



# IRON MAN



THE MOST AMAZING THING HAPPENED TO JIM MACLAREN ONE DAY WHILE RUNNING AN IRONMAN RACE.

HE LOST HIS BODY  
**BY ELIZABETH GILBERT**

Photographs by  
**KURT MARKUS**

**JIM MACLAREN DOESN'T HAVE** any memory of the first accident. He can't tell you what it feels like to be hit by a New York City bus and thrown eighty-nine feet in the air, to have your bones shattered and your legs crushed, to have your organs pulverized and to be pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital, because he can't recall any part of it.

The last thing he remembers about that accident is happily cruising down Fifth Avenue on his motorcycle, on "one of those balmy October nights when anything seems possible." As well it should have. Jim MacLaren was, as of that moment, a handsome, intelligent, ambitious and well-liked 22-year-old who had the world on a string. He'd recently graduated from Yale, where he'd excelled as a scholar, a football player and a theater star—not a bad trifecta for a fatherless kid from a moneyless family. He'd spent the previous evening dancing with debutantes



at a society party and was returning home from a job interview that had gone extremely well. He was wearing a crisp white oxford shirt, his favorite jeans and a brand-new pair of Italian shoes. He looked wonderful, and he felt wonderful.

He never saw the 40,000-pound bus that ran the red light on 34th Street and demolished him. Nor does he have any memory of the paramedics who scraped him off the sidewalk (certain he was already a corpse) and delivered him to Bellevue Hospital. The next thing Jim remembers—after disappearing into a coma for eight days—is waking up in intensive care and learning that his left leg had been amputated below the knee.

So that was the first accident.

Over the next eight years, Jim MacLaren made a concerted effort to become the best one-legged man he possibly could. He endured a brutally painful rehabilitation but was

**THIS TIME JIM REMEMBERS BEING HIT. HE REMEMBERS THE SCREAMS FROM THE CROWD. HE REMEMBERS HIS BODY FLYING ACROSS THE STREET AND SMASHING INTO A LAMPPOST HEADFIRST.**



ever uncomplaining about his loss. He graduated from the prestigious Yale School of Drama, acted on stage and television, found plenty of girlfriends. What's most astonishing, though, is that Jim now became a more accomplished athlete as an amputee than he'd ever been as an able-bodied man.

He initially took up swimming to get back in shape after the accident. Then he began riding his bicycle with a special prosthetic. Within a year of losing his leg, Jim was running. First limping, then walking, then hopping, then running. He started signing up for 10-K road races. During his first race, Jim's prosthetic rubbed the stump of his amputated leg so raw and bloody that he had to walk and stumble the last four miles, stopping frequently to change his bandages and dress his open wound, but he did finish and was exhilarated by the accomplishment. Which is why, the following November, he ran the New York City Marathon. Then it was on to the Boston Marathon, where he broke the world speed record for amputee contenders. Jim MacLaren was now the fastest one-legged endurance runner on earth.

Still as engaging a personality as ever, Jim started making a living as a motivational speaker, encouraging people with and without physical disabilities to never accept the notion of personal limitations. He also pursued a serious study of Eastern philosophy, which helped put his amputation into a larger metaphysical context. He was moved and edified by the Buddhist idea that all pain comes from attachment and that therefore we must not become attached to anything in this universe that is impermanent—including, for example, our own bodies. Our bodies are temporary vessels, after all. Attaching our identities to some ego-based perception of physical self is a sure path to misery. Instead, we must define ourselves only by what is eternal within us—namely, our highest level of pure consciousness, our divinity, our one true self. The more attachments we

can shed, the closer we can come to enlightenment.

Even as he studied this idea, though, Jim kept pushing that temporary body of his to higher limits. He found extreme physical challenge to be a means of knowing himself better. Pain and endurance were becoming doorways through which he could pass toward greater self-awareness.

*How strong is my will? How far can I go without fear? Who am I, really?*

Soon he could run a marathon in just over three hours, routinely finishing in the top third of able-bodied contenders. And then he took up triathlons. Yes, triathlons. Once he'd survived a few of those, he set out to conquer the Ironman, one of the most brutal organized sporting events ever imagined. Two and a half miles of swimming, 112 miles of biking and a full 26.2-mile marathon, all in one race, all in one day. And all on one leg.

