

The Touring Test

by RCG Ward

For Irene, who suggested three women

Though the style here resembles a travel blog
this is actually a work of fiction.

None of it is true.

Much of it may be impossible.

Any resemblance to persons living or dead is unlikely,
and certainly unintended.

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As I write this, computer researchers are still trying to come up with a machine that will pass the Turing test, named for World War II code breaker Alan Turing, which is designed to identify a machine that answers questions as well as a human being can — a machine you can't distinguish at a distance from a person.

Some writers claim such a machine can never be built. Some say we already have examples in operation. A few point out we've always had people who can't be distinguished from machines. The Turing test isn't just about building computers. It's about discovering what in our words makes us human.

Chapter 1

Up the Hill

I come to the end of the valley. My left leg rests while the right handles most of the weight. It's early morning. I want to be cool where I'm going. Yesterday I was riding for eight hours. Even with supper, bed and breakfast I'm stiff.

I work with numbers. I've come a hundred and fifty kilometers up the river and the elevation is still just thirty-nine meters. Over the next six kilometers this first climb will add six hundred and ten meters. Then there'll be another river valley, only that river is smaller, with rapids. After thirty more kilometers there's another steady climb adding seven hundred vertical meters along a similar nine percent grade.

By then I'll be most of a mile up in the air. Once on top of that I'll go fifteen kilometers along a narrow valley to the park building. That road also goes up and down, adding another three hundred meters of climbing.

Beyond that I can ride fifty kilometers mostly downhill, though the route includes enough valleys to generate five hundred uphill meters to get back up over the mountains until finally at the end of the day. I'll be seven hundred meters above sea level. That's the plan.

During the day I might pass other riders or, more likely, they'll pass me. Adding all that climbing totals two vertical kilometers, well over a mile if it was straight up, and that sounds like a workout. It's the same as climbing

stairs in a twenty-story building thirty-five times. You could do that if you had all day, an eight hour day, four climbs an hour, rappelling down from the roof. If I was looking for excitement I should have stayed in the city and done exactly that, but I'm looking for peace.

The first step is to ride back up to the freeway. I wouldn't have to do this except that I wanted to sleep in a motel bed and now that means climbing back to the main highway. So far I've been sticking to back roads with local traffic but here there are no back roads and no towns. There's only one highway into the forest.

The forest is a temperate jungle, ferns and tangled undergrowth decaying in the constant rains. The road has been blasted into new rock within my lifetime. Erosion has not yet dulled its volcanic edge.

I try to find the right balance as I climb, not so slow that my feet speed up, not so fast that it becomes work and my endurance suffers. Near the top where my road joins the freeway it's so steep that fine tuning is irrelevant. It's all I can do to keep moving. That doesn't last long. Soon I'm on the freeway.

There's early traffic on the road already. That gives me a moment to rest before I enter the flow. Tractor trailers are heading back into the valley and camper trucks are leaving, but not too many. It's not a traffic jam. It's not like the city. In less than a minute I cross the highway and head for the hills.

On level pavement I can spin along at about twenty-five kilometers per hour. I climb at half speed and descend at double. Since more time is spent climbing than descending, the average speed drops back to a bit less than twenty. That's fine. It beats walking. The first bit is a roller coaster. If I get up to speed descending and then really spin the pedals at the start of the upgrade, gearing down in stages means I can power right over the top of the next hill.

If I don't quite get to the top, it's more like work. When I'm racing over a hill I really spin my feet. That means I've got to make it to the top because I'm going to need the following downslope to rest. You look at the hills as

you come to them and judge what's necessary. If you guess wrong, your body pays the price.

It takes an hour to get to the beginning of the big hill. At the side of the road there's a little rest stop. I fill the two water bottles on the bike and a third in the pack.

It's extra weight to carry up the hill. On the other hand, if your body runs out of water, you think you can do things you can't. You think you're superhuman. In the city that's a happy fantasy. In the middle of nowhere, it's dangerous.

The sun is out and even this early it feels hot. The highway cuts a wide swath through the trees. With the rocks reflecting the heat and the dark asphalt there'll be no trouble this afternoon frying eggs on the pavement, not that I cook that way. No, I'm simply trying not to be cooked.

There's no sense taking a run at this particular hill. The road rises slowly into the distance until it curves out of sight. Far beyond that where the road reappears briefly tiny cars can be seen climbing. There is a horizon but you tilt your head up to see it. It's a steady climb. Trucks come down it with their engine brakes on.

I might have persuaded a friend to ride along with me. I didn't have to do this alone. By visiting regularly I've managed to keep a good circle of friends. Some I see a couple of times a week, some once a month, some every few months. It's like any relationship. You have to work at it.

Finding and keeping friends has been one of my most important issues since childhood. We're a social species. For some of us family is enough, family is everything, but I dread having my whole life shaped by that accident of birth. Everything becomes a matter of faith. There's no choice.

That sounds like I don't care about my relatives, who are numerous and generally not too bad. All I'm trying to guard against is the pretence that birth can ever make us superior.

Those people I've stayed friendly with over the years are a mixed bunch.

Some are a little rough and I have to keep that in mind when I'm with them. Others are more successful. There I have to be careful to protect their reputation. I'd trust any of them with my life. I suppose I actually do that, in the routine of day-to-day life, in the same way I trust strangers, for example drivers who stay on their own side of the road.

Networking would be different. I'm not good at networking. I prefer friends for companionship rather than favours, like anyone who's spent a long time conspicuously alone.

Recently I've had the feeling I'm getting into a rut. My social life has turned into an easy routine, which is better than being lonely, but it's not enough. That's why right now I'm riding away.

Cars zip past me getting a good run at the hill but I don't worry about cars. I have a wide paved shoulder all to myself. Cars are about as likely to run into me as they are to veer off into a sign post. It's not utterly impossible but, on the balance of probabilities, I don't worry.

There was one cyclist up in the Yukon killed by a drunk driver who was convicted and jailed for two years. That wasn't the only cyclist hit by a car. When it happens it's terrible but I just don't think it's a reason to avoid cycling.

Drivers destroy each other far more often than they wipe out cyclists, both in total numbers and proportionately. Of course people in cars would have a better chance of surviving if they wore helmets.

That wouldn't be fashionable and it would scare other drivers. Cyclists on the other hand are expected to wear helmets. Some are pretty fancy. Marketing always responds to an opportunity.

Last time I checked there was about one chance in a thousand of encountering a drunk driver. That's the statistic when the police did their Christmas road blocks last year and charged forty-five out of 38,000 stopped. I'm prepared to risk those odds. It's not as likely as being hit by lightning. Of course it's surprising just how many people do get hit by lightning.

It doesn't look like there's much chance of lightning today. The sky is clear and the air is heavy. The loudest sound is the buzz of insects, with the occasional louder buzz of a passing car.

The impetus for this ride is to be back with the woman I love. I'm not a handsome guy. I'm no ladies' man. When I was younger I had as much chance of being struck by lightning as of being noticed. I imagine either would have felt the same.

