

Novitiate:

Stumbling Through Wyoming

On the empty shoulder of westbound I-80 I sensed the morning sun thawing my back as I perpetually pedaled into my solitary shadow. Tractor trailers four times my height rushed past, screamed past, each one throwing a wall of air that pushed me to the edge of the road followed by a momentary interval of quiet, a welcome relief from the constant wind I had to struggle against. I was fresh, green: a beginner intimidated by the wind and the mountains and the loneliness of the Wyoming wilderness.

My first long trip through America started in Chicago. After riding through Iowa and Nebraska I faced mountainous Wyoming on the shoulder of the interstate, the only road. A barren experience. Nothing around me was alive. The merciless sun sapped water out of my body. My lungs strained for the thin mountain air. My heart thumped forcefully in my thighs on upgrades. Salty sweat mingled with dust and dirt ran down my forehead and burned into my eyes. At night the air froze my hands and feet.

I fought an invisible brutal wind which forced me into my low gears, making me struggle over each inch of asphalt. It created an endless deafening drone in my ears, a roar more engulfing than the sound of a cathedral organ overpowering the singing of a community of believers. A person bicycling alone can do nothing but participate in sounds. Legs pedal themselves, lungs breathe on their own, the mind jumps from thought to thought and song to song, automatically. Mind and heart and sound fuse. I no longer know whether I think or I feel or I hear. The interstate is an unpleasant bicycling experience. I was too impractical to bicycle properly, wearing clothes that flapped in the wind, carrying a bunch of inappropriate heavy equipment, having no detailed maps and only one water bottle, too inexperienced to know how to deal with this type of adversity, this type of loneliness.

Before reaching Wyoming I had bicycled through a delightful quiet on back roads in Iowa and Nebraska. I had heard the sound of tires turning on the road, the sound of the freewheel clicking when I stopped pedaling, sometimes a rattling in my handlebar bag: quiet sounds that mingled with the sound of tranquil thought. On quiet roads I could hear an approaching car a half mile away. It changes the countryside and drowns the sound of thought until it vanishes and the wind erases all evidence of its having been there, leaving a deeper and more profound silence.

Being alone becomes a state of mind. I know family people who live alone, school teachers and ministers and social workers who live as alone as hermits. I, too, had known many kinds of solitude and many kinds of silences: the desert, the forest, the abbey. I'd been alone all my life. I had seen other people with life-long friends, but at twenty-nine my only friend was my new bicycle. I bought it two weeks before leaving Chicago, and we were both making our first long trip, together. I was full of the fanaticism of the newly converted: fresh and wild and ignorant. Somewhere in Iowa called the bicycle Angel. I'm not sure what inspired the name; I certainly had no intention of giving a piece of metal an identity, but it's important to develop relationships. Most people have a relationship with another human. Some keep a dog or a cat.

It was a stock blue Fuji touring bicycle, a solid frame with standard Japanese parts. I spent all the money I had on it, but I couldn't afford pannier saddle bags, so I used cumbersome eight dollar metal shopping baskets from Sears. I bought a fluorescent yellow bag at the Maxwell Street flea market for two dollars, tied it to the handlebar with string, and stuffed it with

equipment that I never did use. Except for gloves, I had no bicycling clothing. I knew nothing about the extra wind drag that T-shirts cause, but I appreciated the necessity of gloves; previously I had taken a short trip to Wisconsin without them, hurt the nerve in my hand, and lost the feeling in my fingers for a month. I used my running shoes and shorts and brought neither tent nor sleeping bag. Doing it the hard way, I thought, had to be part of the experience.

Angel shined then, and I treated it gently, leaned it gingerly on the wall and wiped off marks from the frame, never keeping it out of my sight when I had to go inside a store. Now it looks like an old work horse when I ride it next to bicycles of gleaming metal and bright paint. I've replaced every moving part many times since then, been through four or five clusters of gears on the rear wheel, and through countless tires. But on the first trip I knew little about its mechanics and had no tools to make basic adjustments. Foolish and serious Angel and I were then, with the enthusiasm of beginners, and we worked together for the next 50,000 miles, touring, training, and commuting.

I wanted to travel the world—that was my aim even then—but at that time I had no need for comfort or short cuts. I didn't need a radio for company or camera to prove to others that I'd been there: nothing extraneous for travel. I wanted not only to see the world, I wanted to feel it—the joy and the travail—bring myself close and touch it and have it touch me, engulf me. Eyes open, ears open, mind open, always listening, always seeing, always contemplating, always comparing, always working.

A few hours after I crossed into Iowa south of Dubuque I saw a man in overalls getting off a faded red tractor outside his farm house. I stopped and shouted "hello," asking if I could have water. The man had to quiet his German shepherd that was almost breaking its leash to jump on me. Dogs hate bicyclists. He signaled me to come over after giving stern words to the shepherd.

"You picked a hot day to be bicycling," he said seeing me empty the bottle.

"It's cooler riding a bike than standing still. The wind can feel like an ocean breeze."

The dog sniffed my shopping baskets. The farmer refilled my water bottle from the hose in his vegetable garden and asked me where I was going.

"San Francisco," I replied.

"That's mighty far, and across the Rockies. Can you go over mountains on that thing?"

I had done no homework on my route, and this was the first time that I had to think about the Rockies. I didn't know how to respond. "Other people have crossed the country by bicycle, dozens of others. Only a hundred years ago people were walking across."

"What do you do, just get on any road and follow it?"

"I have maps. I pick the small roads, roads that were once pioneer trails, the Overland Express, the Mormon Trail."

He looked surprised that I could still stand and was smiling, got me more water, and paused. "Just what is it you're trying to do, go somewhere or get away from something?"

"I'm just trying to find out how people live, the farmers and townspeople."

"Can't you do that by staying in the same place? It would be a lot easier."

Questions like those prove too deep for a novice to answer casually. It's possible to read about corn farming in Iowa and see pictures of ranchers. Or I could have taken an easier form of transportation to travel the world. A motorcycle would be faster and more convenient. A car would protect me from the elements. And if I were to tell you the truth, I would have to admit that many times when I'm struggling in deserts where my throat is cracked, through cold rain or hail or snow, through areas where I've picked up an unpleasant tropical disease, when I'm

perspiring and dirty—God do I get dirty—in war torn areas or areas infamous for thievery, when I look down dirt or mud roads and up steep grades, then I too doubt if I should be on a bicycle instead of a more conventional and trouble-free form of transportation, or better yet, I wish I had never started. I often have fantasies of ending it: getting on a plane or a train, sleeping on a soft bed, drinking unquestionably clean water, and having someone carry my bags and serve me a decent meal.

But the day I entered Iowa I was frenzied with energy, hammering on the pedals, putting in a vigorous 130 miles on various farm roads by mid-afternoon, passing field after field of tasseled corn, groups of pigs, herds of cattle, and clusters of buildings that comprise a family farm: a frame house, barn, metal silo, sheds. Two hours before sundown I was spent. I sat under a tree and pulled out peanut butter and whole wheat bread from the metal baskets. A boy and girl about thirteen or fourteen years old, bicycled up the narrow asphalt road, stopped in front of me, looked me over, and politely asked me questions about where I was from and where I was going. The boy told me that that spring he had gone on a five-day bicycle tour with a church youth group.

“You look tired,” the boy said. “Where you planning to sleep tonight?”

“Don’t know. I usually don’t think about that until near sundown. I can camp anywhere.”

