-threatening testicular cancer just eighteen months before returning to professional cycling. His first book, *It's Not About the Bike*, charted his journey back to life and went on to become an international bestseller.

Now, in his much-anticipated follow-up, Armstrong shares more details of his extraordinary life story, including the births of his twin daughters Grace and Isabel. Never shy of controversy, Armstrong offers, with typical frankness, his thoughts on training, competing, winning and failure. He also tells of the work he did for the foundation he created following his dramatic recovery, addresses the daunting challenge of living in the aftermath of cancer and treatment, and shares further inspirational tales of survival.

A fresh outlook on the spirit of survivors everywhere, *Every Second Counts* is an account of a man who strives every day to meet life's challenges – whether on his bike or off.

***Every Second Counts* was first published in October 2003. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey in January 2013, Lance Armstrong admitted to having taken performance enhancing drugs in all seven of the Tours de France in which he competed between 1999 and 2005. He was officially stripped of these wins by the UCI, the world governing body for cycling, in 2012.**

About the Author

Lance Armstrong is a cancer fighter and was a professional cyclist. He lives in Austin, Texas.

Also by Lance Armstrong
with Sally Jenkins

*It's Not About the Bike:
My Journey Back to Life*

To Luke, Grace, and Isabelle
for always reminding me that every second really does
count



Every Second Counts



Lance Armstrong
with Sally Jenkins



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CHAPTER 1

Pitched Back

SO, IT LOOKS as though I'm going to live—at least for another 50 years or more. But whenever I need to reassure myself of this, as I sometimes do, I go out to a place called Dead Man's Hole, and I stare down into it, and then, with firm intent, I strip off my shirt and I leap straight out into what you might call the great sublime.

Let's say it's my own personal way of checking for vital signs. Dead Man's Hole is a large green mineral pool gouged out of a circular limestone cliff, so deep into the hill country of Texas that it's hardly got an address. According to conflicting legends, it's either where Confederates tossed Union sympathizers to drown, or where Apaches lured unsuspecting cowboys who didn't see the fall coming. In any event, I'm drawn to it, so much so that I bought 200 acres of brush and pasture surrounding it, and I've worn a road into the dirt by driving out there. It seems only right that a place called Dead Man's Hole should belong to a guy who nearly died—and who, by the way, has no intention of just barely living.

I stand there next to a 45-foot waterfall and examine the drop—and myself, while I'm at it. It's a long drop, so long that it makes the roof of my mouth go dry just looking at it. It's long enough for a guy to actually think on the way down, and to think more than one thought, too. Long enough to think first one thing, *A little fear is good for you*, and then another, *It's good for you if you can swim*, and then one more thing as I hit the water: *Oh fuck, it's cold*. As

I jump, there are certain unmistakable signs that I'm alive: the press of my pulse, the insistent sound of my own breathing, and the whanging in my chest that's my heart, which by then sounds like an insubordinate prisoner beating on the bars of my ribcage.

I come up whooping through the foam and swim for the rocks. Then I climb back up and towel off, and I drive home to my three kids. I burst through the door, and I shout at my son, Luke, and my twin daughters, Grace and Isabelle, and I kiss them on the necks, and I grab a Shiner Bock beer with one hand and an armful of babies with the other.

The first time I ever did it, my wife, Kik, just looked at me and rolled her eyes. She knew where I'd been.

"Was that clarifying for you?" she said.

At what point do you let go of not dying? Maybe I haven't entirely and maybe I don't want to.

I know they're out there, lying in their hospital beds, with those damn drip poles, watching the damn chemo slide into their veins, and thinking, *This guy had the same thing I do. If he can do it, I can, too.* I think of them all the time.

My friend Lee Walker says I got "pitched back." What he means is, I almost died, and possibly even did die a little, but then I got pitched back into the world of the living. It's as good a description as any of what happened. I was 25 when cancer nearly killed me: advanced choriocarcinoma spread to my abdomen, lungs, and brain and required two surgeries and four cycles of chemotherapy to get rid of. I wrote an entire book about death, called *It's Not About the Bike*, about confronting the possibility of it, and narrowly escaping it.