I've tried to turn myself into a good bargain. I worked hard, saved my money. After work I went out with my friends. I was sociable. I practised chatting with their girlfriends. I tried to be a good listener. None of it mattered.

That's not entirely true. Being around people wore off some of my sharp edges. I became less angry, or at least I learned not to show anger. After I saw how sarcasm hurt people I learned to joke without attacking. I still have to be on guard against the clever cruel comment.

The grade isn't as steep as I'd imagined. At twelve kilometers an hour I climb easily enough to look around at the view. On my side the road was dynamited out of the mountain but down in the valley and up the other side it's still rain forest clinging to the slopes. There are no birds.

The highway gets steeper. I drop below ten. I spend less time gawking and more time concentrating on my muscles, trying to keep a steady pace, sensing tension early enough for a different muscle to take the load off and still keep the pedals turning.

After a few years my social visibility paid off. I had a couple of tentative relationships, not tentative for me, but in both cases they ended too soon. Next I spent most of a decade being a loyal friend to a wonderful woman who was never going to see me in romantic terms, but who eventually did find a man she could love, at which point she moved on.

I didn't know what to do. I kept going out with friends, being a sidekick, saving money, discussing vague ambitious plans. I figured I had to do

something to stand out so I went back to spending more time on my own being physically active — sound body, sound mind was the best theory I could come up with. It still is.

Cars are racing up the hill, but the day is hot enough and the grade is steep enough to be a challenge for recreational vehicles. Up ahead a lumbering white box that struggled past me earlier has stopped, steam pouring out. When I reach it the elderly couple has gotten out and the man is gingerly loosening the radiator cap which releases a last feeble puff of vapour.

They have one bottle of mineral water. I still have three bottles holding almost two litres. We let the engine cool. Every few minutes we squirt a couple of drops onto the top of the radiator. When the fizzing stops he starts the engine and I pour all my water in.

Up ahead at the summit there's a rest stop with running water. Right here, if we felt really ambitious, we could climb down the slope to the river and bring up water from there. I could carry it in a couple of the plastic bags I use to protect my gear from rain. The bags are bigger than the bottles. The slope isn't quite precipitous enough to demand ropes but it drops off so steeply you consider the possibility.

The engine is still running. So far there hasn't been any steam. The wife gets behind the wheel while the husband closes the hood. They thank me, throw the RV into gear and renew their run at the summit. I watch them crawl away and continue after them.

They offered me a ride but I said no. Having a driver isn't the point of my trip.

If I want a car I'll buy one. I've driven across the country both for pleasure and for pay. There was a time when I wondered if I'd be good at auto racing. I still enjoy watching it. Racing improves the breed. I've owned fast cars but traffic is a social concept and becoming more so all the time. When you buy something that's built to go a hundred and sixty kph it's no fun to cruise along at a hundred. Instead of being about the ride it's all about the

destination. You fire up the engine, sit behind the wheel and wait to get where you're going.

With the distances in this country you can wait quite a while. Through the windshield you watch the trees roll by. The towns don't exactly roll by because people here are too scattered. Reaching a settlement is a minor event. Even then only low fuel will justify a stop.

There's some skill to handling the hills and the corners but after your teens the challenge goes away. Driving to the limits of a good car's potential is less like sport and more like declaring war.

Near the top of the hill the grade increases. I'm now at walking speed. There's no point in trying to spin for power. It's like trudging up stairs. My shirt's out for better cooling. My helmet's off, hanging on the right handle bar. I've got a white ball cap I could pull out of the pack but the summit is in sight and I don't want to stop. There's water there. Cool water.

I hear the song in my head but no words come out. You should never work so hard that you can't carry on a conversation. I know that. I'm doing everything I can to stay within my abilities, to make this as easy as possible.

My legs are tired but the pedals still feel light. I push down for a few strokes, then pull up for a few more. I try to keep even pressure through perfect circles but after a few seconds it's back to pushing down. Pushing down is the low concentration default alternative. Trudge, trudge, trudge.

You've got to get the body involved. A second — a heartbeat — is a basic unit of time. Eighty-six thousand seconds in a day. If you're in very good shape, resting might be fifty beats a minute but riding I average well above a hundred which puts my daily total well over a hundred thousand heartbeats.

Does that mean, compared to classical time, scientific time, that my time is faster or slower? I count more events than my watch does. That sounds faster to me. The more I ride, the fitter I get, the slower my heart beats.

The second was defined by Rome. Egyptians based everything on six, the perfect number, and the moon had four phases. They liked those numbers so

they gave each day twenty-four hours. The Romans counted in tens. A century was a hundred soldiers. Egyptians however were the time experts so six times ten heartbeats was a minute. All those ancient people had good athletic heartbeats.

My will has taken over from my brain. It takes a minute to realize the hill is levelling out. In fact it's flat now and the turnoff to the lookout is on my left. Three cars are coming up behind me, the muscle car on the outside passing a pair of efficient econoboxes, all three pushing the limit. I'm coming off a curve. One of the little cars honks unnecessarily. There's room for all of us. I feel a slight welcome breeze as they speed past. No other cars are following. I power into the left lane and up onto the lookout.

At the water tap I dismount and put my head under the spray. I soak my shirt and put it back on. My legs are shaky so I stretch, touch my toes and sit to massage my calves, shaking them back and forth to loosen the long muscles.

Across the clear blue sky there are red and yellow flashes, like stars in the daytime. They're pretty. I breathe out as hard as I can to get the maximum reflex intake of air. The starts flash brighter, then slowly fade out to pinpoint dots in front of my eyes as I look around.

I need a drink. First, just a sip from the palm of my hand. After filling all the bottles I take a drink from the little one. The couple with the camper are parked nearby. I take a longer drink. My cap, soaked, is on my head. The red dots are fading.

"How are you feeling?" she says.

"Good. Wonderful." It's the woman from the over-heated camper. She has dark hair. Brilliant flowers decorate her blouse. Her slacks have a crisp crease. Her sandals, judging by the cut and weave, are souvenirs from a tropical vacation. She wears a gold bracelet, earrings and necklace. Her husband has the hood open. There's no steam.

"Thank you so much," she says. "Where are you going?"

Small talk, big question. “Vacationing. Going to visit friends.”

“You’ve got quite an idea of ‘vacationing’,” she smiles.

“I admit I look forward to going downhill.”

“Can we at least take you to the summit? It’s a hot day.”

“I like to be self-propelled. Don’t worry. I’ll take it easy.”

“Well, I admire your determination,” she says. “Thanks again.” She goes back to the camper. Her husband waves as they pull out.

Strangers ask what we won’t ask ourselves; but the real question is what I’m leaving. I’ve had it good. I’ve had it soft.

