

TRAVELS

with

TONY ROAMO



How I found joy, humility, connection, new dreams, and the depths of my stupidity rambling around with a 16-foot travel trailer

BY CRAIG LANCASTER

QUITE TO MY SURPRISE, I've become a middle-aged man of recreation. The middle-aged part was just a matter of time. If you spend enough years on the sunny side of the dirt, you confront aging and its attendant indignities. Around the time I turned 55, last year, I began to notice that tasks I'd previously done with ease—lifting things, moving furniture, going on long walks; hell, getting off the couch—set my joints to complaining with outsized vigor. It was not unlike Hemingway's description of going bankrupt. It happened little by little, then all at once.

A while back, out of sheer boredom and a desire to do something that didn't require a lot of brainpower, I took a nighttime job washing and parking delivery trucks. It didn't last. I couldn't bear up under the physical strain of power washes, squeegeeing massive windshields, and repeatedly climbing up into the cabs.

Something had to change. Someone. *Me.*



Tony Roamo is outfitted for a boondocking trip in August 2025.

CRAIG LANCASTER

First came the walks, four of them daily with Fretless, my dog. Later, I bought a bike, and now I greet most early mornings with a long ride before I settle in at work. I joined a golf league, and for the first time I invested in decent gear. Nothing can be done about the deficiencies in the craftsman, but at least I'm grinding on the course with a nice bag of hardware. More than that, I'm in the fresh air and the sunshine, having fun.

The results that can be seen and measured: I'm the lightest I've been in more than 30 years—I'm still a chunk; it was ever thus—and every number my doctor worries over is headed in the right direction. The only figures I can't redirect are the ones on the calendar.

That's why I bought the RV. My stack of yesterdays bends ever more sharply under its own weight. My quantity of tomorrows is surely smaller and also unknowable.

If not now, I figured, when?

BENT THE DAMNED STAIRS.

Day One in a 16-foot, brand-spanking-new travel trailer, and I bent the damned stairs by backing up without first retracting them into the trailer, and I bent them but good.

I broke the cardinal rule of RVing: I'd gone into the trailer for something amid a break in the madly frustrating back-up-and-get-it-level phase, and in my flustered state, I hadn't walked around the trailer before backing up again. *Crunch*. Never act in haste. That's good life advice. Good RV advice, too. I sure wish I'd heeded it.

I'd gone off to Cody, Wyoming, for an overnight trip—a drive of decent length from my home in Billings, a chance to get the feel of the trailer behind me, a night on a simple gravel pad on a farm, arranged with one of the many social sites through which travelers and hosts can connect. It was the perfect first outing, until it wasn't. Until I bent the stairs.

My host, the farmer, came over later, after I'd parked the rig and stabilized it, and he saw the damage done, the twisted stairs I'd pulled from their mooring and tossed to the side.

"Yeah, that was pretty stupid," he said.

"I'm aware," I told him.

Later, he came by again. He wouldn't let go of what I'd done, or his insistence that my leveling job wasn't up to snuff. Several beers into his evening, he surmised that I must be a liberal, a charge for which I am guilty by modern-day definitions, not that it was particularly



germane to the situation at hand. He took a few runs at how dumb liberals are, each accompanied by "I'm just kidding," but I'd begun to suspect he wasn't. I walked away from him, shaking my head.

Still later, via text, he acknowledged my Cash App payment for the use of a 30-amp connection for the night, said he'd give me a 100 percent rating on the website that had hooked us up, and suggested that I not "let politics get into the middle of things." I thought it was good advice directed at the wrong party. I held my tongue and my fingertips. I called him "a lively conversationalist" in my online review of his accommodations, because being a complainer doesn't get you the next site you're interested in. But let's be frank: He was a jackass. It feels good to say that now.

That night, in bed, I whispered my despair into the darkness: "I'm too stupid to do this. I'll take a bath on the stairs, but I'm taking the camper back to the dealer. It's not for me. I don't want it. I don't want any of this."

Even in the moment, I knew full well the fountainhead of all that angst. I have no interest in being a caricature or a cliché, but I also have no interest in dodging the truth: It might as well have been my old man in my head, feeding those lines to me. My father, whom I consistently disappoint with my lack of mechanical aptitude. My father, who wonders how I could have possibly lived this



The sun sets on Tony Roamo during a weekend trip in August 2025. The next day, the camper held its ground while the author played a round of golf—badly.

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down the road, and you're likely to hear about the attendant dumbassery. The air conditioners smashed against low bridges. The tongue jacks left down and twisted up. The bumpers dented from backing into trees or buildings. Tree branches through fiberglass. Jackknives. Fishtail-induced rollovers.

In the long view, I'm a man given to expensive mistakes, but I always say there's a hidden benefit to them: When you screw up at scale—whether measured in money or embarrassment—you tend to learn a lesson that sticks. An RV is not unlike a delicate flower, as my friend Bob Kimpton likes to put it. There are many ways you can harm one. I'm sure mine has dings yet to be visited on it. But I'm not likely to bend the stairs again.

long without learning how to back up a trailer, fer godsake. My father, who regards my lifetime of office-bound work the way some folks regard mortal sin. My father, to whom I'm not even connected by blood—I was adopted—and who can't grasp what moves me, any more than I can grasp what moves him. If anything does.