"Are you sure?" I asked the doctor.

"I'm sure."

"How sure?"

"I'm very sure."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I'm so sure that I've scheduled you for surgery at 7 A.M. tomorrow."

Mounted on a light table, the X-ray showed my chest. Black meant clear; white meant cancer. My chest looked like a snowstorm.

What I didn't and couldn't address at the time was the prospect of life. Once you figure out you're going to live, you have to decide how to, and that's not an uncomplicated matter. You ask yourself: *now that I know I'm not going to die, what will I do? What's the highest and best use of my self?* These things aren't linear, they're a mysterious calculus. For me, the best use of myself has been to race in the Tour de France, the most grueling sporting event in the world.

Every time I win another Tour, I prove that I'm alive—and therefore that others can survive, too. I've survived cancer again, and again, and again, and again. I've won four Tour titles, and I wouldn't mind a record-tying five. That would be some good living.

But the fact is that I wouldn't have won even a single Tour de France without the lesson of illness. What it teaches is this: pain is temporary. Quitting lasts forever.

To me, just finishing the Tour de France is a demonstration of survival. The arduousness of the race, the sheer unreasonableness of the job, the circumnavigation of an entire country on a bicycle, village to village, along its shores, across its bridges, up and over the mountain peaks they call cols, requires a matchless stamina. The Tour is so taxing that Dutch rider Hennie Kuiper once said, after a long climb up an alp, "The snow had turned black in my eyes." It's not unlike the stamina of people who are ill every day. The Tour is a daily festival of human suffering, of minor tragedies and comedies, all conducted in the elements, sometimes terrible weather and sometimes fine, over flats, and into headwinds, with plenty of crashes. And it's three

weeks long. Think about what you were doing three weeks ago. It feels like last year.

The race is very much like living—except that its consequences are less dire and there's a prize at the end. Life is not so neat.

There was no pat storybook ending for me. I survived cancer and made a successful comeback as a cyclist by winning the 1999 Tour, but that was more of a beginning than an end. Life actually went on, sometimes in the most messy, inconvenient, and untriumphant ways. In the next five years I'd have three children, take hundreds of drug tests (literally), break my neck (literally), win some more races, lose some, too, and experience a breakdown in my marriage. Among other adventures.

When you walk into the Armstrong household, what you see is infants crawling everywhere. Luke was born in the fall of 1999 to Kristin (Kik) Armstrong and me shortly after that first Tour, and the twins came in the fall of 2001. Grace and Isabelle have blue saucer eyes, and they toddle across the floor at scarcely believable speeds. They like to pull themselves upright on the available furniture and stand there, wobbling, while they plan how to make trouble. One of Isabelle's amusements is to stand up on the water dispenser and press the tap until the kitchen floods, while she laughs hysterically. I tell her, "No, no, no," and she just shakes her head back and forth and keeps laughing, while the water runs all over the floor. I can't wait for their teen years.

Luke adds to the bedlam by riding his bike in the living room, or doing laps in a plastic car, or tugging the girls around in separate red wagons. He is sturdy and hardheaded. He wears his bike helmet inside the house and refuses to take it off, even when we go out to dinner. We get some interesting stares—but anything is better than the fight that ensues if you try to remove the helmet. He insists on wearing it just in case he might get to go cycling with

me. To him, a road is what his father does for a living. I'm on the road so much that when the phone rings, he says, "Daddy."

One afternoon I went to pick my family up at an airport. Luke gave me a long stare and said, "Daddy, you look like me."

"Uh, I look like *you*?" I said.

"Yeah."

"Are you sure it's not the other way around?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. It's definitely you that looks like me."

Also milling around our house are a cat named Chemo and a small white dog named Boone. I trip around all of them, watching my feet, careful not to step on a critter or a kid. It's been a chaotic few years, and not without its casualties. There have been so many children and adults and animals to feed that sometimes things get confused and the dog winds up with the baby food. One day Kik handed me what was supposed to be a glass of water.