I was lucky enough to get a job and I’ve been thrifty. During a little more than a decade I put together some investments. The return goes into a chequing account that automatically pays my rent, phone and utilities. I didn’t leave any perishables in the fridge. If something happens to me and I never return, no one will know. I’ll live on forever as a phantom consumer.

Of course my friends in the city expect me back. Existence isn’t just about money. Who we know, and who knows us, is more important than how bills are paid.

It’s amazing how we’re all connected. Put a few million people together and I don’t care what you call it — a city, a country, a market, a movement — the ideas that rise to the top are amazing. I’m riding on metal developed for the space industry, with components mined, forged and manufactured internationally, then assembled locally by a shop selling just enough to pay the staff who work to play.

Car dealers control governments but I’ve never heard of a rich bike store owner. Hundreds of bikes have to be sold for each one to be cheap, yet every model has to stand out. Any bike could make this trip but the one I chose does it a little easier.

It’s not a pure touring bike. In fact it’s a mountain bike just long enough to take racks front and back. It won’t take big panniers on the back. My heels would hit them when I pedal. That’s okay because it keeps the weight down.

Fifteen kilograms is enough, maybe twenty right after stocking up on food.

It's tempting to buy the biggest panniers you can find but then you'll be tempted to fill them up with things you might need, heavy things you could hold off buying until you really do need them. Small panniers organize things. The Latin for baggage is *impedimenta*. I have barely enough character to overcome small impediments.

Drop bars are the main adaptation on this bike. With ninety pounds pressure in the tires, a bicycle has very little rolling resistance. Once your weight is moving, as Newton said, it tends to keep moving. Most of your work is overcoming the wind. The faster you go, the more air you have to push through. Cycling really makes you understand air as a fluid.

Correct tire pressure may be the most important way to make the job easier, but the time a trip takes is determined primarily by how fast you climb. Consider this example:

You ride 120 kilometers. You climb half at 15 kph and descend the other half at 60 kph. Your average speed is not $(15+60)/2=37.5$ kph. Here's why.

At 15 kph climbing takes 4 hours. Then you go 60 kilometers at 60 kph in one hour. The full 120 kilometers take five hours for an average speed of 24 kph, two-thirds of what you might guess.

Now imagine the climbing speed drops to 10 kph and, while you might not want to do this in real life with a full load on your bike, descending goes up a matching 50% to 90 kph. You climb for six hours and descend in 40 minutes. Your average now is $120/6.67=18$ kph.

Therefore the single biggest influence on average speed is your slowest speed — your climbing speed or speed into a head wind. For a cyclist, winds are the mountains of the flat lands. Drop bars let you slide through the wind.

Even with drop bars I ride upright most of the time. I like to gawk at the view. My shift levers are up on the bars along with assorted clutter: light mounts, bell, speedometer. The mountain bike frame lets me take side trips on trails, short of real rock hopping. It's versatile, though for where I am

right now it's neither as efficient nor as elegant as a custom touring bike.

There's always something better but mine has been good enough and better than most. It's not what you have, it's what you do with it. It's where you go.

I think about mechanical things when I don't want to think about people. So many people, and every one an individual. Where am I going? Away.

So. If I intend to avoid people, what about myself, being of the human persuasion? If I intend to settle down with a partner, if I'm making an epic journey to confirm that I have to keep my innate misanthropy in check. I have to trust the woman I love. I have to let myself be vulnerable.

All goals have built-in contradictions. No ambition is so simple it won't block another dream. When you think about all the ways even a single life can go, the weight is exhausting. Multiply that by the number of people, factor in their environment and add the areas where there are no people. I know there are simple ideas that encompass it all. The proof of their effectiveness is that they have lasted.

Everyone has a good philosophy, even those who don't know it. When there's a good question there's a useful answer.

The river runs beside the road. It ripples over the rocks. Where small trees have fallen in, natural dams form to redirect the water. It's not a big river. You could throw a rock across it underhand.

The river makes a pleasant sound. Its ripple reminds me of city traffic. The air is different. It lacks that thick chewy city quality. It feels thin, well, as air.

There are some people who've never spent twenty-four hours alone in their entire lives. When they leave their parents it's to move in with somebody else, and then they have children of their own and those children look after them until they die. A lot of people live like that. Now I've come to envy them.

Many other people wish someone was always there but things go wrong. Their partner leaves them and then they're alone. Their children don't visit when they're old and sick, or they have no children.

Then there are those who look forward to being alone. They like to walk along trails, or read, or watch television, or go on the internet. At first television is like a virtual family but the effect is illusory. You may become very involved with the people you see on television. You may care about them deeply. The problem comes when you expect them to care about you.

The internet is better at participating, but only with your statistical self. Your image there is as intangible as a cloud. Even more than with TV you become one of many, easily replaced.

Books also have that problem but to a lesser degree. There are more books than TV shows so, when you need company, often you can find a book that seems to be written just for you. The voice of the book is like a close family member talking to you, even though the author will never meet you, and wrote without knowing you exist.

For more of us television is that surrogate friend. The generalized life there aims exactly to describe our own personal life. Of course we have to adapt a bit. No living person is born directly into the scene on the screen.

Family isn't the only way we avoid solitude. Some people have real flesh-and-blood friends.

Credulity socializes us. Ignorance is democratic. If we should be fools, then we must learn to fool ourselves. The ancient Greeks had a penalty for crimes where execution was insufficient. Banishment. To be alone is worse than death.

As I said, I do know people. A spectrum. Some so accepting as to be my peers. Some smarter, and in their own way still my peers. I'll think if necessary, but not when I want to get along with people.

Underwear. That's what books come from.

Underwear became popular with the arrival of cheap cotton in the sixteenth century. For the first time hundreds of thousands of ordinary people wore underwear. When it got old and torn, ragpickers collected the linen. The fibre was used to make paper and, since the raw material was cheap, so were the

books. Books from underwear.

Sitting on a saddle all day I think about underwear. Some riders skip it and rely on their racing shorts but I like that extra layer. I agree that if there's a seam in the wrong place you might as well be wearing wasps, but with a good fit the extra layer is civilized. No one wants saddle sores.

Hikers take care of their feet. Bikers take care of their seat.

As an individual, self-reliant, you have to manage physical issues. As a member of society, part of the hive, you also need to cope with money. It's the way most of us communicate with each another. One way to finance travel is to loan money to large corporations who pay interest on it as reliably as if they were governments. Like governments, corporations issue bonds, along with other debt instruments like debentures and preferred shares. Corporate debt is the largest pool of borrowed money and generally pays the best rate. Get the top return on your savings.

If you have no moral qualms you might buy some of the corporations. Buy a bank. Most money is credit and most credit is electronic, produced by banks, though they like to pretend their credit is based on something solid.

Buy governments. Diversify: national, regional and local. Look at who produces the money in your wallet and render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. If you don't control money, money will control you. Money may be abstract but, as fantasies go, it's the most pervasive hallucination.