Which explains what Jim MacLaren was doing in Southern California on that cool June afternoon in 1993. He was participating in an Ironman. Jim was excelling. He was speeding through the town of Mission Viejo on his bicycle, tearing ass at thirty-five miles per hour. The sidewalks were crowded with spectators, and he was dimly aware of their cheers. He had just pulled ahead of a thick snarl of cyclists. He was leading the pack. Suddenly, Jim heard the crowd gasp. He turned his head to see what was going on, and there was the steel grille of a black van heading straight toward him. He realized he was about to be hit by a goddamn car.

**Fastest Man on One Leg**  
Jim races in the 1992 Ironman in Kona, Hawaii; opposite, at home a decade later, no longer running.

It was supposed to have been a closed racecourse. But for some unknown reason, a cop guarding an intersection decided to let one car through, and he misjudged how fast the bicyclists were coming. As Jim MacLaren was approaching, the cop was gesturing to the driver of the van to hit the gas. The driver, a 50-year-old man on his way to church, was merely obeying orders. He floored it. He didn't see Jim until Jim was on his windshield.

This time Jim vividly remembers being hit. He remembers the screams from the crowd. He remembers his body flying across the street and smashing into a lamppost headfirst, snapping his neck. He remembers riding in the ambulance and being aware that he could not feel his limbs. He was put under anesthesia for emergency surgery on his spine, and when he woke up he was in the trauma ward. He could not move. His head was shaved. There was a bolt screwed into the back of his skull, preventing him from shifting his head even a millimeter. Jim remembers this well. But what he remembers most clearly is this image: All the nurses were in tears.

"We're so sorry," they kept saying.

Jim MacLaren was now a quadriplegic. He was 30 years old. And this is where his story begins.

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**I FIRST HEARD ABOUT** Jim from a friend who had been a roommate of his at Yale and who described him as "a marvel and a mystery."

"What happens to a person after two accidents like that?" I asked. "How does he survive? How does he reconcile? How does he not kill himself?"



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WORLD'S  
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"That's the mystery part."

I first spoke with Jim MacLaren on the telephone one morning in the spring. I told him I wanted to write about him.

"For *GQ*?" he asked, and laughed. "OK, but I don't really look the part these days. Armani doesn't exactly make Velcro flies on their pants, you know?"

And I first met Jim MacLaren on the side of a road. It was a sunny afternoon in coastal California. Jim had suggested I come over and meet him at the campus of the Pacifica Institute, where he is currently working on his doctorate. The Pacifica Institute is a small private university buried in the hills of Santa Barbara and dedicated to the graduate study of mythology and psychology. The school is also home to papers of the great mythologist Joseph Campbell. Jim is writing his dissertation on wounds and the wounded male throughout mythological history.

"Meet me down on the road by the front entrance," he said. "We can go up to the campus and have lunch."

The day was cool and dry. The landscape was all parched browns and olive greens. I drove until I reached the gates of Pacifica, and there, waiting on the shoulder of the lonely and dusty road, was Jim MacLaren—Yale graduate, football star, actor, amputee, triathlete, quadriplegic, scholar. He was in a wheelchair, but he did not look anything close to helpless. He was a big and handsome man, broad through the chest. He was wearing shorts, and there was a peglike prosthesis attached to the stump of his left leg. His other leg was muscular and tan. A catheter bag half filled with urine hung from the side of his wheelchair, and a thin hose snaked up from it and disappeared under his shorts. He was lighting a cigarette with fingers that were frozen into painful-looking talons, bent and twisted like little Joshua trees. I rolled down my window.

"Jim MacLaren, I presume?"

He smiled. "How'd you recognize me?"

"You *smoke*?" I said.

"Don't start," he warned.

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**THE REASON JIM MACLAREN** can light his own cigarettes has to do with the nature of his spinal injury. He is what is known as an incomplete quadriplegic. This means that although all four limbs were damaged when he broke his neck, he still has limited nerve activity, allowing him some movement and sensation. He can raise his arms a bit, he can bend forward in his wheelchair, he can use his hands somewhat (twisted though they are), and sometimes he can even lift his legs by a few degrees. This tiny range of movement means everything—the

difference between an independent life and one with round-the-clock caretakers. The incompleteness of Jim's injury is why he can live alone. With excruciatingly protracted effort, Jim can bathe himself, dress himself, feed himself and even drive a van (specially outfitted with only hand controls). This all came as a big surprise to Jim's doctors; they'd initially diagnosed him as a complete quadriplegic, meaning he would never have any feeling or motion below the point of injury.

"So I've been very lucky," Jim told me.