BUT HERE'S THE THING. Amid all my deficiencies in living up to manhood as my pop defines it, I also carry a doggedness about learning that serves me well and a zest for raising a middle finger in response should someone think I can't do something, even if that someone is me.

I didn't take the camper back.

Oh, and I want it. I want all of this.

The next morning, I found the gumption to shuck off disappointment so I could make room for something better. I got the hell off that Wyoming farmer's property as quickly as I could, and it was an enjoyable haul back to Billings. I admired my trailer when I stopped for gas. I dreamed of adventures yet to come.

The expansiveness of my stupidity remains an open question, one for which I often lack a sufficient answer, but when it comes to banging up RVs, I'm hardly alone. Talk to anybody who's pulled a trailer or directed a motorhome

INAMED THE TRAILER TONY ROAMO, a nod to the former NFL quarterback, whom I always liked, with a spelling that captures what I'm after.

I began looking at RVs and imagining myself in one maybe a decade ago. Back then, I was taken with the razzle-dazzle. I pictured myself in a massive Class A motorhome with all the trappings, everything deluxe. I joked that I didn't want to climb mountains; I wanted to park under them, plant my considerable backside in a recliner, and watch a movie on my big-screen TV. *Ah, nature.*

Time's passage and some clarifying conversations with RV-oriented friends brought me to a different place when it came time to buy. Deep dives into the maintenance needs of even a new motorhome didn't align with my lightweight bank book. The considerations were practical (I couldn't flat-tow my FJ Cruiser behind a motorhome) and monetary (even a modest Class A costs more than my first two houses) and attuned to who I am, or maybe who I'm becoming.

I bought a Go-Lite Cloudbreaker, which weighs 2,400 pounds dry and 3,500 if you load it to the gills, which never happened. An FJ can tow it with ease. It doesn't gnaw quite so aggressively on the wallet. And with a fixed bed, a couch, a kitchen, a wet bath and an exterior shower, it has everything I need and nothing I don't.

It's a stripped-down, no-frills approach to recreational RVing. And despite the "I'm Sexy and I Tow It" T-shirt I just had to buy—I'm not a dad, but I'll gladly wear his

This life of recreation is rising while other interests are falling away. The comings and goings are the way of things, I suppose, but these recent changes strike a little harder and deeper, in ways I didn't necessarily expect.

clothes and make his jokes—no-frills is the way I seem to be rolling these days.

I'VE MOVED FAR BEYOND THE mistakes and quiet despair of that first trip. I've been in badlands and brewery parking lots, on flat open roads and in treacherous mountain passes. Sometimes, when money or time is tight, I've boondocked somewhere nearer home, giving dimension to the invented term *staycation*. I've dreamed of the next trip. Always, always I dream of the next trip, and it's a dream that has the quality of clay. I'm forever reshaping it.

Tony Roamo and I, we roamed on all last summer and fall. Fretless would come along, sometimes. On every trip, the bicycle would ride hitched to the back bumper until we got where we were going. The golf clubs joined us for some trips, too.

I've fallen in deep with the culture of RVing. I love talking to the couple at the next gas pump as they fill up their Class C. I beam with pride when someone approaches me, wanting a closer look at my setup. I read the online reviews—*stay here, don't stay there, here's where you get fresh water*—and tuck away the details for when I need them. I've become a candidate for that series of commercials featuring the life coach who tries to keep people from turning into their parents.



Despite the long face, Fretless the dachshund has turned into an enthusiastic and intrepid traveler.

CRAIG LANCASTER

“So,” I say, striding up to a guy pulling a small trailer like mine, “I see you’ve got a single-axle unit there.”

Life coach: “You don’t have to tell him how many axles he has.”

I remember being a young man and listening to Paul Simon sing about how everybody loves the sound of a train in the distance. It’s a love song, yes, but its central imagery is cast against a more universal longing. I thought I understood it, this idea that whatever’s around the next bend is more intoxicating than anyone’s present view. Four decades on from that first listen, I hear something else in the words. For me, it’s the ability to go that beguiles, not so much the destination. It’s about reaching inside and finding the will.

I saw Simon in April 2025 in Minneapolis as he broke free from retirement to sing and play again in his mid-80s, his profound hearing loss and other infirmities be damned. I’m old enough to understand that compulsion to do what you want while you still can. I’m also young enough to be his son and not fully understand the depth of what he feels, right now. My dearest wish is to someday get there. I love chasing the horizon in the shifting light, feeling the weight under my bumper, pursuing the sound of the train in the distance, literally and figuratively.

TURNS OUT THAT BEING A MIDDLE-AGED MAN OF recreation costs a lot of money. From the seemingly limitless number of specialty items I can buy for the rig to that sweet, sweet hybrid club I’d like to put in my golf bag just as soon as I throw my unhittable 3-wood into the lake, everything draws my attention and taxes my prudence, which was never in ample supply anyway.