You should own one or two media shares, just to share in the glamour of showbiz. The American empire isn't over yet. It's sick, terminally ill, but greenbacks are still currency. Own some American companies, or companies that sell to that third most populous country in the world (after China and India), the United States. It's still the only rich big country. There was a time, the end of World War II, when the U.S. held half the wealth in the world.

That's how I cover my costs at the apartment back home. Save til you can give a lot of money to corporations and they'll give you a little back, but reliably, over and over again. It takes twelve years on average to double your

investment but that's not the point. I spend what comes in. I cover my costs that way. Meanwhile the capitalist empire is dying and I could lose it all, but I can live in the woods, even through the northern winter, if I have to.

How does the rest of that go? "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render unto God the things that are God's." People like to say they live in God's country. They mean their home is blessed by nature. It sounds like nature should be worth seeing. That's another reason I travel.

Here the trees cover all the land, some on slopes so steep that the top of one barely reaches the base of the next. On the level they grow so close that no light filters through their needles to the ground and undergrowth is sparse. With no undergrowth there are no small animals and, with no small animals, no large predators. The needle-covered floor stretches far, far away, traversed by an occasional porcupine.

The northern forest has been compared to a desert. The evergreen monoculture is about half as large as the Sahara, perhaps the extent of the Sahara when Egyptian civilization was young. The desert is dry and the trees are wet but both are unfriendly to animal life. You've got to have stamina to get from one stream to the next. You've got to be big: a deer or a moose or a wolf or a bear.

Riding along the level road in my big chain ring I feel like I'm wearing seven league boots. Each turn of the pedals is like a stag leaping. I have to lean forward so my helmet cuts through the air. Sixty per cent of cycling effort goes to cutting through wind resistance.

The road here is flat and straight for almost a kilometer. Then it curves up to the right. I pick up the cadence. I go down a cog. I feel the hill start to slow me. I go down a chain ring. Now that I've got the climbing rhythm I look ahead and see that the road continues up around the next corner. It could be another long one. It's time again for the granny gear.

Beginning riders, muscle heads in particular, pride themselves on pushing a big gear. That's why the little chain ring with the big cog is a granny gear.

Only their old granny would ever need it. They on the other hand are young and strong and laugh at pain. On this road they would laugh a lot.

Going through the woods you take care of your legs. You take care of your feet. Even if your feet blister and your knees buckle, stopping isn't an option. Then the soreness gets worse. It's surprising how fast little pains turn into disability. In the middle of a long traverse you break down and there's nothing there to eat you but bugs. It's not the bears you need to worry about; beware the insects. Granny knows that. It's how she managed to get so old.

My situation of course is nowhere near as dire. This is an enjoyable vacation and if I blow a knee I can hitch a rescue from a passing pickup. The only fatality would be my pride. I could race this climb and see just what my body can handle. I could test my limits. Or I could wait and test them after lunch.

Lunch. A good idea. I've been maintaining my water intake but the earlier disorientation from the heat made me forget food. I don't feel hungry but that's a bad sign in itself. The sun is getting high. I'm still strong, using a middle cog with the little chain ring, but I want to stay strong. The grade eases so I can climb with my middle ring. Up ahead there's a picnic table. How civilized.

One great thing about eating is the weight that comes out of the pannier.

Lunch today is roast beef sandwiches. Without refrigeration meat gets eaten first. I prefer a lot of protein. My indicator is hair growth. I assume waste protein goes to hair, since hair is entirely protein. Limp hair means no extra protein. I try to eat enough so I can prove I've wasted a little.

I can't be worrying too much when my big project is growing hair. My appetite is back with the second sandwich and it tastes great. I eat a banana and then I eat an apple. There's a tap by the table so I top up my water bottles. For a few minutes I sit listening to the river far below.

It's time to ride up to the high pass, 1,342 meters above sea level. A big forest fire fifty years ago cleared the slopes on the south side of the road. The

trees are starting to come back but it's still not a forest. For years beside the road there was a gallows with a giant cigarette in a noose, and a sign saying "The person who threw away this cigarette should also be hanged. Prevent forest fires." After a while someone decided the warning was overstated. Now there's just a wide spot in the road and a trash barrel.

I guess "death to litterbugs" faded out with the general ban on capital punishment. The burn stretches for miles. That cigarette did kill a lot of trees.

The real climb to the pass begins. I'm in the lowest gear I've got and all I want to do is keep a steady pace. Even so, this is the speed of a brisk walk on level ground, let alone ascending stairs. It's going to be a long slow push, most of an hour. It's mid-afternoon, the hottest part of the day. A couple of cars have overheated but this time I'm not stopping.

This cleft through the mountain range is named after a woman, a woman who's difficult to get to know. The strange thing is that I think of this name as belonging to someone small, like an elf or a pixie. It's not the name of the mountain. It's the name of the pass.

When I was a young teenager the only thing I noticed about women was how closely they matched an idealized appearance. Girls, I guess it was back then. Now women seem at least as diverse as men. Maybe more so.

I should get off and rest but then I'd have to start again. Looking back I see I'm closer to the top than to the bottom but I still have a long way to go. Looking down I see the creek tumbling alongside the road. Looking down I'm spared thinking about the distance to the top. I try to divide my body in two with the lower half working and the top sitting relaxed in the pelvic saddle like a rider on a horse. If the rider is balanced the horse climbs more easily. This horse trudges gamely along but it's weary.

Every minute or two I have to use the handlebars to pull up against the pedals to bring other muscles into play. I try not to. I want to keep my arms relaxed. It's important to take it easy, to keep something in reserve, but the hill keeps rising up in front of me and I have to keep shifting forces to find

the power to move.

It takes a lot of thought, not profound thought, just rapid decisions to move the work to whichever part of the body has recovered enough energy to carry the load for a few moments, all while balancing at slow speed. Meanwhile the creek goes tumbling down.

I'm at the summit. I keep riding over the crest and gear up to gain a little speed to cool down but I'm going to stop. I'm shaking and I need to eat something — an apple. Looking back I see a sign — “9% grade.” They warn the trucks going down. Coming up they let you figure it out.

I'm dizzy. I don't see imaginary fireworks but I am light-headed. I should sit down to recover. When I stop and lay the bike down the feeling shifts. Once my posture changes it's like I've shaken off the dizziness. I could sit down but I don't have to, so I don't. I shake my legs to see if the workout is generating a muscle cramp but that part of me seems fine. I pat my calves to see if they're tense. They're loose and the long muscles sway easily.

Bending over makes me dizzy again and I do sit, peering at the scenery beyond the hill crest I've just surmounted. I gaze intently because I don't want passing motorists to stop and ask if I'm okay. I am okay. I want to feel the heat. I've earned this revery.

Back in the office I didn't have the same sense of my body, the extent of my ability and my limits. I could be extreme, exploring closer to exhaustion, even death. Athletes do that, some of them, a few. They reach the point where the medics get called in. I don't want to do that here.