We were now sitting in the garden of the Pacifica Institute, eating lunch in the sun. Jim is a true sun lizard. His body is deadly intolerant to cold; chills burrow down into his bones and nerves and torment him without mercy, but sunlight can bake out the pain even better than codeine sometimes. And Jim is almost always in pain. This is the kicker about an incomplete spinal injury—there is still just enough damaged-nerve activity left in his spine to keep him in agony. It's a terrible biological irony. If Jim's injury were more serious, it would actually cause him less suffering. He would feel nothing from the neck down. His limbs would atrophy, and he could forget about his body. As it stands, though, his nerves are spastic and unpredictable. He wakes up some mornings, he says, "feeling like I'm encased in wet cement with electrical currents running through it." His legs convulse uncontrollably, his bowels revolt, he goes blind with pain. Other days he's fine. Day by day, he never knows what he's going to get from his body, or when.

So when Jim says he's been "very lucky," well...go ahead and take that with the biggest grain of salt you need to get it down.

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**WHAT THEY DO IN HOSPITALS** to someone who has suffered a major spinal injury is unthinkable and torturous, something from a nightmare or the basement of a serial killer. After another surgery to clean the bone chips from Jim's spinal fluid, the doctors put him in a halo—a steel ring that encircled his head and bolted directly into his skull. They had to do this procedure without anesthesia, and Jim screamed for mercy while they drilled the screws into his forehead. Then the halo was attached with four long bars to steel plates clamped tightly on either side of Jim's body. This was to keep him immobilized during recovery, so his spine would risk no further injury. Jim was locked in this halo for three months. There has never been a more dreadfully misnamed apparatus than the medical device known as "the halo."

During his time in the halo, Jim got such bad respiratory infections that an orderly had to come by every few hours with a long

tube, forcing it up his nose and down into his lungs to clean out the infected fluid. Other people came to dig inside his rectum with their hands, pulling out the feces because he could not empty his own bowels. Others came to take his blood, to catheterize his bladder, to force-feed him or to tighten the screws on his halo.

Jim had known physical agony before. After his first accident, he'd been sent to a rehab center legendary for its toughness, a kind of boot camp for new amputees. There Jim worked with a physical-therapy aide named Oscar, a big, bald, muscular

## THE MOST AMAZING THING I EVER SAW A BODY DO Eat Like a Champ

LAST SUMMER I WATCHED 131-pound Takeru Kobayashi consume fifty hot dogs in twelve minutes. The world champion of professional eating, Kobayashi left a field of gluttons twice his size belching in awe as he doubled the previous record at Coney Island's Fourth of July hot dog-eating contest. Long after his rivals had stopped eating just to watch, the metronomic Kobayashi kept breaking the dogs and buns in half, dunking them in water and scarfing them down, now and then gracefully wriggling his shoulders and torso in time to "Who Let the Dogs Out?" I assumed the shimmy aided digestion, but Kobayashi explained later that he was simply "listening to the music. It got into my soul." By the end of his binge, the champ had gained eight pounds, his six-pack stretched over a basketball-size bulge. He insisted, however, that he wasn't full, and to prove it he kept munching dogs throughout his press conference. That night, he said, he planned to eat fifty servings of Korean barbecue.—JANE MANNERS



black guy who was tougher, Jim says, “than Apollo Creed.” Oscar used to hoist Jim onto a machine to exercise what was left of his leg, make him do squats and lifts. Jim would do a few repetitions, and then Oscar would gently lift him off, lay him down on the ground, cover him with a towel and let him sob uncontrollably for a while. Then they’d do it all over again. So Jim had endured pain before.

But not like this.

The nights were interminable. Paralyzed and in the halo, he couldn’t reach the call button for the nurse. He lay awake, anguished at being left alone but equally frightened of whoever might come into his room next and what they might do to him. His body was a hot chaos of pain. Every time someone touched him, he screamed. “I was all body,” he remembers. “I was all animal impulses, operating from the most primitive core of my being. I was too afraid to cry—I’d lost control of my diaphragm muscle and was physically unable to cough. I was afraid that if I started crying, all my tears would fill up in my lungs and throat and literally choke me to death.”

As he describes it now, he had no soul anymore. He had no self. He had no identity, no “Jim MacLaren,” no history, no future, no hope. Because all this stuff is a luxury in the face of real trauma. The metaphysical question of *Who am I?*—that universal question of humanity that had echoed through Jim’s consciousness for years, was now brutally silenced. He wasn’t even a “who” anymore; he was a “what.”