"This tastes like Sprite," I said.

"Just drink it," she said.

I could never seem to find the right keys to anything. One time I pulled the ring of keys from my pocket and stared at them in their seeming hundreds, and said to Kik, wonderingly, "I have the keys to the whole world." She just said, "Perfect."

The reason I have so many keys is because I need so many homes and vehicles, in various countries and counties. I spend most of the spring and summer in my European home in Girona, Spain, while I prepare for the Tour. When the racing season is over, I come back to Austin. Our family lives in a house in central Austin, and we also have the ranch in the hill country. But my favorite home is a small hideaway, a one-room cabin just outside Austin, in the hills overlooking the Colorado River. Across the river there's a rope swing dangling from an old bent

oak, and on hot days I like to swing on the rope and hurl myself into the current.

I love the tumult of my large family, and I've even been accused of fostering a certain amount of commotion, because I have no tolerance for peace and quiet. I'm congenitally unable to sit still; I crave action, and if I can't find any, I invent it.

My friends call me Mellow Johnny. It's a play on the French term for the leader of the Tour de France, who wears a yellow jersey: the *maillot jaune*. We like to joke that Mellow Johnny is the Texan pronunciation. The name is also a play on my not-so-mellow personality. I'm Mellow Johnny, or Johnny Mellow, or, if you're feeling formal, Jonathan Mellow.

Sometimes I'm just Bike Boy. I ride my bike almost every day, even in the off-season, no matter the weather. It could be hailing, and my friends and riding partners dread the call that they know is going to come: they pick up the phone, and they hear Bike Boy on the other end, demanding, "You ridin', or you *hidin'*?"

One famous November day during the off-season, I rode four and a half hours through one of the strongest rainstorms on record. Seven inches of precipitation, with flash floods and road closures everywhere. I loved it. People thought I was crazy, of course. But when I'm on the bike, I feel like I'm 13 years old. I run fewer red lights now, but otherwise it's the same.

Some days, though, I feel much older than a man in his thirties; it's as if I've lived a lot longer. That's the cancer, I guess. I've spent a lot of time examining what it did to me—how it aged me, altered me—and the conclusion I've come to is, it didn't just change my body; it changed my mind.

I've often said cancer was the best thing that ever happened to me. But everybody wants to know what I mean by that: how could a life-threatening disease be a good

thing? I say it because my illness was also my antidote: it cured me of laziness.

Before I was diagnosed, I was a slacker. I was getting paid a lot of money for a job I didn't do 100 percent, and that was more than just a shame—it was wrong. When I got sick, I told myself: if I get another chance, I'll do this right—and I'll work for something more than just myself.

I have a friend, a fellow cancer survivor named Sally Reed, who sums up the experience better than anyone I know. "My house is burned down," she says, "but I can see the sky."

Sally was diagnosed with rampant breast cancer in the spring of 1999. The disease had reached Stage Three and spread to her lymphatic system. She was facing both radiation and chemotherapy. Right away, all of her smaller fears disappeared, replaced by this new one. She had been so afraid of flying that she hadn't flown in more than 15 years. But after she got the diagnosis, she called an airline and booked a flight to Niagara Falls. She went there by herself and stood overlooking the roaring falls.

"I wanted to see something bigger than me," she says.

Mortal illness, like most personal catastrophes, comes on suddenly. There's no great sense of foreboding, no premonition, you just wake up one morning and something's wrong in your lungs, or your liver, or your bones. But near-death cleared the decks, and what came after was a bright, sparkling awareness: time is limited, so I better wake up every morning fresh and know that I have just one chance to live this particular day right, and to string my days together into a life of action, and purpose.

If you want to know what keeps me on my bike, riding up an alp for six hours in the rain, that's your answer.

Oddly enough, while the near-death experience was clarifying, the success that came afterward was confusing.