“I’ll see if my father can help you,” he said, and the two of them bicycled west, back the way they had come.

A few minutes later I got up and followed them, encountering the mother and father and their two children on bicycles on the other side of a bridge. The father asked me the same questions his son had, then invited me to stay with them for the night. I accepted eagerly. It was to be the first of hundreds of such invitations.

“We have a farm just a couple of miles from here. Do you think you can make it that far?” the mother asked.

“I’ll give you a half mile head start and race you there,” I replied.

The kids and I zig-zagged around each other down the road. After a stretch we hit dirt and turned left to a pig and corn farm. Before we got off the bicycles I said to the father, “I’ve been a city person. Farmers in Illinois have been telling me about growing corn. I’d love to learn how you raise pigs.”

The father, an upright, slender man in his mid-forties who sported a trimmed beard and spoke without emotion, looked at me directly and said, “I’ll be glad to show you everything you need to know about pigs. We’re Mennonites. We’ve been doing this for hundreds of years.”

He took me to the pen where he showed me his stock, about 200 pigs in an area a quarter the size of a football field.

“That’s the feed house,” he said pointing to a metal structure that sat half in and half out of the pen. “We give them a mixture of corn and oats and vitamins: good feed. It costs us more, but we produce good pigs. The corn growing over there feeds the stock, though most years we have to buy more.”

He took me to another enclosure where a large pig ran back and forth inside the wooden fence.

“He’s the daddy. We just got him. Cost fifteen hundred.”

My host climbed in the pen and began playing with the pig, making him run around in the dirt while pointing out to me the shape of his shoulders and legs and hind parts, qualities that make him a good breeder.

“We want to raise meat, not fat,” he said. “A lot of other farmers give pig farming a bad name. To them it’s a business, getting the most out of the least; to us it’s our life’s work.”

Then he took me into a room about the size of a small hangar made out of galvanized metal.

“This is the breeding room,” he said.

Clean cemented aisles separated four neat rows of stalls covered with hay. The screeches of pigs echoed off the metal walls, drowning out the sound of the air exchange fans. Troughs of water and feed ran through the room. My host and his son took me to a stall where a hefty sow lay exhausted after giving birth. The sow looked too weak to move or groan. The son counted the litter and exclaimed excitedly that the sow had sixteen little ones. A smile appeared on the father’s otherwise expressionless face.

They carried three newborns from another stall into a room off to the side. Medicines and sterile products lined the shelves, making it look like a doctor’s office. The father took out a syringe, filled it from a bottle, and gave each animal an injection. While the son held each pig upside down in his arms, the father took a surgical knife and cut each of their testicles and removed the two tiny organs, covering the wound with antiseptic. The pigs didn’t seem to notice what happened.

“It’s mostly to prevent disease,” the father explained.

I wondered if it would make them sing better.

“How long do they live before they’re ready for market?” I asked.

“In six months they’re about 220 pounds. That’s the best weight.”

“Only six months of life!” I said.

“We put them in that trailer and take them to town every couple of weeks,” the son told me.

“Lots of folks are so removed from what they eat,” the father said. “They think meat grows in the back of the supermarket and comes in plastic wrappers. I hope that you know more about pork now.”

We went inside and found that the mother and daughter had laid out dinner. Everyone sat down, prayed, and took up fork and knife. I looked down on my plate and saw a large, thick slab of dark pink next to the white mashed potatoes and green peas.

“Everything on the table comes from the farm,” the father said.

He explained that the Mennonites settled in that area last century, but since then the group had divided into reformed Mennonites such as themselves, and the more conservative group who live like the Amish.

“A Mennonite is a farmer,” the father said.

None of us left anything on our plates.

Toward the end of dinner the father turned to me and asked, “What kind of meat do you eat in Chicago?”

I probably blushed. “I guess most people in Chicago eat beef.” I didn’t mention that I’m a vegetarian except when I stay on a pig farm.

The next morning, my energy regenerated, I pedaled robustly across the hot farmlands, stopping whenever I saw someone to ask about the roads and the crops. Although it was a month before harvest, everyone was predicting a near-record year for corn growers, but the farmers were complaining that that would drive the price of corn unacceptably low. After a couple of days I crossed into Nebraska, feeling the summer sun becoming more intense as I moved west. People began talking about the heat and drought.

“All the hay’s been ruined this year,” said one blond Polish farmer in a matter of fact tone. “Lots of folks going broke. People say that the drought’s going to be worse in years to come.”

But for cross-country bicycling Iowa and Nebraska were wonderful places: miles and miles of solitary open space. I got on one small farm road after another, over one rolling hill after another, where I pedaled, listened, and developed my relationship with Angel, encountering almost no traffic, perhaps a car an hour. I would see someone working the field, and we would exchange greetings, or a car would pass me, and we would wave to each other.

People in each part of the country have a way of waving and saying hello. In some places you’re supposed to lift the index finger above the handlebar or steering wheel and not look too interested. Other places require turning the wrist or nodding the head with eyes averted. Some places you just say “mornin’,” while other places add a “good.” You’re supposed to smile in parts of the country, but that might mean you’re peculiar in other parts. You can offend people by being friendly in some places.

The northern part of Nebraska requires a full-fledged wave, smile, and if you can, a hello. When I see another bicyclist in the city we don’t even nod our heads or lift the index finger. But if we meet on the open road we don’t just wave, we stop and talk, sometimes for a half hour or more, or we ride together if we’re going the same way. On country roads other bicyclists become part of a common experience, but in less populated areas each person—old or young, male or female—is also part of that experience. We share something, our human condition or our need to talk, like dogs share their dogness. When you don’t see many people, each human encounter becomes significant. We don’t have to share the same political beliefs or share a similar hobby or pinpoint a common idiosyncrasy through which to approach each other: being human is enough.

I bicycled south to the North Platte River and began pedaling on a much busier road that paralleled I-80. The rolling hills of northern Nebraska ended, and the slow, imperceptible upward cycle toward the Rockies began. The quiet farm roads turned into a well-traveled one. I saw pairs of bicyclists coming from the west. Two by two they made their way on the Bicentennial Trail across the country. They would stop across the road for a chat, gazing in amazement at my metal shopping baskets and running shoes and the string holding my handlebar bag. I, in turn, would look at their clean panniers and unwrinkled clothing. They would ask me embarrassing questions, such as how I camp, what I would do if it rained, why I’m traveling alone. Eventually I would just say that I am from the area making a casual one-day trip. I didn’t see any other lone bicyclist, or anyone with my type of equipment.

I didn’t feel the uphill grade of the road until I looked over at a sign announcing a dirt runway airport that gave an elevation of over 4000 feet. Then the road turned a sharp left and fed into I-80, giving me no choice but to take to the shoulder. A half mile later I got excited when I saw a billboard cowboy riding a bucking bronco and waving his hat next to the words: “Welcome to Wyoming, the Cowboy State.”

The thrill of coming to the fourth state of my trip made me begin cycling with tireless gusto, singing loudly to myself, and waving at drivers with unwarranted enthusiasm. I must have looked a little crazy. I suppose I was. I was so happy—joyous, ecstatic—about riding on an uninviting road with expressway litter, a dearth of scenery, and screaming trucks blasting wind that almost knocked me over.