In the RV, my choices get cast through the lenses of weight and power. Pursuant to the latter, the dual-fuel generator was a wise investment, even if choking it down required a big gulp when I saw the price tag. I run it off my propane supply, keeping my systems going when I don’t have shore power and avoiding the stench of gasoline in my trailer or my tow vehicle.

The matter of weight drives other decisions. I can take a flyer on the cool little water flow gauge, which was 20 bucks and doesn’t take up much room or demand much freight. How and where and when to add the water it measures is a trickier call. Get it at home, where I know I have it, and carry 8.34 pounds multiplied by 20-odd gallons sloshing around down the highway? That’ll put me on the upper end of Tony’s capacity and further

compromise my fuel efficiency. I can wait till I’m at my destination, of course, but I’d better be sure of my supply or I’ll come home smelling ripe. I plot not just routes of travel but also amenities, gas stations, and bridge heights, lest I become another RVer who sacrifices an air conditioner to the gods of hubris.

After every trip, I reorganize yet again, looking for that perfect alignment of what I need, stored in just the right place, arranged in a way that distributes the weight efficiently.

This is who I am now.

What the hell happened?

Whatever it was, it’s the Hemingway line again. It happened little by little, then all at once. From walks to bike rides to rounds of golf to overnight camping trips, I’m putting my time and attention where I want them right now. It’s the only moment when I have a say. The others are either gone, immune to how I try to define them, or yet to arrive and unpromised to me.

MY STITCHED-TOGETHER DEFINITION OF fulfillment hinges on the idea that the things we *do* won’t linger long if they’re not also, in some sense, the things we *are*. The handful of years that led to the iffy health and preceded the walks and the bicycle rides and the golf and my relationship with Tony Roamo were difficult ones. Each of these new things I’ve picked up has been a manifestation of what’s happening with and to me and an undeniable move toward some new destination and the version of me who’s going to live in that place when I get there.

This life of recreation is rising while other interests are falling away. The comings and goings are the way of things, I suppose, but these recent changes strike a little harder and deeper, in ways I didn’t necessarily expect. And I know I’m glossing over the truth when I say I’m middle-aged. The greater likelihood is that I’m two-thirds of the way through, maybe more. Maybe a lot more. I feel the urgency to do the things now, and in response I’m embracing and letting go with equal fervor.

Sometimes, I think what I’m feeling is bound up in a Ben Folds lyric: “*But in these days of overwhelming change / I just wanna know what I want / Because I only seem to know what I don’t.*”

Other times, maybe I’m getting at it when I write in the journal I’m keeping as I commemorate my camper trips: “*I’m getting better and better, each time out.*”

A FEW WEEKS AFTER I BOUGHT THE TRAILER, I took my dad out to see it. I silently thrilled when he said “leveling jacks” and I corrected him, saying, “No, no, those are *stabilizer* jacks.” And then, of course, I felt bad, because he’s just an 86-year-old who doesn’t always pull the right word, and if this man-of-recreation thing works out, I’ll be there someday, too. He marveled over the modern touches, so much more deluxe than he remembered of his early-’70s Holiday Rambler.

“Is it level?” he asked. I showed him that it was. “Did you back it in here yourself?” he asked, and I assured him I had.

As I drove him home, he said, “Well, Craig, I’m proud of you.” I sat there, staring ahead as I drove, caught between two notions.

The first: *This? This is what it took? A camper?*

But also this: We’re two men, one in the great middle of life (if I’m lucky) and one at the tail end, and we’ve never shared an interest, a dream, or a manner of living. If we weren’t father and son, we’d never have been friends. Even the family bond often isn’t enough to get us beyond mutual tolerance. And here, we had a genuine moment, a true rarity. He felt proud, and he said it, and it landed squarely on me, and that’s enough.

Thanks, Pop. For what it’s worth, I’m proud of me, too. ▣



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Postscript

MY SUMMER AND FALL WITH TONY ROAMO CLARIFIED something in me that I wouldn't have predicted that first night in Wyoming, as I beat myself up for bending the stairs.

I want this camping life, and I want it in bigger doses than I can get on weekend outings. I want to chase the sun. I want to see places I've never been and revisit precincts I know well.

I want to get gone, for long stretches at a time. I want to see every sunrise from every place, meet every person, and explore every museum and art gallery and bookstore I possibly can while I still can.

I'm lucky in that my work—the day job with a research firm, my creative pursuits, the design of this magazine you hold—can be done from anywhere.

And anywhere just so happens to be where I intend to go.

So meet Sunny. (Named after former Rangers catcher Jim Sundberg. What can I say? I have a thing for the names of North Texas sports stars.) It's a little longer and a lot more durable than Tony Roamo, the little camper I sacked with a heaping dose of gratitude. It's also a little more luxurious and much more suited to longer-term living.

Come mid-April, I'm gone. Maybe I'll see you out there.



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