It complicated life significantly, and permanently. The impact of winning the 1999 Tour de France was larger than I ever imagined it would be, from the first stunned moment when I stepped off the plane in Austin, into the Texas night air, to see people there waiting. There was yellow writing painted on the streets, "*Vive la Lance*," and banners stretched across the streets, and friends had decorated our entire house with yellow flowers, streamers, and balloons. I was bewildered to be invited to the State Capitol to see our then-governor, George W. Bush, and afterward there was a parade through town with more than 6,000 cyclists (in yellow) leading the route. People were lined up five deep along the sides, waving signs and flags.

I didn't understand it: I was just another Austin bike geek who liked his margaritas and his Tex-Mex, and Americans weren't supposed to care about cycling. "You don't get it," said my friend and agent, Bill Stapleton.

I lived in a constant, elevated state of excitement; the air was thin and getting thinner, and compounding the excitement was the fact that Kik and I were awaiting the birth of our first child, Luke. I kept waiting for things to subside, but they never did—they just got busier. Bill was swamped with offers and requests and proposed endorsements. He struck some handsome new deals on my behalf, with prestigious sponsors like Bristol-Myers Squibb, Nike, and Coca-Cola. With the deals came new responsibilities: I shot half a dozen commercials, posed for magazine ads and the Wheaties box. I earned the nickname "Lance Incorporated" and now I was a business entity instead of just a person.

It was estimated that the '99 victory generated \$50 million in global media exposure for the United States Postal Service cycling team. Our budget grew, and now we were a \$6 million year-round enterprise with dozens of support staff, mechanics, cooks, and accountants.

With success came the problem of celebrity, and how not to be distorted by it. There were invitations that left me and Kik amazed. Robin Williams had a jet. Kevin Costner offered his house in Santa Barbara. Elton John had a Super Bowl party. Kik and I felt like Forrest Gump, lurking in the background of photos with accomplished people. We were impressed, so much so that sometimes we would save the messages on our answering machine and replay them, awed.

But fame, I learned, is an isotope, and it's not good for you. When you become celebrated, a kind of unhealthy radioactive decay forms around you, and the decay can be creeping, or even catastrophic. The attention could become addictive. There was no doubt I could have turned into a swollen-headed jerk, and there's no doubt some people think I did turn into one, much as I tried to keep it all straight.

One afternoon I said, "Bono called me."

Kik said, "Really? Brad Pitt called me. He wants to know what time we're having lunch."

Okay, I got it.

I struggled with what to think about all of it, until I read a remark by J. Craig Ventner, the man who helped map the human genome. He said, "Fame is an intrinsic negative. People respond to you based on their preconceived notion of you, and that puts you at a continual disadvantage." I agreed. I was just the son of a single mother from Plano, Texas, a secretary who'd passed on her conscientious work ethic. It seemed wrong to be idolized by strangers, or to idolize strangers in turn: I preferred to idolize my mother, or my teammates. They were the people I'd pick to go through hard times with.

Don't get me wrong—I liked what winning the Tour did for me, as a person, and as an athlete, and for my family. It made life very comfortable, and I was thankful for that. But I was learning that not all of the people who flew to Paris to

be at the finish line were my very best friends. And I was learning that the only thing wealth meant was that you had a lot of money. If you thought of fame and wealth any other way, you could get confused—think you achieved it through some specialness and believe it made you better than others, or smarter.

There was one good use for celebrity: it was a huge and influential platform from which to lobby for the cancer cause. I had become a symbol, the poster boy for the hardships of the disease, and now I was on cereal boxes, and *Late Night with David Letterman*, and I went to the White House.

At first I didn't quite understand the intensity of people's curiosity. What did they care about my particular hurts? But one day Kik said, "You've been on the brink, stood on the edge between life and death and looked over. You've seen the view from that cliff and come back down. You can share that perspective."

The pitched-back experience, I realized, was important: even to participate in the Tour demonstrated that I had survived, and if I had survived, *others could, too*. What's more, they could live the rest of their lives normally, if not even better than before.

It was an important message for the entire cancer community, not just for patients but for families, physicians, and nurses dealing with the disease. Doctors knew how serious my situation had been, and how severe my four cycles of chemotherapy had been, and they knew that (a) I survived it and (b) the treatment didn't ruin my body. That gave the doctors hope, and it occurred to me that doctors needed hope as much as patients did.