In an hour an orange sun hung just above the interstate, and I rode uphill in front of my long, hazy shadow. Taking a turnoff before Cheyenne I found a place where the tall yellow grass

would hide me from the road. I carefully set Angel down, foolishly drank my remaining water, and pulled out my two light blankets from those ridiculous metal baskets. I laid down on a plastic tarp that I had used for house painting and used a T-shirt on top of my shoes for a pillow.

While the sun gave its last light I brought out my maps and studied them, something I would do night after night for many nights to come, studying all the possible routes, putting the map down and picking it up again to re-study and stare at the same place with a mind full of different possibilities. Hours and hours of reading maps, of feeling the accomplishment of passing this city and this county that day, of having gone a tenth, a quarter, two-thirds of the way to my destination. I drifted off to sleep with a proud feeling, my satisfaction keeping me oblivious to the intense mountain cold that came with the darkness. Dawn jolted me awake. The crop-destroying heat wave that had been pounding the Midwest all summer became a distant memory. I wrestled out of my tentless campsite and rode shivering to a truck stop. My legs could hardly turn the pedals, my fingers too numb to squeeze the brakes.

“We ain’t seen this kind of cold this time of year,” said the woman behind the counter who wore a peach-colored smock. “But don’t you fret, it’s going to heat up plenty soon.”

She wasn’t lying. When my toes thawed I started riding on a local road through Cheyenne. By the time I was on the other side of the city the sun became a blinding ball of heat; the cold air that came in the night vanished into the mountains, and my hard times began.

I stood straddling my bicycle looking at an isolated junction. The map I had picked up from the tourist office in Cheyenne told me I could either go straight back to the interstate or turn right to a secondary road that would take me part of the way through Wyoming, passing Medicine Bowl National Park. The small road looked longer, but I took it without hesitation and without asking anyone about it.

Hitting the Wyoming mountains after Cheyenne was like beginning to run by entering a marathon. I had trained in Chicago, riding my bicycle everywhere during every season, cycling twenty-five or fifty miles every day. But Chicago is sea level flat; to train on hills you have to go to a street that goes under a train tunnel and then climbs a two percent grade over an expressway. You have to pedal up, turn around when the traffic is clear, coast down, and again wait for the traffic, back and forth over the quarter-mile hill until you’re sick of it.

There’s nothing better for a hundred miles, but the hills that faced me made that overpass seem like walking up to the first floor of a skyscraper.

The road wound around the clay mountains, passing vistas of open land scattered with scrub brush and tumbleweed which sat on the surface of the hard earth and looked as if it was ready to blow away. A few gaunt herds of cattle grazed on the austere vegetation. By mid-morning the wind whipped around the hills, searching me out and hitting me in the face with its total ferocity. I emptied my water bottle in the first few miles, having to stop several times along the way to give my lungs a chance to grab the thin air.

Two hours after noon I couldn’t go any further. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the heat, the altitude, my parched throat, the wind, or the loneliness. Quiet roads, dry roads are wonderful cycling experiences. Desert trips are often the most rewarding. But what do you do in the middle of Wyoming on a deserted road when you can’t go farther, when you have to beat the pedals for every inch of road, where a pleasant trip turns into an agony? You have to continue.

I had no idea how many miles I had gone; the road seemed never to end—just wind and mountains and my baked throat. When the road turned into dirt, something my map didn’t show me, I clenched my teeth and loosened my toe straps and cursed Wyoming.

By late afternoon the drone of the wind quieted slightly, and I felt relieved to hear the roar of expressway trucks. I promised myself to never again leave the safety and convenience and smoothness of the paved road to be alone in the mountains. I stopped at a gas station at the edge of the expressway, drank two liters of foul-tasting water, and spent well over my three dollar a day budget on plastic food.

“Doesn’t the wind ever come out of the east?” I asked the attendant.

“When it does you don’t want to be here. Ain’t often that I see bicyclists, but when I do they come the other way. I don’t understand why you guys wouldn’t be afraid to ride on the expressway.”

“It’s not frightening. We have an entire lane. We have to be careful at turnoffs and avoid pieces of truck tires, dead animals, and beer bottles.”

Wind is the biggest obstacle to bicyclists. Energy is lost to friction between the wheels and the pavement, to friction in the moving parts, and to the bending of the frame. Except on dirt roads, friction is insignificant compared to the energy lost from the wind. It takes eight times as much energy to go against a ten mph wind as with it. If the wind is twenty mph it is like the difference between going up and down a steep hill. The constant noise in the ears, created by the wind, eventually wears the rider down, and the wind wouldn’t give up in Wyoming. I had to pedal in low gear to go downhill.

Bicycling during the coming days became a hell I couldn’t find a way out of. The wind required a reserve of energy, and when that reserve was exhausted, the wind sapped my will like a relentless demon, leaving my body empty, a distasteful shell void of rationality. Several times I quit, got off my bike and screamed, “Fuck you, you son-of-a-bitch place. Fuck this road, and fuck you truck.” I cursed Wyoming, I-80, life, and the stupid silly idea of traveling by bicycle.

No one heard: wasted obscenities lost to the wind. I under-stood ranters and ravers that roam city streets, those who had been treated unkindly by this harsh life, those who society had gratuitously thrown condemnation and humiliation like the wind had thrown dirt in my face, drowning me like a cigarette butt in a urinal while alternately drying the sweat from my forehead, leaving a layer of grimy salt. Sometimes physical aloneness brings happiness; sometimes it brings despair.

When an unchecked wind blows against a defenseless face, everything is wrong: the legs can’t pedal, the lungs don’t breathe, and the mind stops. Wyoming lasted 400 miles, through Laramie and Rawlins and Rock Springs. My body and mind matched the desolate mountain wilderness around me.

Curses escaped from both sides of my mouth, making my throat even drier. No matter how much my mind suggested it should, no matter how much I hoped it would, the wind never let up. What’s a few days of agony in a lifetime, a few days of riding from morning till dusk on the interstate without shade from the sun or shelter from the wind? What was it for?

By the time I arrived at the old railroad town of Evanston I was too tired to notice it was near the border of the state. Soon after another billboard announced the beginning of Utah, I stopped on top of a long hill and looked down, expecting more of the same.

Somewhere down that hill the wind seemed to quiet. I looked around and saw trees and plants. Green life. The desert experience was coming to an end. What excitement pioneers must have felt knowing that the specter of death had passed and life was beginning.

Signs warned trucks to use caution; songs came to my mouth and relief to my soul. I stopped and listened. Nothing. Four hundred miles of drone had ended. The Mormons declared that green Salt Lake Valley the land God gave them, and I remembered a Bret Harte comment

that Californians owe their existence to the Mormons for providing an oasis for those going west. I too made the crossing. Turning off the interstate I started cycling through the valley, feeling the sun behind me and seeing my solitary shadow pulling me, my mind filled with a deeper quiet, ready for more bicycling challenges.

I returned to Chicago and took other shorter bicycling trips around the Midwest until I felt ready to undertake the first around-the-world bicycling tour a year and a half later.

First Journey

Appalachian Back Roads

He couldn't have been over five feet two inches tall, standing at a slant, leaning to the side like Pisa's tower, greasy right hand holding his chin like a gnome. He eyed my bicycle up and down, front and back, appraising the idea of cross-country bicycling. I stood nearby taking a drink out of the water bottle he had filled for me, my eyes never leaving his tilted form. Without moving his feet he stretched his unevenly shaven face over my map and looked at it as if he had never seen the name of his town on a piece of paper before. His mouth crunched to the right, and sounds came out of it, like "gollie" or "oowie." He turned and looked up at me: "Boy, you ain't got a lick of sense."