If I'm going to be rescued, any physical cause would be a disappointment. It's the limit not of my body but of my mind I mean to explore. I experience no hallucinations. Sounds are neither heightened nor diminished. My breathing is deep and regular. With my helmet off and all the sweat from the climb I feel pleasantly cool. I can reach the pannier from where I sit. I extract an apple and take a big bite.

Even though the apple is juicy I need a swig of water to wash it down. I

soak my cap and put it on. I want to feel chilled on this hot summer day. I wonder how far my nature can be controlled in the greater nature around me.

My science is good and I cool to a shiver, one powerful pulse bringing back all my strength and more. Now my senses are heightened. I feel and see and hear preternaturally. The last of the apple tastes rich, as if the calories are turning into energy instantly. I smell the forest, hoping that the clean scent will overwhelm me, but it doesn't. It smells good but it's not transcendent.

I guess I'm trying to push hard enough to go crazy. At the same time I fear insanity. I fear the consequences of insanity in the forest. I want a better life and, though I struggle to be a fool, like any fool I recognize that death can contradict me.

There may be pie in the sky when I die but if I take it easy, smart and slow, there'll be pie back here on earth, this very day, if I'm lucky, and haven't I been lucky so far?

It's time again to mount up. I coast at first but soon I gear up and put on some speed. By the time I climb again it's easy. It's nothing. Whatever the grade I have a gear to handle it and scenery to peruse while the legs do their job. I get a run at the last hill and, once over that, the park buildings are in sight.

I lean down on the bars in my best aerodynamic form shifting my arms to minimize how my sleeves ripple in the wind. With my right foot forward taking the weight I balance behind the saddle levelling my back in the air stream. I'm going 65 when I pass the sign saying 50. Even with my elbows bent and my chin on the handlebars I can see there's no radar trap. I hold my position til the speedometer drops to 35. When I do push the pedals I have to drop a couple of gears.

Keeping my speed up I turn right like a racer, knee pointing to the inside of the turn, weight back, outer foot down, the way a skier carves a turn.

The local speed limit is 30 but lugging freight I'm not speeding any more. I took it easy earlier and I'll take it easy now. It's not over til it's over and in

my larger scheme of things it's just starting. One hard part is over. I roll along, up to the park café.

Chapter 2

The First Plateau

When I lock up, everything comes off the bike: a pair of panniers on each shoulder, bedding and shelter under my left arm. My right hand is free to open doors. The restaurant cashier is respectful but not awed. She's seen this before. I dump my load at a table within sight of the food bar. It's time now to go for that pie.

Lots of coffee, lots of pie. My baggage tucks neatly under the table. I don't know why I worry about the clutter. If I was driving luggage would be in the trunk. I'd walk in with nothing more than the contents of my pockets. I have a lingering insecurity about being seen without a car. It doesn't matter that I could write a cheque at the first dealership I pass and head off with the best from the showroom. I could do that but I haven't.

Choosing to drive in the Interior is like wearing upscale casual clothing. It says you mean to fit in but are not to be trifled with. Depending on the car you might demonstrate your authority further afield. From their first marketing cars have been about status.

Status did exist before cars. The elite had a coach and four; the hoi polloi might hire a cab for special occasions. Eventually highways were built and then the automobile could go farther and faster than any horse. In cities horses were outlawed because of the organic pollution. City management knows now cars thicken the air like no population of horses ever could but

here, among small towns separated by trackless wilderness, air is still cheap and status is hard to come by.

I knew this would happen. I lived here long ago, not right here, but in the million square kilometers surrounding this spot. I know what's expected, which is one reason long ago I left. In fairness I will say these are unpredictable people. Call them weird; they'll laugh and prove you right. A moment later they'll put themselves in your place and the moment following that they've decided no sensible person can live the way you do. It's a social roller coaster.

It's an alien land that simulates global convention better than the greatest metropolis could ever pretend.

At least I came away with that impression and now, here I am back again, carbolading with a pile of freight I can barely lift, and an attitude. I've climbed a mountain. I'm pumped, full of every hormone my body can produce, and maybe, perhaps, just a little bit crazy. Because if there is anywhere safe to be crazy, this is it. If freedom exists, it's here.

Crazy. Safe. Freedom. They don't go together. I get more coffee and soup and a big ham sandwich. With all this coffee I'm a ricocheting pinball, not that I wasn't before. Is there any reason to be paranoid? I hunch over my panniers, scanning the other customers. Soon I feel less despised. What glances I draw are curious and kind. Daughters in family groups flirt carefully. I'm too old but it's flattering to be a practice target. I resist devouring the last of my sandwich. I get more coffee and more pie. I linger.

I'm confused now. I was prepared for hostility, even indifference, but I never imagined I might be foreign and exotic. Fortunately the families take their young women in tow one after another as my gargantuan appetite holds me in my seat. There's coffee to be drunk, dessert to be eaten.

Once the daughters are old enough to drive for their families, responsibility accompanies freedom. I see suddenly that if their freedom were absolute, they would be less open, just because of the risk to themselves. I recognize

family groups gathered for safety in caravans. The line of cars drives away.

I've eaten into the evening. It's time to haul the luggage to a campsite. No problem. The warden gives me a number. I get the prime site.

Now that I have my spot I make sure everything is secure on the bike and leave the campsite. It's still early. Everything is under control. I'll climb to the alpine meadows before dark.

I should ask to leave my gear back at the restaurant or with the warden. I've already hauled everything up two long hills. I don't need to take it up a third mountain and then bring it right back down. I've had enough of that kind of fun for one day.

The warden has a little tool shed. He locks up my tent, sleeping gear and spare clothes. I keep one pannier with my jacket and weather gear. Instead of my house on my back I have wings on my heels.

Although I'm still on pavement this isn't a highway any more. The road winds around, shadowed here and there by the trees. It climbs steadily. I start out going around the inside of the corners standing up. Soon I'm tracking around the outside of the curves, travelling further and reducing the grade while watching for cars. I see only one coming down and I hear it a long way off.

This is yet another long climb. The bike feels light as a feather with the load stored back at camp but I'm just as heavy as I ever was. Wherever there's a viewpoint I stop. I drink lots of water. Gradually the coffee wears off. I'm already high up. The scattered trees are getting shorter.

At the top I'm high enough to see across mountain ranges. They stand row on row, some over a hundred kilometers away, peaks crisply visible through the clear high air. The river I rode beside is deep in the valley, threading through the dense woods. Here I'm above the trees.

Summer is intense up here. Whatever heat there was in the valley rose up past here in the middle of the day and vanished into the upper atmosphere. Vitality is brief, so to compensate it must be riotous. I see sunset from the

meadows. Below the valley blackens and shadows climb slowly toward me. I descend into darkness like diving into ocean water. I've carried a generator and a big light as well as the usual little battery operated headlight. Now it pays off. Once I get moving, my light opens a path through the night, though I'm not really speeding. You get nervous enough in the dark in the forest without taking on extra risk. Still, I easily see as fast as I can ride and when I do approach a car it flashes high beams, not sure if I'm a motorcycle.