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**AFTER THREE MONTHS** in this dark underworld of pain, Jim was released from the steel halo. Moved to a rehabilitation center in Colorado, he was assigned to a floor with thirty-seven other patients who had recently become quadriplegics or paraplegics. Like Jim, most of these patients were young men. They were athletic, healthy men who’d been out there in the world only a few weeks earlier, living at their prime and doing the things that snap guys’ necks—climbing rocks, racing motorcycles, driving with the top down and riding in rodeos.

“There was a lot of anger on that ward,” Jim says. “But it was good anger. Funny anger. Sarcastic, brave, young man’s anger. It wasn’t as grim as you might think.”

Tentatively, in this battered company, Jim’s sense of self began to reemerge. His human consciousness crept out from hiding, and he began to recognize that there was something familiar about his situation. Loss, pain, incapacitation, rehabilitation, endurance? Jim had been through this already. The amputee-triathlete-survivor within him took over. This was the inner voice that said “You know how to do this, Jim. Work your ass off in rehab, eat the pain, focus on regaining your independence, keep your spirits up, and get the hell out of this place.”

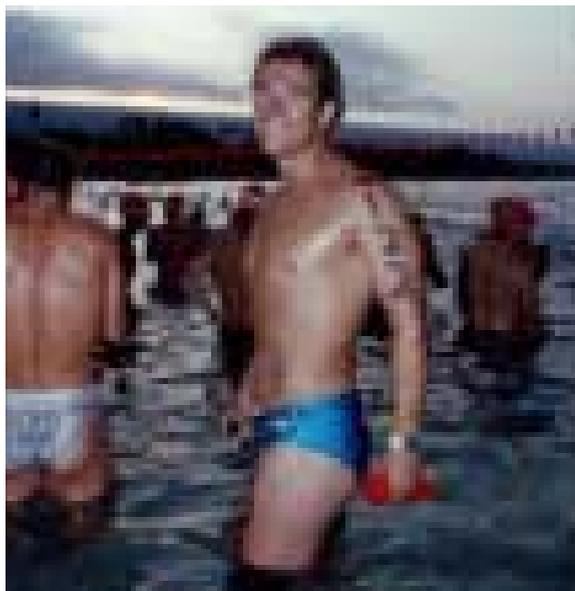
Over the next months, Jim became—to nobody’s surprise—the model recovering quadriplegic. He was upbeat and stoic and unflinchingly focused. He kept his distance from the other patients so that he could concentrate instead on his own recuperation. He lobbied to get the best therapist in the place and then

arranged to have an old issue of a triathlon magazine sent to the guy, featuring an article about this wondrous amputee athlete.

“Look,” Jim said. “I want you to read this. This is who I am. This is how hard I’m willing to work.”

There is a particular energy to the momentum of recovery, and Jim now swung his whole existence into that energy. He advanced, he pushed, he strove. He defied prognosis after prognosis and recovered faster than anyone had expected. But here’s the thing—everyone *had* expected that. Because he’s *Jim MacLaren*, damn it, and that’s what Jim MacLaren does when he’s beaten down. He rises up. He never quits. He’s a marvel and a mystery, right?

Which is why, just six months after breaking his neck, Jim was back in the world. He was living on his own, with only visits from caretakers. About a year after his accident, he made a difficult voyage to Hawaii to speak before a convention of Ironman athletes. He was wheeled out onstage to a standing



#### In Perfect Shape

Jim, before the second accident, takes part in the 1991 Ironman in Kona.

“WHY AREN’T YOU IN THE GYM RIGHT NOW?” HIS OLD TRIATHLETE BUDDIES WOULD ASK HIM AFTER THE SECOND ACCIDENT. “WHY AREN’T YOU TRYING HARDER TO BEAT THIS, JIMMY?”

ovation. When the applause finally died down, Jim began with, of all things, a dark joke: “For years I sat out there in that audience and listened to the best Ironman champions in the world speak from this very podium. I always wondered what it would take for a guy like me to be invited up here. I never realized it would be so simple—all I had to do was break my neck.”

There was a bone-chilling silence.

Jim thought, *Whoops...*

Apparently, these people weren’t ready for a joke like that. Nobody in the real world was ready for this. Quickly, Jim changed his tone, went back to his old rousing motivational-speaker oration about endurance and the strength of the human spirit. He gave the people what they wanted, and they (with considerable relief) rewarded him with riotous applause and tears of emotion. After the speech, they all gathered around him, telling him what a hero he was, how healthy he seemed, how they all expected to see him running in the Ironman next year.