His words caught me off guard, like hearing flamenco dancers actually shouting "ole" or Italians saying "mama mia." I thought he was putting me on.

"Don't you know enough to go places by car?" he added. "Bicycle's for kids."

A small flat-back truck drove into the station. The short man greeted the driver by his first name and walked away to fill the customer's gas tank with regular, leaving me in front of his disorganized garage, next to the water hose that fed the tire pan. I took the map of southeastern Ohio out of the map case and threw it in the garbage, then began examining the new West Virginia map.

"Look like we gettin' a heap more rain," said the attendant when he returned. It had stopped raining two hours earlier, but the road was still wet, and the pavement near the gas pumps had puddles deeper than people's shoes.

I looked up at the sky and agreed with him. He turned to Angel and put his hands on his hips. I could see he hadn't washed them after working in the garage on an old red pickup.

"Don't it get cold ridin' a bicycle in the rain? Well, at least you ain't gotta worry none 'bout water; you can just go down the road real fast with your mouth open." His body shook with laughter at his own humor, making me laugh watching him.

"Where you been on that gismo?" he asked, pointing to Angel.

"A week ago I rode from Chicago through Indiana and Kentucky and Ohio." His mouth opened but nothing came out. "I'm planning to take it around the world, riding east."

"They're crazy everywhere else. Ain't no place like America. Too scary to go to them strange places." He got interrupted by the sound of a car. Two of his buddies were driving down the road in a patched-up car with either an old muffler or one that someone had deliberately punched a hole in. The short attendant waved them in.

"You gotta get ahold of this guy," he said as if I came from a circus.

They swerved into the driveway at top speed, keeping the noisy engine running as they got out. The driver asked me where I was from, then opened the trunk and offered me a beer while he began talking about how cool it was that I came from the big city of Chicago, for they too went regularly into the cities, Parkersburg and Morgantown.

"Nothing doin' here in winter," he said. "Town packs up at six. We got to have us some fun."

"What kind of fun are you talkin' about?" I asked. "Winnet's the first town I hit since the sign on the river tellin' me I'm in West Virginia." I realized that I was speaking in their dialect.

"We go drivin' around, go to bars. A lot to do in the city."

"Tell me," I said. "I'm fixin' to head into the hills, then go over the Potomac and ride down Pennsylvania Avenue. Which is the best way to go?"

“You can’t go into the hills like that,” said the young driver. “Shucks, why’d you want to anyhow?”

They saw that I wouldn’t change my mind, then walked over and looked at my map. The two who had been in the car joined the attendant in an argument about the roads, their voices exceeding the noise of the running engine. Finally they came to a consensus.

“There ain’t no sense on going on K because it got too many hills and all the people on it are simple folk,” said the driver. “Best make tracks on forty-seven.”

County Road K was the one that struck my fancy when I looked at the map since it was a small winding road. Highway 47 looked like it might have a lot of traffic.

“K’s full of nothing’ but hicks,” the attendant added.

I thanked them, saying that I enjoyed their company, which I did. They told me to be cool. I began bicycling east of Highway 47, taking the turn-off to Route K a mile out of town. It turned out to be an ideal road for bicycling: smooth and hardly used, curving through unspoiled green country.

After my trip through Wyoming I began making trips to other states in order to train on mountains. Piece by piece I bought good equipment and always studied my route and read about the places where I would be cycling. A week after I finished my undergraduate degree, I felt ready for a world trip: from Chicago to the east coast and up to Boston, then up and down Europe, the Middle East, India, and East Asia.

Packing my bicycle became a precise science. Everything I carry has to justify its weight and size. I put aluminum racks over the front and rear wheels, attach large pannier saddlebags on the back and a roomy handlebar bag on the front where I load the heavy items—tools, replacement parts, camera equipment—as well as my important documents. In my rear panniers I stuff a minimum amount of clothing, a medical kit, vitamins and water purification pills, maps (these take a lot of space), a tube repair kit and two extra tubes, rain coat and plastic bags, bar soap and razor, a paring knife, spoon, and tin cup, nothing more to cook with. I bring a flashlight, a journal, and a fly swatter (flies and mosquitoes can make camping miserable), a compass, and I wear bicycling shoes without cleats so I can walk around. The panniers have room for a two day food supply.

Over the racks I tie a sleeping bag, tent, camp mattress, and spare tires. I often dry a piece of clothing over the sleeping bag while cycling. I wash it the night before, and next morning the sun and wind dry it quickly. Inside the handlebar I roll up an emergency \$50.

After taking the turnoff for Route K, I began feeling a spring drizzle, but the heavy rain that other people were talking about had not yet made its debut. I bicycled quietly contented in the drizzle until mid-afternoon when a group of four beer drinking boys in a fired-up purple Dodge drove up beside me, squeezing me to the side of the narrow road.

The fellow in the front passenger seat stuck his head half out the window and said, “Get off the fuckin’ road, boy.”

The others laughed in the style of the country, making he-haw noises between open-mouthed guttural sounds. The guy in the back seat close to me said through the open window: “Hey faggot,” and began unzipping his pants to show his vital organ.

“You suck dick, boy?” The others responded with guffaws.

The driver squeezed me closer to the edge of the road, dangerously close to the soft dirt. They raised their beer cans and howled again. I stopped.

“Ain’t you gonna offer me no fuckin’ beer,” I said caricaturing them.

“Hey, man.” said the driver as he jumped on the brake and brought the car to a stop. “He’s fuckin’ all right, man.” The fellow who called me a faggot reached into the cooler at his feet and handed me an iced Budweiser. His cheeks were pitted with acne. I put the can to my mouth and took a long draught.

“What the fuck do you guys do in this shit heap of a place?” I asked, putting them on the defensive.

A pig-eyed overgrown teenager in the backseat yelled out, “We head down to fuckin’ Charleston, get fuckin’ loaded and pick up some fuckin’ broads.”

They laughed. I joined in. The guy in the front seat described the wonderfully rowdy time they have in the big city, “shit,” “bitch,” and similar adjectives forming the basis of his dialogue.

They asked me where I was going. “D.C.,” I replied. “Bicycle’s the best way to go.”

They said, “Yeah, man,” then wished me a good one, man. The driver put the Dodge in gear and popped the clutch, burning rubber as he slithered on the wet road, out of sight and into silence. I emptied the rest of the beer in the weeds and was off again.

The next day involved a lot of changing gears, turning the levers down to go up hills, then slowly opening the gears as I gained downhill speed until my wheels outran the pedals. I lowered my head against the wind and the rain to gain downhill momentum for the upgrade which began at the bottom hill, then repeatedly downshifted up the hill until I had to stand, breathe deep, and push myself over the peak. Those mountains were tough to ride, the toughest area I had ridden in America.

The mountains were not tall—the tallest was not much over three thousand feet according to my map—but the roads were a constant up and down, making the overall altitude change tremendous. I would climb for two or three miles, reach the peak, go down the hill, have to climb another mile, go down again, then climb for three or four miles, and so on. Such roads drain a cyclist. It takes little effort to bicycle briskly over flats, but to take a bicycle loaded with camping equipment, clothes, tools, and a dozen other pieces of equipment, to pedal the rider’s weight plus seventy pounds over mountain after mountain, that requires many hours of training, building the muscles and expanding the lung and heart capacity.