Back at camp I ride around til I find the warden. I lean the bike against a tree so I can set up the tent in the broad beam of the battery light. It takes ten minutes to be completely at home, including water boiling for tea.

It's barely ten o'clock and I'm still on city time. I have the battery light on hand if I need it. I don't need it. I drink my tea just at the outer fringe of the drivers' gas lanterns. I sit between them and the stars, facing the stars. The lanterns throw my shadow on the trees, and where the trees are lit they frame the brighter stars. Beyond the weak gas light the last glow from the sun outlines the mountain peaks and ridges. Then the mountains and the trees are equally bright. Then the gas is brighter than the night and the trees come closer and I finish my tea and nestle in my sleeping bag and sleep.

In summer night is late and dawn comes early. I pull the bag over my head. That's good for a couple more hours in bed. It's still early. At this elevation it's so cold I dress inside the sleeping bag. I check the cafeteria for breakfast but it's two hours til they open.

If there's one meal I take seriously it's breakfast. I cook oats and mix water with some powdered milk. After a leisurely forty-five minutes to cook and eat I pack in a few moments and I'm on the road. Traffic is light. Breakfast establishes a routine and I'm ready now to work. It's level and I eat up the road.

Morning chill dictates warm clothing but the layers come off fast. I ride with the helmet visor lowered for aerodynamics instead of raised for cooling. I'm well into the morning before I drop to the middle ring and from then on

the excitement of the descent eclipses the technique of the climb.

There are three steep ascents followed by a long curving drop past the copper mine site where I think I might hit 100 kph but with the turbulence from the panniers I top out at 85 no matter how finely I fit myself into the air. Even so the bike is pounding over the pavement and my sleeves are flapping madly with my elbows out to keep control.

On the sharp corner at the end of the hill I sit straight up to catch as much air as I can and hit the brakes and lean, and wait for the rear wheel to break away. The rear wheel should skid first. If you're going to lose it, you want the back to go first.

On a bicycle there's a natural tendency for the rear wheel to lose traction before the front does. Of course if you brake too hard on the front you can reverse that, and most of your stopping does come from the front brake. Ideally you balance front and back brakes so the back skids a moment earlier. On the conservative side, having the front skid while the rear proceeds efficiently ahead is very bad. It's not like a four wheel vehicle where you spin flat a couple of times and swear not to be so foolish next time. There's really no reason a two wheel bike spinning out should stay flat. You could easily crack a helmet.

Into a "Slow to 60" at 85 is not so outrageous. Lean, and just enough time to straighten, and lean the other way. If a motorcycle can straighten out the road, how much more a bicycle? The faster you're going at the bottom of the hill the further up you can coast, though you'd prefer not to die getting there, of course.

As it turns out I do bleed off some speed in the corners. A tuned road racer might preserve every gravitational dyne but carrying freight it's prudent to go down slower and climb more. It's not like I haven't done it before.

Yesterday going 30 was fast. Now it feels slow coming into town at 70. I'm on the move and the hard part is behind me. It's time for a burger and a beer.

The nearest hotel offers rooms only as an excuse for a beer parlour license. That's according to government policy. It means that small communities can provide rooms for rent, rooms that are easy to find, so it's a good policy. It doesn't look like this hotel will require a jacket and tie. Through the windows I see the place is a quarter full. I lock my bike to a street sign and pop off the packs. There's an empty table by the window overlooking my bike. Perfect.

I draw some looks as I totter in. The customers go back to their conversations. Window tables are popular so I have neighbours.

The waitress is cute. It's an unofficial job requirement. She asks where I've come from. I tell her and choose my lager. She tells the kitchen to start my burger and brings back my pint. Then she returns to patrolling the other tables. It's quiet so she has time to chat with the customers while picking up empties and taking orders.

Seeing her takes me back to junior high, being in love with a girl who was in none of my classes, who I almost never saw. There was a different classroom for each subject so I developed a complicated route from one to the next, up one unnecessary set of stairs, down another, trying to improve the odds of an anonymous encounter. even so I saw her every third week at best. She probably never knew I liked her. I'm sure I wasn't her only admirer.

The couple behind me is having an argument. He's telling her what to do and she's refusing to do it. The dialogue is from television, the phrases all learned there. Perhaps the talk is borrowed because they already know everything personal about each other, if such a thing is possible. More likely in a public place etiquette dictates ritualized verbal combat. It's nobody else's business why they disagree. The point is that they do, to the extent that they want an informal audience for their dispute. I'm obviously a stranger. People don't worry about being overheard by strangers.

In the higher grades I felt I was the object of a few tentative flirtations but those were strongly discouraged by the other girls. On top of the usual

sarcasm and shunning there was a physical disincentive. We weren't a school where girls slapped other girls. They fought with closed fists and when they kicked they kept kicking. I was nowhere near attractive enough to make that kind of punishment worthwhile.

In high school the girls policed each other, if "policed" is the right term. Their boyfriends didn't need to get involved. The prettiest girls, the ones who would have been most vulnerable, got connected to the toughest boyfriends. It was understood that those kids with rich or powerful parents were exceptions, although even they tried to look dangerous.

As I got older I simply waited in the school gym, swinging on the high bar, climbing the ropes and lifting weights until it was time for the school bus to arrive. That sounds like it would be good practice for prison, and in fact we often compared high school to prison, but I could never see the profit in actions that might get me jailed. There are easier ways to get money, and violence always seemed like such a trivial revenge.

Most sports, weight lifting included, have specialized techniques mixed in with the strength, speed and coordination. In time I was able to pick up as much as bigger heavier kids. They asked how I did it. Timing is the skill advantage with weights. One of the biggest walked with me to the bus while we talked.

That was enough to stop my peers from bullying me but by then all the girls had learned to stay away and that never changed. In our town new kids were rare. We'd all known each other since childhood. Status or the lack of it became established, inevitable.

Looking back I imagine the kids who made a career of attacking me probably got beaten up by their dads at home; not over me, just out of habit. In turn their dads got pushed around at work by the engineers and the managers. Those who pushed back got fired. That was very serious. Anyone who moved out back of beyond obviously needed the money, on top of which in my town the money for labour was some of the best you could get

anywhere in the country.

That was worth fighting for and, if the new supply of workers leaving school ever hoped to win an adult physical fight, they needed to practice on someone they had a good chance to beat, even if they had to join together to do it.

In front of me are five guys from a construction site. It's the best time of year to be working outside but they've found something to grumble about. It sounds like the usual undirected anger, each taking a turn to show he's being treated unfairly, or that the world is even worse than anyone else imagines. Then someone makes a joke to break the tension. That happens a couple of times.

My hamburger comes with potato salad. My pint is still half full. I settle down to eat. It's not as if the conversations around me are the only sound. Country music plays through the speakers at the corners of the ceiling. Outside cars pass at random intervals, not frequent enough to be called traffic.