They wanted to use me as an example, and I wanted to be used. But I wanted to be used in the right way. I was deeply uncomfortable with the word "hero"—it wasn't heroic to survive cancer. No one was immune; eight million

Americans suffered from some form of it, and about a million were newly diagnosed each year. Like them, I was dealt an unfortunate hand, and I simply did what came naturally to me: I tried hard.

I met all kinds of people who were fighting the illness, turned yellow and gaunt by chemotherapy. Go to Sloan-Kettering in New York, or M. D. Anderson in Houston, or the Southwest Regional Cancer Clinic in Austin, and you'll see them, 50 or 60 people packed into a waiting room that only has 30 chairs, people of the widest possible variety, and a handful of stone-faced, weary nurses.

Other cancer patients wanted to know everything I did, every drug I took, every morsel I digested.

"What was in your chemo?"

"What did you eat?"

"What kind of vitamins did you take?"

"How much did you ride your bike?"

I was a success story—for the moment. But if I got sick again, I would no longer be a success story, and the truth was, at times I was still as scared and anxious as a patient. What if the cancer came back? Each time I visited a hospital I had an uneasy reaction. The first thing that struck me was the smell. If I did a smell test I could find a hospital with my eyes closed: disinfectant, medicine, bad cafeteria food, and recycled air through old vents, stale and artificial. And the lighting: a leaky radiant, it made everyone look pale, like they didn't have quite enough blood in their bodies. The sounds were artificial and grating: the squeak of the nurses' rubber-soled shoes, the sound of the hospital mattresses. A hospital mattress is covered with plastic, and I remembered how it felt and sounded as I shifted in the bed, the crackle of the covering beneath me, every time I moved, crackle, crackle, wrinkle, wrinkle.

These are the odors and sensations and images that all cancer patients carry with them no matter how far removed

they are from the disease, and they are so traumatic, so concentrated, that they can bring about reactions years afterward.

Some people even get physically ill when they encounter sights or smells that remind them of illness. There was a story in the *New England Journal of Medicine*: a woman was treated for breast cancer with very arduous chemo, and she suffered violent bouts of nausea. Five years later, she was walking in a mall when she ran into her oncologist, the doctor who had treated her. She threw up. So that's how cancer stays with you. And it has stayed with me.

When I had the illness, I fought it with the hope of returning to my life, but I never gave any real thought to what that life would be. The term "life after cancer" has very real ramifications: you might be dealing with the loss of a leg or a breast, or with infertility, or, as in my own case, with sterility, a potentially lost career, and deep anxieties. There are physical, emotional, and financial consequences. In other words, you can save someone's life, but what about saving the *quality* of that life?

All of these issues fell under the title "survivorship," a curious, post-traumatic state of being that I was experiencing, and which all cancer survivors experience in one form or another. Survivorship, I decided, should be the core of the cancer foundation I'd launched: managing the illness and its aftereffects was as important as fighting it. The Lance Armstrong Foundation began to take shape as a place where people could come for information of the most personal and practical kind. There were other, richer foundations and more comprehensive Web sites, but at the LAF, hopefully you could call or e-mail us and get a greeting card from me to a patient, or you could ask, what's the right exercise for breast-cancer patients and survivors?

Most people, I discovered, just wanted to be heard, or sometimes they just wanted to be touched. I met a boy

named Cameron Stewart who has leukemia, got it when he was about six.

"Did you have a port?" he asked me.

"Did I have a port? Look at this," I said.

I unbuttoned my shirt and showed him the scar on my chest. He took off his shirt, too. He had a small port inserted in his tiny little bird chest.

Cameron and I have kept in touch; he came to Austin with his family for our annual foundation bike race. He's in remission, and he's growing into a healthy kid. He likes to say, "I have Lance Armstrong legs."