The rain changed from a drizzle to a downpour, making the curvy road treacherous. Bicycling downhill in the rain, building up speed along the way until I was going over forty miles an hour, sometimes reaching fifty, the brakes became useless. Even without the extra momentum the weight of the equipment creates, stopping or slowing down would have been impossible. The wheels threw out a spray of water two feet above them, spraying water over my head; the rims became dangerously lubricated.

Once that day I was coasting downhill and let myself go too fast. I squeezed the brakes to slow for a curve and got no response. My knuckles turned white trying to slow the bicycle and make the turn so I wouldn’t throw myself off the mountain. Helplessly I watched the curve come closer, unable to do anything to slow down. I tucked my head and shoulders below the handlebar, stuck out my left knee, shifted my weight, and saw my wet front wheel come to the edge of the road, a millimeter this side of eternity. If I had gone over into the dense wild vegetation at the bottom of the hill, no one would ever have known. I would have been erased and forgotten.

By afternoon I was so drenched it no longer mattered if it continued to rain. After a few hours of riding in hard rain my raingear became useless; even the most breathable raincoat closes off the body, building moisture under it, especially while pedaling energetically. The road crossed a town, and I went into a supermarket, spending a long time inside to stay out of the rain,

trying in vain to dry off. Two long-haired men in their twenties and a woman with many strands of bead necklaces saw me and began a conversation.

“We got a house a spell down the road,” said a fellow with muscles bulging from his plaid long sleeve wool shirt. “Looks like you need a dry place for the night.”

I put my bicycle into the back of their four-wheel drive Travelall, and we went on a different road for twenty miles then turned to a small dirt road at the bottom of a hill. I never understood why people bought flashy four-wheel drives with oversize balloon tires that make a car stand three feet off the ground until I saw that road. The rain made it look like a battlefield, with pot holes that could have been made from cannon balls. Mike, the driver, put it in low gear and forced his way through deep mud, finally arriving at a clearing where two wood buildings stood: a run-down farmhouse, and a barn which had one wall caved in, the front sliding door off its rollers, and water pouring down the center onto a rusty tractor. A six-year-old boy ran out of the house to greet us. Mike picked him up and playfully threw him over his head.

“We like to have elbow room,” said Bob, a dark-haired man who wore a camouflage jacket with the sleeves cut off. “Ain’t nobody else around for a good bit.” He curved his hand over his mouth to make a horn and let out a loud scream to the mountains.

“We rent this place for \$65 a month,” Mike added. “It got 150 acres around it. An old lady, a widow, owns it. If anybody wants to go hunting or anything round here, they got to see us first.”

The house used to have a farm around it but now suffered from obvious neglect. A flat uncultivated area the size of a football field had been taken over by weeds. The house sat at the corner of the farm; lush green mountains surrounded it. Two mutt dogs, a half dozen chickens, and too many cats ran between the dilapidated barn and the horseless stable. The mountains began abruptly as soon as the flat space of the farm ended.

Mike’s wife came out of the house with a baby in her arms and casually said hi to me. She and Bob’s wife took groceries into the kitchen and began putting them away while preparing a meal. I went into the bathroom and changed out of my wet clothes, then joined the men who sat on a stained couch in the living room. Overflowing ashtrays were scattered around us. Beer cans with cigarette butts smashed on the lids lay on the floor. The couch, a couple of odd chairs, a coffee table, and television comprised the furniture. Bob started a fire from the wood near the fireplace.

“We’re rough-necks,” Mike said through the side of his mouth while lighting up a cigarette. I felt embarrassed that he called himself that; it sounded like calling himself a goon.

“We work oil rigs,” Bob said when he saw that I didn’t understand. “Least when they got work. Ain’t nobody hiring now: everybody layin’ off.” He went into the kitchen and came back with three beers, passing two to Mike and me.

“There’s oil here?” I asked.

“Nooo,” Mike replied. “Ain’t nothin’ here but coal, and that’s runnin’ out. We go to Ohio to work.”

“That’s a hell of a long way,” I said. “I cycled through the Ohio oil area a few days ago.”

“Six hours going and six hours coming, driving fast. We go for a week and come back on Friday night.”

“They pay us good cause they got plenty of accidents,” Bob said without an inflection in his voice, “twenty an hour.” He lit up a joint and passed it around. The six-year-old turned on the television and the radio, listening to both. The local news came on and competed with rock music. Like almost everyone I met in West Virginia, the disk jockey spoke in a local accent, but

the television local news, the national news that followed, and the other inane television programs that the child switched to, had people speaking the standard Midwest dialect.

I asked Mike, "Does my accent sound strange to you?"

"You talk like everyone else who's not from these here parts," said Mike. "Nothin' strange about that."

"Your boy listens to people on radio and television who speak like me. Yet he speaks like you, not like me."

"Course," responded Mike. "He's a West Virginian. He's always been speaking like his ma and pa."

"Maybe television ain't as important as folks say," added Bob.

We ate dinner on paper plates while sitting on the sofa and scattered chairs. I put more wood on the fire, oiled the child's tricycle chain, and we started a game of Monopoly which lasted past midnight. My hosts went upstairs to bed, leaving me the couch. I brushed off the crumbs and lay on my sleeping bag.

The next morning it drizzled quietly, and in the north I saw a break in the dark clouds. I took down my clothes which were hanging on a line in an unused room. The household went outside to see me off with a warm country good-bye, then Mike took me back to the blacktop in the four-wheel drive. I began making my way deeper into the mountains, climbing hill roads surrounded by run-down farms with junk lying around them, an antique collector's paradise. Mist covered the heavily wooded mountains, giving them an aura of mystery. Branches of large trees drooped over the road. I traveled through several small towns whose streets were deserted, stopping in a grocery store or gas station to dry my face and discuss with self-assured experts what the weather might be like tomorrow.

Toward the end of the day the drizzle stopped. I saw an old man sitting on his porch with a heavy hunting jacket and a black hat pulled low over his forehead, staring reflectively into space. His eyes met mine when I stopped in front of his wooden fence.

"Howdy," I said. "Mind if I pitch my tent in your front yard?"

With an expressionless face he said, "Sure, go ahead," turned around and walked into his house. When darkness fell a half hour later, he came out again with a full dinner on a tray: two heaping plates of potatoes and spinach and roast and pie, and a glass of lemonade.

"Thought you might be hungry," he said as his strong large hands placed the tray at the mouth of the tent. He crouched on his hams to be able to talk to me. "Lost the wife last year; the children work far away, and their's nobody to talk to 'cept at church on Wednesday and Sunday. Folks now don't have the time."

He got up and brought over two chairs from the porch. We sat on them in our jackets, talking and looking at the stars which began to appear wherever there was a break in the clouds.

"We been mightily lucky," he said. "People on the other side of the hill had it rough when coal weren't no good. We don't see them much. They speak so strange no one can hardly understand them." His reflective voice solicited trust. "This side of the mountain is farmland," he said; "here we don't have to mess with working for someone else."

"The young people don't seem interested in staying," I said.

"I suppose they're like you, want to see more. I don't fault them; I wanted to see more when I was their age too, but we never had the chance."

"So you live alone now?" I asked.

"Don't want to. People are made to talk. What's life about if you're alone? You got a wife?"

I shook my head.

“You’ll get one soon.”