One of the construction workers is telling a story. He gestures to make a point and knocks over his buddy's beer. Like mine it was half full. Now it's completely empty.

The waitress gets a cloth, no big rush, it's not like it's never happened before, and mops up. She brings a fresh pint for the victim but it's upset the drinking rhythm. They have to get back to work.

Conversation now focuses on the job. It sounds even worse than the world in general. They smoke fiercely. The one with the full beer is younger, a helper. The guy with the waving arms is trying to resume his story but one of the quiet ones, the straw boss, drains his glass. They all drink quickly now. The helper has to leave some of his pint. As they get up the crew extrovert tells another joke and they exit laughing. Even if it's a rough life, it's a pleasant day.

I've timed the burger to give myself an excuse for a second pint. The

couple is going into real detail about just how complicated relationships can be. I'd rather not think too deeply about that at this point in my journey. An old man sits alone in a corner. I'd rather not think too much about that either.

Outside it's a hot day in a sleepy town. These people have to stay here. My bike is waiting outside the window. It can take me down the road or into the hills. It can take me anywhere. But not yet.

Some other people are here. Age and dress would make me call them students but I know the area and can't think of an institution where they might be studying. One of the women has a guitar in its case. Students of life.

I don't want to think about that either. It's taking a lot of discipline not to think. Remember the child's game. If you're not thinking about a pink crocodile two seconds from now, I'll give you a dollar. What did I just say? Pink crocodile.

This isn't a neighbourhood for crocodiles, pink or otherwise. Right continent, wrong latitude. Now that I'm thinking about pink crocodiles, I'm entitled to a fresh start. I can take a drink and think about pink elephants. My reverie is pierced by the couple's conversation. They both have ideal telephone voices, high-pitched and piercing. I'd expect it from her but he speaks from the top of his chest, every word capable of cutting through the thickest static. It must be the emotion, the tension they both feel.

The difficulty I have with sarcasm is the absolute confidence, the presumption, of the speaker. The victim has overlooked something obvious, something any fool should know. The problem is that the more you do know, the less obvious everything becomes. The caustic suggestion may turn out to make sense, ironically to have enough accidental truth so that it boomerangs and mocks the speaker's misunderstanding. There's something desperately conservative about sarcasm.

More than once I've taken sarcastic suggestions as genuine and tried what seemed absurd and it's worked. That's not always the case or even usual, but it's enough of a possibility that I always overlook the anger in sarcasm to

examine the idea itself.

A sarcastic person uses the full power of his or her imagination, fueled by anger, to describe an impossibility. They say what they'd never do. It cuts down the competition. When they're wrong, that's an opportunity.

Of course you do want to be away from them when you take advantage of their ironic proposal. Nothing infuriates a person more than to see you benefit from what they grimly told you was impossible.

I used to listen for logic but now the emotion in speech is most of the content. When someone lectures me I try not to argue. If they're wrong, if I'm absolutely sure they're wrong, they can find out later when circumstance may make them more receptive. Error is self-correcting. Sooner or later consequences feed back. Bad feelings are not so balanced.

Recognizing emotion is the primary social skill. That's easy for me because I really have just one emotion: anger. The children I grew up with were the same, as far as I could see. We all like to think our anger is justified, and sets us apart from the great mass of merely annoyed people with low social pain thresholds.

Being older now, able to travel far away from danger, I look back and wish I could have had more empathy for my attackers. Instead of the other cheek I turned my back, and then I ran. With practice I learned to like to run. After I got a little older riding was faster, and now here I am.

I like to think those struggles for childhood power are behind me now, yet I still struggle to find a mate, if that's not too zoological. Adult life should no longer be the "hunt or be hunted" jungle of childhood, but I recall that business, not evolution, is where "survival of the fittest" originates. Only a madwoman would choose a mate who won't survive.

I shouldn't sink into self-pity. A lot of children — a lot of people — have it so much worse than I even did. Sure, I've known a few people hostile and indifferent enough to try to kill me, but my life has never been threatened by entire societies, and in parts of the world that's normal.

I was born into privilege. For millenia humans were hunted by large predators and hostile neighbours. When I was young I ended up back in that typical experience. I shouldn't let such a usual way of life feel like oppression.

The problem is that it's all so unromantic. When I'm barely surviving, how can I hope to protect someone else? That's why I've tried to get stronger. I may not want to fight back but I do want to resist forcefully enough to win, or at least to keep the enemy at bay long enough for my family to escape.

They've noticed my eavesdropping. When the place was crowded it didn't matter but now, with fewer people, paradoxically they have less privacy. I'm not really paying attention, hearing mood rather than content but, when I glance toward the bar, out of the corner of my eye I catch the man's glare.

This is normally when I would light a cigarette. I've learned to use smoking as a threat. It reminds me of the First World War, soldiers being issued cigarettes as they march to the trenches to die. That was where the modern machine-made cigarette became popular.

In the fifties smoking became a sign of high school defiance. Modern medical research confirms the old message. If you smoke, you're ready to die. Nothing to lose. It's a sincere threat.

On the other hand I still have a long way to go and when I work hard smoking makes me feel tired. I know several top bicycle racers have smoked, including one of the Race Across America winners, but it is the exception and I'm concerned about what my body tells me, not the statistical average.

Of course smoking is not the only warning signal in my arsenal. The simple fact I've ridden here says something about my strength and determination.

He wants me to leave. Of course he has no right to insist and the bar management would prefer I stay to buy more beer. He might try to force me, to put on a show for the woman he's with. He's a bit bigger than I am but he looks slow. I could move farther from them but I'm almost finished my pint

and I don't want another. He's about to speak to me. I look back at the street, ignoring him.

In the past I've found that placidly ignoring anger is one good way to make an enemy for life. Another alternative is to fight back: see whose threat display is more impressive, test how far each combatant might go and, if no one backs down, go ahead and fight physically. Even if you win you'll get hurt; but less than if you'd lost.

I'm an unlikely target for attack. First, I don't look like a fighter so there's not much glory in beating me. Secondly, you'd have to assume I'm tough with all this riding. Thirdly, most of a fist fight is in the legs. Off balance you can't hit hard. Finally, consider persistence and determination. If you attack me and don't win right away, which of us will wear down faster?

A crazy person might ignore all those things and fighting is crazy. You want to give your attacker a chance to think.

Of course none of this is my fight.

He's talking about me to her now. She's having none of it. As far as she's concerned he's changing the subject from the problems between them. As long as I don't hear the sound of his chair scraping back, I know he's still seated and I don't have to worry. Let him talk to her, about her.

I couldn't wait to get out of high school, to leave my little town for the big city; but I did wait. I graduated. University was not populated with like-minded people. After a couple of years I complained how hard it was to meet a woman. The unsympathetic reply was, first, that my experience proved university women had good judgement; but, on the other hand, if you couldn't get a date at university you couldn't get a date at all. That sounded like the unvarnished truth, short and simple.