“Doesn’t Jimmy look *great*?” everyone said. “Isn’t Jimmy doing incredibly well?”

In fact, though, he wasn’t. He wasn’t doing well at all.

Yes, there is a galvanizing momentum to recovery, but then there comes a moment when the recovery has gone as far as it can possibly go and momentum can’t carry you anymore. There

eventually comes a wall where healing stops and the truth of what you're left with settles in. And Jim had just hit that wall. His body had healed as much as it was ever going to. And all the determination in the world could not change these facts: He would never be out of pain again; he would never lift his arms above his head again; he would never be able to control his bladder again. And he would absolutely never walk again. Not even if he spent ten hours a day in physical therapy, as his old triathlete buddies kept suggesting he do. ("Why aren't you in the gym right now?" they'd ask. "Why aren't you trying harder to beat this, Jimmy?")

Because it couldn't be beat, that's why. That was it—the truth, plain and simple. And the day he realized that truth was the day the invincible Jim MacLaren finally began to lose it.

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**THE NEXT YEAR WAS** an ugly tailspin of rage, sorrow, calamity and dysfunction. Jim won a big settlement for his accident—\$3.7 million. After considerable medical and attorney's fees, that still left him with a fair amount of money. He decided to move to Kona, Hawaii, putting an ocean between himself and everyone who loved him.

"I announced to all my friends that I was moving to the beach to spend my time contemplating my destiny and writing my memoirs," Jim recalls. "Everyone thought this was a great idea and believed it. Everyone supported it. But it was bullshit. I was just running away."

Jim was running away because he didn't want anyone to know the truth, which was that he had become addicted to cocaine. He'd started using the drug about two years after he broke his neck. He'd met this woman, and she'd offered some coke to him. ("Go ahead," she'd said, full of sympathy. "You've suffered so much, you deserve it.") And Jim thought, *Yeah, I do deserve it.* He took the stuff, and it made him disappear for a little while. It took the nightmare of his reality away. Soon he was buying it, doing it alone, needing it—and surrounding himself with the kinds of friends who encouraged the behavior. Junkies, prostitutes, dealers and lost souls.

"You wouldn't believe how many people were willing to give me cocaine and let me kill myself because they felt sorry for me," he says. "These weren't cruel people, but they were just like, 'Dude, have another line—what else are you gonna do with your damn life?'"

And he drank. There's nothing worse he could have done to his battered body, but he drank and did cocaine every night until his body went away from him, until he didn't have to belong to it anymore.

His old friends called from California, from Colorado, from Yale. Left messages. *How you doin', Jim?* He wouldn't call them back for weeks; then he'd apologize—*Sorry, I've been really busy, been working on my book... Yeah, it's going great...*

Then one night, he found himself drunk out of his mind and drugged to the gills at three in the morning, wheeling his chair up the middle lane of some desolate highway. He realized he was on Alii Drive—the most famous stretch of road on the Hawaiian Ironman racecourse. He'd been here before—had run marathons up this road. Now he shut his eyes and could almost hear the lost echo of the crowd's roar. Alii Drive had been the

site of Jim MacLaren's greatest triumph, but now look at him. Wheeling around at night, seeing double, trying to figure out where he could score more cocaine at this hour. Unwashed, alone, crippled. He looked up, or as far up as he could, given that his head couldn't tilt back and he was too blind drunk to see the sky.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he yelled. "Why are you fucking doing this?"

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**AS A HUMAN BEING,** you have two choices as to how you view the events of your life. Either you can believe every act is random, or you can believe every act occurs for a preordained reason. But what if you believe every act occurs for a reason and then hideous, unspeakable things happen to you? Well, you are faced with two choices once more. Either you can believe you are cursed, or you can believe you are somehow blessed. Jim MacLaren—who lost a leg at 22 and became a quadriplegic at 30—has decided to believe he is blessed.

This has indeed been a decision. Jim made it shortly after that dark night on Alii Drive. He woke up and knew there was a choice he had to make, and soon. Was he going to die, or was he going to live? He'd surrounded himself with people who were essentially saying to him with each gram of cocaine and each grimace of pity, "Go ahead and kill yourself, Jim. You've suffered enough. I give you permission to leave this life."

"But I didn't *want* to leave this life," he says. "I was 33 years old. That's too young to say you're finished. I wanted to live. I didn't want to live as a fucking quadriplegic, but I couldn't change that. And since I couldn't change it, I knew I'd have to make some kind of peace with it."