There was a short silence. “I’ve been having a lot of rain all the way through the state.” I said. “Hope I’ll have a few days to dry off.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You got a lot of days to get wet and dry off. Getting wet is good. Let me teach you something, young man. I’ve been on God’s earth a good bit. I can tell that you’re a decent fellow looking to do good. I’ve seen so many people turn out to be my age and be unhappy. They missed something in life, and I don’t mean missed seeing something. They missed getting wet. They always looked for a way to keep out of the rain. Now, there ain’t no way to make them happy. You can give them anything, and they’d still be miserable.”

After this piece of advice he wished me a good night. I got into my dry tent and immediately went to sleep. The next morning the old man and I had a conversation about the countryside. He put a couple of apples in my panniers as I was taking down my tent and said that he would pray that I would have a safe trip around the world. It began drizzling as we shook hands. He returned to his chair for more reflection while I rode off.

Several hills later I pulled up under an empty wooden shelter on the side of the road that probably served as a fruit stand. A small red car was parked next to it, but I saw no one. I got off, unfastened my yellow rain suit, and began making a sandwich. The brush behind rustled, and I turned to see a middle-aged man dressed in black zipping up his suspended pants while walking to his car. He saw me, moved his head to the side, and spit out a wad of brown saliva.

He looked at my bicycle then turned his eyes to heaven, either to look at the rain clouds or to receive divine inspiration.

“Ain’t it the wrong day to be ridin’,” he said to begin a conversation.

“Sure enough,” I said, looking at his disheveled hair and unshaven gray whiskers. I realized that I, too, hadn’t shaved for two days.

“It’s a might better than yesterday,” I added.

“Reckon you right.” He looked closer at my bicycle, not focusing on anything. “Where do you say you ridin’ from?”

“Illinois.”

He paused. His pants barely reached the top of his wrinkled socks. “Last time I was in Illinois was in nineteen hundred and thirty-four.” He took a deep breath, as if winding up. “My pappy, bless his soul, took me when I was barely nine years old. Went by train. Took three days and two nights. Train broke down outside Muncie, Indiana, and we had to walk five miles. Man told my pappy it was cause the depression. Pappy tried to get work. Got to Illinois to see corn tasseling.”

“Ain’t changed much I don’t reckon,” I said, interrupting him.

“The only thing that changes is that things get worse. There’s more sin in the world today.” Another wad of tobacco was building in his mouth. “You too young to know the Great Depression, but that ain’t nothin’ like what’s comin’.”

“Why,” I said to his eyes set inside rays of wrinkles, “seems to me you a preacher.”

“Spent seventeen years in the pulpit tellin’ ‘em to turn away from their wicked ways. Preached Christ crucified all the way.”

He paused and looked at me for the first time. “I believe you an edacated man.”

I took off my glasses. “I’m always learning something new,” I said.

“But you edacated with the fear of God,” he said. “All a body got to do is read the Bible.” He spit another stream, wiped his mouth with his unbuttoned sleeve, and continued. “Yes, sir,

ain't nothin' worth readin' but the Bible. I done all my learnin' from the Bible. If it ain't writ' there, it wrong."

"Amen," I said, for I could tell he was on the brink of beginning a sermon. He tightened his lips, looked around, then turned to me as if he was telling me a secret. "You know the sixth seal has been broken?"

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to know or have him tell me.

"This here's the end time," I said, knowing that's been a safe answer for two thousand years.

"Yes sir," he said without listening to my response. "Soon the beast of the north be a fightin' the beast of the south. Them communists and them homosexuals will have their day before they tossed into the lake of fire. It's all writ' in the book. Soon the rich and the strong will hide in caves and among the rocks of these very mountains."

"Tell me, where shall we seek shelter?" I asked.

"I believe you a God-fearing young man. You know that the Anti-Christ is already loosed on the earth?" He didn't look at me or allow me to answer. "Homosexuals and communists will rule." He pronounced "communists" as J. Edgar Hoover had.

"Sin and corruption are gonna be everywhere. You know that Russia is the beast of the north and the Pope is the scarlet whore?" Again, he didn't wait for a response. I took another bite out of my sandwich. "The chosen will gather in hills, here and in other places, but before we do they gonna have their reign; you mark my word."

"I know your words are inspired," I said, offering him bread and cheese. He took a piece of cheese in one hand and bread in the other, but he didn't put them together and continued speaking.

"I preached 'em with the holy spirit seventeen years, yes sir. I give 'em the wrath of God, telling 'em about their sins, I did. They came back every week. They wanted it harder and stronger. I tell 'em about the time of the end and what the Word of God says. I tell 'em that when Albania became communist, they fulfilled the fifth seal. You know that?"

He looked at me for a response. "Ain't communism bringin' 'bout the end of the world?" I asked, thinking that would be the right thing to say.

"Communism and homosexuality. It says it in the Bible. When you can't tell a man from a woman. They ain't no difference 'tween communists and homosexuals. They all the same in the eye of God. They all perverted. It ain't what I say; it's writ' in the book. What do I know? I don't know nothin' from myself. I only know what the Bible says. I started working when I was eleven. My pappy was too poor. I work the mines for five years before I ever shaved. Had to support the family. I don't know nothing but what the Bible says." His mouth was getting ready for another salivation.

"I can tell that your inspiration didn't come easily," I said, unaware that I lost my fake dialect until after the words came out of my mouth. He didn't notice.

"I was pullin' coal out of mines before I even knew about the commies and the homos destroying God's world. Used to like workin' down there. It be cold or hot up here, but you go down and it always nice. Didn't get the callin' till I was twenty-nine. I'm alone now."

He spit again, and finally ate a piece of bread, almost un-aware of what he was doing. He thought for a minute, then looked me in the eye. "You know, I believe that God has called the two of us together, two believers, to share the good news of his return. You believe God works that way?"

"I believe what you say to be genuine." It was the first time that he listened to me.

“Here you come down the road all the way from Illinois, meeting me on this here small road with nothing’ around excepting trees. What could be more the hand of God than that?”

He took out a can of Skool and put a pinch in his mouth.

“Where’s your church?” I asked.

“Don’t preach no more, not for the last ten years.” He spit, then talked more about Daniel and Revelation. He was happy and satisfied to have an audience again. We exchanged goodbyes—he cautioned me to watch out for the subtleness of Satan—then he got in his car and drove off.

Not many miles farther, the mountains became hills, then rolling earth. A sign welcomed me to Virginia. I stopped in a store and asked for directions: “You got a mountain to cross before you get to Washington,” said the man behind the counter. “It’s pretty tough. I don’t know if you can make it on a bicycle.”

“Is it tougher than the mountains in West Virginia?”

“This isn’t anything like that. If you’ve been in West Virginia you’ll have no problem with this. Two hundred years ago we cut the state in half and gave the mountains to West Virginia. Only kept one or two. A lot of strange folks live over there, didn’t you think?”

“They make America interesting,” I said.

I packed my raincoat in the panniers, stopped at a coin operated laundry to dry my clothes, then with little effort climbed on a wide road over the last peak. After two days of postcard scenery, I bicycled into Washington’s traffic between the grand and pretentious buildings of the city. After three days I began the ride to Boston. From Boston I took my flight over the Atlantic.

A Jungle Rider Attacks Europe

I arrived in London in the morning, put my bicycle together at the airport, rode to the other side of the city, and headed north on a local road. I had wanted to travel across the country to the Lake District and take a ferry to Ireland. As it turned out, I never made it: the cold and damp discouraged me. Even when it didn't actually rain, it always threatened.