I met other athletes with cancer, and we swapped stories and anecdotes. I laughed with Eric Davis, the great baseball player, about trying to eat during chemo. "Caesar salad with chicken," he said. "I ate two of them, every day, right before the chemo. Because when you take chemo, you throw up. And if you don't have anything in you, you can't throw up. And *not* being able to throw up is even worse than throwing up. So I'd eat my Caesar salad. It went in, just so it could come out."

Doctors got cancer, too. A prominent physician in New York was diagnosed with prostate cancer. We got to know each other via e-mail. He wrote, "I hope I live for ten more years." I wrote him back: "I hope you were joking about living only ten years," I said. "I'll see you in thirty."

I never tired of the subject, of talking about it or hearing about it or reliving it. I celebrated the three-year anniversary of my diagnosis on October 2, 1999, and I called it "Carpe Diem Day," meaning, "Seize the Day." It remained the most important day of the year, larger than any birthday or anniversary or holiday, and it was a day filled with introspection, of thinking about second chances.

Every so often a friend or a family member discovered just how much cancer occupied my mind. One afternoon my coach, Chris Carmichael, told me that he had begun working with other athletes who had cancer. Chris wanted

my counsel. "You have a great template for me to work from," he said. "You've been there, you know exactly what those athletes are facing." I did: the long days with an IV in the arm, the heaving nausea, and the scars and chemical burns that would tattoo their bodies. But I didn't feel like an expert on how to beat cancer, I just felt lucky.

"You don't know, this thing could come back tomorrow, come back in me," I said to Chris. "It only went away because mine was treatable. But it's not really gone and it's not something that ever does disappear. I still worry about it."

"Lance, it's not coming back," he said.

"Who says? Who says it can't come back?"

At no point could I say, "That's over." Even with a Tour victory, and a new baby on the way, I still had the lingering impression that everything might go away overnight, that I might not be able to ride again, or even that I'd get sick again.

My son came in the early hours of a mid-October morning, and his birth was hectic and difficult: at first, he had trouble breathing and the nurses took him away to clear his lungs. Finally, he let go a beautiful howl.

The fear at that moment when he wasn't breathing trumped any fear I'd ever known. Kik and I looked at each other, and we instantly realized the truth about parenthood: it's the most vulnerable state in the world. Later, Kik said, "Now we're both capable of being emotionally annihilated." To be a parent was to be totally stripped down, emotionally naked, and that would be true for the rest of our lives.

After Luke was cleaned and wrapped in a blanket, we settled into a room to get some rest. But the reverberations and anxieties lasted all night and made it impossible to sleep. I shifted on the plastic hospital mattress. I thought about the difference in the fear I had for myself during

cancer, and the fear I had for someone else's wellbeing now that I was a father.

I thought about my mother, and wondered at the risks she had watched me take without interfering, the things she had watched me climb, the high dives and hard falls, the times I wrecked my bike, and of course, the time I got sick. Nothing could be as emotionally hazardous, or interesting, or rewarding, as the job of being a parent.

Having a child was an excellent way to feel alive, I decided. Not unlike jumping off a cliff.

Cancer made me want to do more than just live: it made me want to live in a certain way. The near-death experience stripped something away. Where others have a little bit of trepidation—*Am I ready for a child, what happens if people don't like me, should I do this or is it too dangerous*—I didn't anymore. To me, there were some lives where you might as well be dead. Illness had left me with a clear view of the difference between real fear and mere disquiet, and of everything worth having, and doing.

The trick was to make sure it wasn't also a recipe for disaster. I was a confirmed risk-taker, but now I was also a husband, father, and businessman responsible for others. Did that mean I had to make concessions, become more conservative? It was an essential question. I wanted to live a life of action, but I also wanted to live a life of vigilance.

It was an uneasy balance, much easier in theory than in practice. I wanted to be a father—and I also wanted a motorcycle. My friends lectured me to slow down; for years my pal John Koriath had been yelling at me to drive more slowly. Koriath was the best man at our wedding, and we call him "College," which is short for College Boy. We call him that because he played college basketball, and one night he and another of my best friends, Bart Knaggs, got into a beer-fueled game of one-on-one. Bart started taunting John. "Come on, College," he said, "let's see you make one." He's been College to us ever since.