Not some facile, life-is-beautiful, made-for-television, triumph-of-the-human-spirit peace but a true and sustaining and deeply personal peace. And the only chance he had for gaining any peace, he realized, was to start seeing things very differently. He needed a total change in perception, a paradigm shift. He wasn't sure exactly how to do this yet, but he knew one thing: If he couldn't start finding some serious blessings in all this disaster, he did not stand a chance in hell.

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**SO HE WENT INSIDE.** What else could he do? He took his intellect, his energy and his spiritual hunger and he turned it all inward, setting forth on a journey to find out all over again, but with a newfound humility, "OK, seriously now—who am I? Who am I *really*?"

"The first thing I had to do was identify my absolute deepest fear about all this," Jim says. "What was it? What was the worst thing about having to spend life as a quadriplegic? Was I afraid of death? Not really. I'd had two near-death experiences already, with the white light and the tunnel and the whole deal. They were both amazing encounters, not scary either time. I knew that death no longer frightened me. Was I afraid of losing my sexuality? No. I knew as long as I had taste and smell and sensation, I could lead a sensual life. Was I afraid of helplessness? Not really. Managing on my own is a drag, but it's just logistics. Was I afraid of pain? No. I know how to deal with pain. Pain is a bitch, but I know how to beat it, how to wrestle physical pain to the ground. So what was I afraid of? The answer was pretty clear: I was afraid of being alone with myself, with my mind, with the dark things that lived in me, like fear and doubt and loneliness and confusion. I was afraid of *metaphysical pain*."



→ 1.5 The number of minutes your life span will increase for climbing one flight of stairs.

Jim MacLaren knew he was going to have to spend much of his life in solitude and stillness. He was often confined to his bed for days at a time. As though wrestled to the ground by God Himself, he had been forced into his own company. This was petrifying, but now Jim faced this terror and wondered if he could learn to see it differently.

"Maybe, I thought to myself, this wasn't really a curse at all. Maybe it was actually the most exquisite blessing of my life. Maybe it was the opportunity for true catharsis, if I chose to make it one—an opportunity to see my true self beyond all the noise."

Jim MacLaren? Meet Jim MacLaren.

Continuing to seek answers, Jim began to speculate that maybe he needed to have the second accident because he'd never fully learned the correct metaphysical lessons from the first one.

"Yeah, sure, after I lost my leg, I talked the talk about how *I am not this body*, but did I really understand that yet? I had the words down, and I appreciated the concept, but I didn't really

MAYBE WITH THE SECOND ACCIDENT, DESTINY HAD LOOKED DOWN AND SAID, "HATE TO DO THIS, PAL, BUT YOU STILL DON'T GET IT. NOW WILL YOU LET GO OF YOUR ATTACHMENT TO THIS MORTAL BODY?"



have the experience yet to carry that wisdom beyond words. As an amputee, I was still vain about my looks, still seeking attention and affirmation from women, still getting approval from the world through applause, still trapped in my ego."

So maybe destiny had looked down at Jim MacLaren and said, "Hate to do this, pal, but you still don't quite get it," and then pushed him in front of a van—not as a punishment but as a favor—saying, "Now will you let go of all your attachment to this mortal body? Now will you examine who you really are?"

Or, as Goethe said, "Die, so you can live."

Inspired, Jim turned to his books. He went back to the ancients. He examined all the classical images of wounded men—the crippled god Hephaestus, the blinded Oedipus, the long-suffering Job. What was God trying to do to Job, anyhow, by stripping him so ruthlessly of his family, his health, his fortune? Testing his faith, right? But something more than that, Jim suspected. And then Jim finally saw it on the tenth reading of that biblical book. God was trying to bring Job closer to Him. After all, Job starts off the story as a faithful but somehow detached worshiper of the Lord. By the end, however, his suffering has erased all formality and he speaks to God directly, challengingly, intimately—just the way God speaks to him.

Maybe this is what had happened to Jim that dark night in Kona in his wheelchair when he'd yelled up at the sky. No priests or rituals or prayers were needed—he had been able to yell directly in God's face, *I am here right now and I am talking to you. Answer me!* Jim had believed that was his low point, but now he saw another possible truth: Perhaps he had been closer than ever to the divine. Perhaps that had been his *highest* moment.

Jim came to believe there were other blessings. For the first time, he could see something most people go through their entire lives blind to—namely, that we are not in charge of what happens to us in this lifetime. We are in charge only of how we *perceive* what happens to us in this lifetime.