On the first evening I found myself near Cambridge. A woman directed me to an empty patch of grass surrounded by trees, and away from road noise, where I could pitch my tent and go to sleep. The next day I took small roads across the island toward Wales, riding from dawn until the sun touched the horizon. Twenty or thirty miles from Stratford-on-Avon I spotted a rugby field, thought it would be a good place to camp, and was about to stake my tent next to the clubhouse when I noticed that the door to the clubhouse had a padlock and latch held on the door with two loose screws, terrible security. Thinking that it would be nicer to sleep inside out of the cold and rain, I took out my screwdriver, and within fifteen seconds I was inside the clubhouse, which contained a bar, showers, and locker room. This happened in the days before I knew how to ask for accommodation.

After I was comfortably inside, I saw two teenagers around the field. I didn't bother to think much of them since I was tired from a full cycling day. A few minutes later a police car rushed up. I knew they had come for me, especially when the policemen hurried in and handcuffed me.

"Is this necessary?" I asked. "I've just come in for a night's sleep."

The policemen insisted, and I had to go with them in the back of the car. I asked about my bicycle, but they told me not to worry, and I didn't worry, not only because I had no choice, but because one of the policemen, a thin person in his early twenties, rolled up his trousers and began to ride Angel back to the station. I could see that he was proficient at riding bicycles, but he had trouble balancing mine since it was loaded with so much gear.

"Have you ever been in trouble before?" asked the middle-aged driver in a slow professional voice.

"Am I in trouble now?"

"You most certainly are. Breaking and entering, and I don't know what else."

"I'm sorry. I was only trying to get out of the rain."

"There's liquor in there."

"I was too tired to notice. I'm suffering from jet lag. I don't drink. The door was almost open. It looked empty inside."

He looked at me in the rearview mirror. "Well, you shouldn't have gone inside," he said excitedly, fatherly, shedding his policeman tone.

When we got to the station the driver and another officer in the station put me in a cell, but when they saw I was harmless and benign, they took me out and treated me civilly. Twenty minutes later we saw the young policeman come up on my bicycle, puffing from the three mile ride to the station. The sight gave us all a chuckle.

He sensed that we had become friendly, so he asked, "How do you pedal such a heavy thing?" The others made English jokes about him being out of shape.

The man in charge of the clubhouse lived nearby. He had gone to examine it and told them that nothing was touched except the latch. I told them my complete story, apologized to

them and the owner, and then we began a lively discussion about the differences between the U.S. and England. The young policeman was also interested in colloquial linguistics, and we struck up a conversation about the dissimilarity between American English and British English, giving many examples of our uncommon language. The officer who had driven me to the station talked about the differences between English and American law enforcement.

“You should be glad you’re here,” he said. “What would the cops have done to you in America?”

“Probably told me to go somewhere else.”

“Come on,” said another. “They’d have been ten times rougher, grabbed you-by the cuff, slapped you in jail and thrown away the key.”

He began naming several American television cop shows that I’ve never seen.

“Do you believe that stuff?”

No one knew what to say, as if they had been caught in their naiveté. I decided to delve further. “I’ve lived in the U.S. many years—in the big cities—and I’ve never seen a car chase or a gun fight. Most American cops are overweight and have boring jobs. They certainly wouldn’t have ridden my bicycle to the station.”

“Their jobs are probably more interesting than ours,” one said. “You’re the most excitement we’ve had here in months.”

Amid laughter they examined all my things, more out of curiosity than necessity—“sun block, you’ll not need that here.” They filled out a form, and wished me well, but by this time darkness had fallen, and I had nowhere to stay. If a moon was out, the rain clouds hid it. The policemen worried about my sleep more than I did. They didn’t want to be inhospitable and let me out alone in the middle of the night, so they tried to find me a place to stay.

“I can put up my tent in the dark,” I said.

“We won’t have you do that.”

“Can’t I stay in the cell?”

“It would take too much form filling. We close at night.”

Each of them wanted to help me personally, but I felt bad about causing them trouble and felt embarrassed to impose further, so they took me to a bed and breakfast house where I destroyed my budget and laid in too comfortable a bed contemplating my renegade American judgments as excess baggage that I’d brought with me.

American cities made me a jungle rider, fighting through traffic, untamed, a non-believer in politeness, a lawless athlete struggling against equally lawless drivers, curses loaded in my mouth, battling man-eating dogs and bullies behind the wheel. Too many Americans are obsessed with their cars, big and fast, bullying bicyclists with their steering wheels like transformed cowboys.

On my first bicycling trip outside the U.S. and Canada, it took me a few days to learn to stop at red lights and ride in the bicycle lane. Much of Europe has an excellent variety of bicycling roads. Riding in the Alps is a fairy tale experience. I saw men wearing short pants, wide suspenders, and knapsacks walking over breath-taking hills; I passed hillside resorts where men and women moved their ornate beer mugs to and fro in unison to the sound of fiddles and accordions. I saw castles until I was tired of seeing castles. I passed an assortment of loaded fruit trees, and when I stopped to pick fruit and people saw me, they usually called me over and gave me tomatoes or cucumbers. Once when I was resting in the shade, an Italian rushed out of his house and gave me handfuls of almonds and figs.

I crossed the English Channel to France, which holds the reputation as the cycling mecca: every distance bicyclist picks up a green Michelin map and explores the variegated country roads that pass one farm village after other, crossing between pear or cherry orchards, spans of golden wheat, varieties of beans, alfalfa, barley, rows of potatoes, carrots, or strawberries, acres of fat sunflowers, and hill after hill of grapes. From a good map you can find the quiet, well-surfaced roads, roads so narrow that when two small Renaults come face to face, one of them has to move off the pavement to allow the other to pass.

I was bicycling on one of those small quiet roads in the Loire Valley, singing at high volume, when I happened to see on the ground in front of me a round object reflecting the sun. I often see that, and it's usually a smashed bottle top, but as I got closer I saw that it was a one franc coin. I stopped, picked it up, and put it in the pocket on the back of my cycling jersey without interrupting my song. At that time the franc was worth about twenty-two cents. Thirty or forty yards later I saw another, and again I stopped and put another franc coin in my pocket.

The next coin was closer, about twenty yards past the last, and the fourth coin was still closer. One by one I added them to my bounty. By the time I came to the fifth coin, I was actively looking for a treasure chest of one franc pieces. I looked around to see if anyone was playing a joke on me. Not a soul. Every few yards I spotted another shiny coin. I got the knack of slowing down, bending all the way over, and reaching them without having to stop and take my foot out of the straps.

Most coins were on the right edge of the pavement, but several were closer to the center of the road, and these were nicked and scratched from being run over by cars. Considering the negligible number-of cars on the road, they must have been there a long time. Some coins were off the road surface in the weeds, and many of these I missed, but I ruled out the idea of going back for a closer look. I hadn't come to a foreign country to spend time looking for money on the street.

In a mile the pockets on my jersey and shorts were so heavy with metal that I was stuffing francs into my handlebar bag. This couldn't actually be happening; there must be some hitch. I looked around. Nothing but the sound of the wind over the open fields. The coins kept coming, each sparkling in the summer sunlight.

About two miles from the start of this silver trail, the number of franc pieces began thinning and finally ended. By that time I had over 150 one franc pieces on me. I felt guilty. I looked around again. Nothing. Guilt changed to a snicker. It must be heaven's gift. I rode off laughing to the nearby town where I handed a bunch of coins to the grocer to pay for a bag of celebration food: creamy cheeses, chocolate, and apricots. He felt the coins and asked me why some were damaged.