"I started looking around and seeing people everywhere—especially successful middle-class American men—walking around in complete denial, smugly thinking to themselves, *I sure am doing a good job running my life here*. But I could see now that their sense of control was nothing but a mirage. Safety, entitlement, power—these are all fantasies. We don't drive our destinies. Not in that way."

Jim realized, to his relief, that once you stop trying to control events you can't control anyway, you can drop all that wasted energy and focus on the one thing you *are* in charge of. As the teachings of Buddha and Socrates show, you have only one task as a human being: To know yourself.

"Look," Jim says. "I have honestly come to believe that I

needed these accidents in my life. I completely believe that. Not in terms of paying dues or getting punished by God, but in terms of getting my attention and bringing me deeper inside myself to a place where I could find honesty and peace. Was it destined? Did I literally choose to have these awful things happen to me? No, not in so many words, I don't believe so. But I do believe this—I believe I was born *begging* for experiences that would show me who I really am. And that's what I've been given."

Sitting across from Jim at lunch, listening to him recount his story, I suddenly decided to interrupt and tell him a story of my own. I told him about a bicycle accident I'd had a

#### Changing the Parts

Jim swaps artificial legs midway through a 1989 triathlon.

few weeks before I met him. I was riding my bike at night in New York City, going too fast, getting thrills from dodging taxis and passing buses. I was crossing 37th Street, thinking, *I am so cool!* when I hit a pothole and went flying. I landed on my head, broke my helmet, took all the skin off my shoulder. But after a few minutes of shaking with adrenaline and pain, I was able to get back on my bike and—very gingerly—ease my way home.

I told this story to Jim only because I'd just realized that my little accident took place a mere three blocks from the street where he'd lost his leg. Raising the inevitable question: *Why?* Two separate accidents in two isolated moments. Why did they have such astonishingly different consequences?

"Is it even worth asking why I got *this*," I say, lifting my sleeve and showing the tiny scar on my shoulder, "and you got...*that*?"

"Sure, it's worth asking. Any question is worth asking. Why do different people have different destinies? It's an interesting intellectual subject. We could sit here and speculate about it forever, if that's what you want to do. But we'll never know why. And if we did somehow miraculously find out why, would that change anything?"

"So should we just move on to some other question?" I asked.

Jim smiled. "Well, that's what I've done." (continued on page 236)

**THESE DAYS, JIM LIVES** in a huge loft in downtown Pasadena. On good mornings, he can get out of bed, eat, clean out his bowels, attach his catheter, shower, dress and be ready to leave the apartment in just under three hours. Almost the same amount of time it used to take him to run a marathon, and nearly as physically grueling. It's painful, but he gives his body the time it needs, and then the rest of day belongs to him. If the weather is nice and he feels strong enough and doesn't have a paper to write, he'll get in his wheelchair and head into the city's Old Town. He'll park at an outdoor café, order up a triple espresso and read in the sun, blissfully alone and blissfully comfortable with his own company.

Or sometimes he spends the day with his girlfriend. Her name is Alessandra. Jim calls her Ally, or Ally-mander, or Ally-cat. She's beautiful, blond, smart. They met in an Internet chat room and have been together for two years.

"People look at me and call me a saint for being with a guy in a wheelchair," says Ally, "and it's so insulting. First of all—the idea of *me* as a saint..."

This makes both Jim and Ally laugh so hard that the conversation has to stop for several minutes.

"Anyway," Ally continues, wiping her eyes. "I'm with him because he's the most intelligent and sexy man I've ever known. Period."

As for the sex, yes, they have it. Maybe not the way you have it, but they do have it. Jim does have limited sensation in his penis, but he has to be careful because an orgasm could be a serious health risk. (It could put him into a state of hyperreflexia—pulse goes down, blood pressure goes up; he could have a stroke or a spasm or even die.) So he expresses his sexuality differently now—with hands, mouth, voice, imagination and lots of time.

Of course, Jim and Ally have to deal with the limitations of his body every day. For one thing, they don't get a lot of privacy in public. People stare at Jim. People stare shamelessly. After all these years, Jim is used to this sort of thing. He recognizes that his is a public body now. But it still drives his girlfriend nuts when people stare. The three of us all headed into the Old Town one afternoon, with

Jim rolling along as Ally and I walked beside him. Every person we passed either gaped openly at Jim, did a double take or stared with purpose at the ground before his own feet, fiercely determined not to gawk at the quadriplegic. Jim took no notice of this, but Ally grew increasingly tense. By the time a young couple nudged each other with absolute indiscretion and actually pointed at Jim, Ally lost it.