I started to tell him what happened. Excitement filled me, but my French failed, and I had to relate it to him mostly in sign language. He smiled and called over a couple of men wearing short brim caps who were talking in the center square. He showed them the coins. I enthusiastically showed them my full pockets. They loved the story. One fellow patted me on the back, and two others took me to the cafe, bought me a beer, and talked about the times long since past when they rode their bicycles to Nice and Lyon and Belgium.

"The money allows me to spend an extra week here," I said.

"Maybe they fell out of a car little by little," said one man. "A slow moving car."

"It's God's blessing," said another as he finished his beer. "God's blessing, our hospitality, and your good fortune."

I agreed.

I was too tired to ride the extra twenty miles to the small town near Stuttgart to meet the Lutheran pastor of the orphanage in Palestine where my father had grown up, so I stopped where I was and asked directions to the local youth hostel, an ornate edifice used as a private school most of the year. The town's name escaped my notice, but its charm and cleanliness typified southern Germany. A stone church with a single high steeple stood opposite a manicured square. Park benches placed next to neat circles of soil filled with symmetrical patterns of blooming flowers lined the smooth streets. There seemed to be no garbage and no graffiti. The lights and fountains worked; the houses were neatly painted; the cars shined. So clean and orderly was the cemetery that I took a picture of it: polished marble tombs and vaults topped with fresh flowers surrounded by square hedges and golf course grass carefully trimmed at the edges. Germans pay regular visits to the cemetery, I learned.

The woman who ran the hostel wouldn't let me enter the building with Angel, so I took off everything that could be taken off, removed the front wheel, and put my Kryptonite lock between the frame, the two wheels, and a post. The action was automatic and without thought; I do it every time I stop somewhere in the United States. People who don't do that lose their bicycles or their front wheels. The next morning, a bright Sunday, I woke to the sound of children playing in the yard and shared breakfast and stories with various international travelers staying at the hostel. When I was ready to leave, I took all my possessions and went downstairs to the statue-filled lobby and stepped through the carved wood doors. Boys and girls filled the yard. I looked to the side, and in a wave of embarrassment realized that dozens of shiny bicycles paralleled mine, lined up one after another on both sides, and none of them had a lock. My blue bicycle stood in the middle, the front wheel off and a fat lock holding it to a post, a lock that you'd need an acetylene torch to take off if you lost the key, a lock that would defy a hardened criminal.

A twelve-year-old blond kid in shorts ran toward me, stopped ten yards away, and yelled over in English. "No man is going to take what doesn't belong to him." Then he ran off playing while two of his small friends stared in disdain at me from across the yard.

I put my panniers on my bicycle as fast as possible and rode off.

Bicycle tourists flock to Western Europe not only because of their familiarity with the continent but because bicycles are a respectable form of sport and transportation. When the Tour de France comes around, for example, it causes mass hysteria. A bicycle on the road is treated as a legitimate vehicle. In most places I wouldn't have to fight through traffic, get cut off by turning cars, or listen to cars honking impatiently at me to get out of the way. When I found the less traveled European roads a cycling paradise unfolded for me.

I rode down to Rome and played tourist for several days. The chaotic Roman traffic was exciting riding, but the cobble streets in the old city can give a bicyclist a vigorous rattling. Impulsively, I decided to go to Assisi to be part of the 800th anniversary celebration of St. Francis' birth. Being on a bicycle granted me the freedom to hop on the saddle and leave anytime and go anywhere. Following my compass and taking the curvy main roads, I reached the suburbs of Rome, then I started asking people for directions. It took three hours to reach the country roads.

Mountains, which I learned to love riding, cover the middle of Italy. Thin roads wind back and forth like tossed strands of fettuccini on the sides of green mountains. Away from the industrial regions, hamlets of a half dozen 200-year-old stone houses are nestled among the

forests. Crossing a flat stretch between hills, five team racers riding in a straight line passed me, glancing at me condescendingly as they passed, like a Ferrari passing a Fiat. Their clothes fit like spray paint on their slim bodies. Their bicycles gleamed. They wore bright green and red jerseys, black shorts, and white socks, perfectly white, all identical. Their wheels turned precisely true, and they had exactly the right amount of oil on their chains. Their club name was written in script on the backs of their jerseys and on the front lip of their traditional white caps that had a colored stripe running down the center. One had shaved legs.

I had been cycling leisurely, but after they passed me I got on the handlebar drops, forced out a few hard strokes until I could change to a higher gear, then maintained a crisp pace. It's hard to catch up on your own; you have to apply a lot of energy, and you can only do that for a short while. Once I caught up with the racers, pedaling behind their broken wind was easier, although still requiring force to keep my heavy bicycle behind the pack. The last person saw my shadow and looked behind at my smiling face. He didn't know how to respond, so he shouted at the others, and they all turned and looked at me.

"Buon Giorno. Nice day to bicycle," I said in poor Italian, pretending that their pace was relaxed by not showing any strain in my voice.

Their eyes inspected me as they tried to make up their minds whether they should like me or not. First they looked at my bicycle and didn't recognize the Japanese make, but they saw all Italian moving parts, and that made them happy. Their eyes went up. They saw a standard pair of racing shorts, but that day I wore a tight T-shirt instead of a proper cycling jersey. But finally they saw a hat with the name of a bicycling club from a small city north of Genoa that someone gave me, and I could see that it won them over.

"Buon Giorno," they said. "Where are you going?"

"Assisi."

They liked that as well. A lot of pious Catholics were converging on Assisi for the festivities, and they must have assumed that I too was devout. Most young Italians do not practice their religion, and even though these racers may not have seen the inside of a church since being brought by their mothers for baptism, even though they probably philosophized against every religious tenet, they gained a lump-in-the-throat respect for me. One of them broke their tight formation, and they started riding in pairs, riding alongside to give me an easier time by breaking more wind.

Without slowing the pace we began to talk in a mixture of broken languages, about prices of bicycles in America, about Italian roads and mountains, about races, talking and keeping a training pace, changing over the lead positions periodically.

Cars had to wait until it was clear to pass, for we took half the road. Someone honked at us; one of the cyclists flipped his wrist at him. The group suddenly got excited and started pointing at another racing team going the opposite direction on the other side of the road. The other group looked over, and I could see that they were puzzled about me, wondering what I was doing training with a rival club. When both teams were even, everyone started shouting a series of harsh sounding words that I didn't understand and making obscene arm gestures that were too easy to understand, then my group broke out in spontaneous laughter, inviting me to laugh with them, and I understood that the two clubs had a heavy competition.

"They ride dirty," said one in I can't remember what language. Racers always make that comment about other clubs.

After ten or fifteen miles of bicycling at that pace we arrived in a modern town full of young people milling around the open central square. A bright movie house and fashionable

boutiques stood on all sides of the square. The expressions on the faces of my group completely changed as soon as we reached the square. No longer were they smiling or being friendly; instead, they put on stern, professional faces, riding like proud heroes, pretending not to notice everyone looking admiringly at them.

When we stopped my legs felt like two strips of rubber. I bought the group ice cream, shook hands with friends of theirs who came over to talk, and was soon ready to hit the road again. Taking my cue from the racers, I mounted my bicycle with dignity, sat high and looked straight ahead while riding out of the square without showing that my legs were still trembling from the brisk ride into town.