"What the fuck is the *matter* with people?" she exploded.

"They're just curious, Ally-mander," Jim said, reaching for her hand. "It's nothing."

Indeed, Jim attracts an enormous amount of attention. And it's not only gruesome fascination, either. He has earned a strange kind of status through his injury. People constantly come to Jim with their own tragedies in hand, seeking solace or wisdom from him. Even perfect strangers see him as some holy sage of pain, someone who can help them heal their own wounds.

"I'm a walking projection," Jim says, and then clarifies, "No—I'm a *rolling* projection."

Acquaintances who barely know Jim

make him the first person they consult when calamity strikes. People call him at all hours from hospitals, jails, funeral homes and rehab centers, everybody begging for the same thing—*Please, help lead me out of this fear.* Jim tries to help when he can, but he says sometimes it's hard to come across as completely sympathetic. For instance, when he gets a desperate midnight phone call from someone whose brother or son or wife has been in a dreadful car accident and he hears that the loved one has lost a limb, it's all Jim can do to affect a somber tone and not say what he's thinking. Which is, Thank God! Hallelujah! Just an amputation. That's *nothing.* We can *totally* handle that.

And it isn't always easy, because Jim still struggles. Jim MacLaren, let's be very clear about this, did not enjoy losing his leg, and he does not enjoy being in a wheelchair. He looks for the blessings where he can find them, and he tries to keep a sense of humor, but there are days when it's not funny and it's not enlightening. Days when he wakes up in so much pain he can't get out of bed at all. Days when he can no longer stand the endless battle over trying to control his bowels ("I'm more obsessed with my feces than the Marquis de Sade," he jokes darkly). Days when yet another infection lodges in his catheter incision and his testicles swell to the size of softballs. Days when he wonders how he's going to possibly survive this abuse for another forty years.

"There are moments when I realize all over again what happened to me," Jim

says, "and it's still unbelievable. I mean, come *on!* Jesus Christ, for fuck's sake, how much can one person endure? But I can't stay in that place for long or I'll lose my mind. Instead, I have to ask, What is wholeness, really? What is a full life? What are my actual obstacles? And whenever I find myself frustrated with my handicap or looking with envy at an able-bodied man, I ask myself this: If I could get up out of this wheelchair right now and walk across the room, would that really get me there? I mean, would that *really* get me to the place I most want to go with my life? Because let's be honest here—the other side of this room is not my ultimate destination. My ultimate destination is self-knowledge and enlightenment. Do I have to get there on foot? Or can I find some other path?"

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**THE DAY BEFORE** Jim MacLaren broke his neck, he woke up in his house in Boulder, Colorado, stirred out of bed earlier than usual by some strange and unfamiliar energy. He left his then girlfriend, Pam, sleeping and went outside to sit in his backyard to eat his breakfast alone. The sun was coming up, reflecting off the mountains, and the morning light was filmy and gold. Jim could hear his neighbor's young children playing next door. He could hear birdsong and the tremor of leaves. He'd brought a book outside with him to read, but it lay in his lap unopened; he couldn't focus on it. He couldn't pay attention to his breakfast, either. He wasn't even thinking about the

Ironman he'd be competing in the next day. None of this mattered, suddenly. All Jim wanted was to sit in stillness and experience the inexplicable bliss that was surrounding him in this moment.

And then the bliss started to grow, to rise within him. Jim moved from a state of contentment into a state of joy, and soon even the joy could not be contained, and it became a euphoria that spilled out over his whole body, lifting the hair on the back of his neck and running goose bumps across his skin. He was overcome by a thrilling sense of what he could later only describe as *anticipation.* He'd never felt anything like this, and he never wanted it to end. He was laughing and crying at the same time, elated beyond his senses.

Jim's girlfriend heard the noise and rushed out of the house to see what was wrong.

"What is it, Jim?" she asked. "What's going on?"

He looked up at her through his tears and smiled. He was 30 years old. He was twenty-four hours away from becoming a quadriplegic, and he could not contain his excitement.

"Pam," he said, and he was never more certain of anything in his life, "Pam—listen! Something *amazing* is about to happen to me!" ❦

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*Elizabeth Gilbert is a GQ writer-at-large. Her next book, The Last American Man, based on a piece she wrote for GQ on the rugged outdoorsman Eustace Conway, will be published this month by Viking.*