And so I graduated, and went through graduate school, and it all felt meaningless, which was a popular attitude at the time. I had no feeling of accomplishment, only that I'd demonstrated endurance, and not much desire for the rewards my credentials could deliver. I must have been a real pain.

That's how it's been until recently. Learning you'll always be unattractive affects the way you see other people. You stop looking. From then on life is about other things.

You travel somewhere else and suddenly there's someone who doesn't know you're supposed to be ugly. Reflexively you pull back to see if she's joking, setting you up. But no. She's sincere, friendly and beautiful.

It's the first two that really matter. After all these years beautiful has become another species, alien, usually hostile. The aesthetic has been divorced from the relationship. I'd learned to survive by being polite, deferential, but in this one extraordinary encounter I felt confident, as if there was something valuable I could offer, knowledge or strength; and she saw me as an ally, someone who could help her in her own struggle with the world.

I take my time with the last of my drink. The waitress asks if I want another but it's time to ride. The other customers are back into their private conversations as I gather my packs. I write down a good tip on my charge card. I've enjoyed my lunch.

I cross the bridge out of town. So soon after lunch it's important to take it easy, get used again to the balance of saddle, bars and pedals. I don't work hard but the highway here is fairly flat and I am picking up speed. I pass an arid golf course with sand greens. I pass farm buildings on the outskirts of town.

Around the bluff the road descends gently. Around me all slopes are gentle. There are no big grades here on the plateau. A wide river flows peacefully beside me. There are ripples on the surface but it's because the water is shallow rather than rapid. On the opposite shore there's a broad gravel bank with driftwood from the spring runoff.

Traffic is light and I listen to the sound of the river. I wonder if there's anything intelligible in the pattern of the ripples. Some sounds are deep, some higher, like the range of a human voice. No. The river isn't talking to me.

Even after my ample lunch I'm feeling energetic and soon I'm striding

along with the seven league boot feel of the big chain ring. It's a good spot to keep a fast pace. Here it's open curving highway and the cars whip past.

A tractor trailer moves out to the opposite lane to pass me. At my speed the turbulence in his wake drags me along for a moment. Briefly I wish he'd passed closer to create a stronger acceleration, though passing me like he would a car is courteous, and safer, I'm sure.

There are cyclists' tales — in the style of urban legends — about being sucked under the wheels of a truck passing too closely but I've never heard of a documented case and I've been looking for one. I've never felt threatened by big trucks although, in spite of the temptation of catching their wake and surfing up to a higher speed, I admit that when I see one coming I hug the shoulder and concentrate on riding a straight line. If drivers are going to be courteous to me, the most responsible reply I can offer is to be predictable. On the highway no one likes surprises.

Ahead and in my mirror the road is clear. The river runs opposite my direction, creating the illusion of greater speed. I'm going fast enough to need a streamlined position but it's not like descending. I have to be far enough forward to deliver force to the pedals.

My legs are making a powerful down stroke and I'm using my ankles for a separate little push but I'm not keeping an even pressure all the way around the crank rotation. I'm covering ground but I'm working harder than I have to. I didn't choose the ideal lunch for racing. You don't have to be a sports dietitian to know that. I knew that.

A couple of drinks always makes me feel confident. That lasts until I have a couple more. I've been drinking from my water bottle because alcohol leads to dehydration but of course water also increases the rate of absorption of the alcohol.

Add the hamburger to the mix and it's time to ease off a bit. It's too bad because I've just reached a long straight stretch with signposts counting off each kilometer. I drop to thirty and check my watch. Two minutes later the

next post passes. The speedometer seems to be working. A Corvette whizzes past, thirty seconds from post to post, maybe less.

Beside me are broad well-kept meadows where cattle graze. Ahead the forest forms again, pines dotting dry hillsides. Down by the river the trees are thicker. I pass a campsite on a rocky outcrop.

Then the valley widens again. A groomed viewpoint begs for tourists, tourists with money, although no souvenirs are for sale at this particular spot. I stop to eat an apple. The paving is perfect here. Billboards and painted rocks advertise irresistible opportunities ahead.

I come down the hill into town fast enough that I have to slow to fifty to obey the municipal speed limit. The remnants of old mine buildings cling to the mountain side. It's been two hours since lunch. The only coffee shop is the former mine owner's converted colonial mansion. I feel grubby in the Victorian surroundings but the motherly waitress seems pleased to see me. I only intend to get a coffee but she promotes their peach pie and, after all, I am on vacation. It takes a lot of food to fuel this much riding.

This restaurant is a little busier than the bar was and the other diners seem more surprised by my cycle gear. I get the feeling I'm finally in car country. When I turn to gaze out the window they turn to look back at their plates but they seem almost guilty in their curiosity, rather than disapproving.

I expect disapproval. It's a big commitment to be part of the car culture, to build the necessary highways, to belong to an economy based on car manufacturing and to commit a substantial chunk of your wealth to your own personal vehicle. I would guess these people have cars because they need cars. They've always needed cars. Their parents needed cars. Their children will need cars. Why don't I need one?

Of course they know why. They know the environmental arguments but out here where the air smells sweet and people are few, such problems seem remote. These are self-reliant people from one-industry towns based on technology. These are the people who work with that technology, understand

it, and know that technology will solve environmental problems if those problems really become urgent. These people are not Luddites.

Of course neither am I. I know about alloys and mechanical engineering. I like to think my machine represents an advance over what they have, so why do I feel self-conscious? How do I know what they're thinking, really? Maybe they're looking at me because I got bugs in my teeth coming down that last hill.

I take a big mouthful of coffee and gingerly lick my teeth, keeping my mouth politely closed. If there were any bugs there, they're gone now. The waitress tops up my coffee.

I feel part of things now, less paranoid. To be fair, I expected to stand out. I could have gotten coffee at the gas station and drunk it beside the road if I didn't want to be with these people. I want to fit in. I want to travel in my own way while blending in, remaining invisible. Up to now that's how I've felt and nothing has really changed. The pie is good. I turn down a second coffee refill. Even though the bill isn't much, I put it on the credit card.

I carry very little money. I need to keep weight down on the bike. Coins are heavy. Paper money is bulky. Some places they don't take anything else but, as money goes, cash doesn't amount to much any more. I wish it did. For too many people, cash is all they'll ever have and little enough of that. When money does show up, the most desperate need is for status, even if it's gone in an hour.

That's what I've just paid for. I could make my own coffee.

Money isn't only about status. Because it's easy to count, some people prefer it as a way for valuing everything. Necessities are valued by simple arithmetic. Food returns a certain number of dollars to the farmer, fisher and rancher, a few more to the shipper and the rest to the merchant. We eaters compare prices and choose the lowest by subtraction.

Often prices offer percentage discounts. That's where multiplication comes in.

Larger costs like rent are still compared as simple sums. If you own your shelter you may have a mortgage and then the math gets more challenging. Again you're multiplying by a percentage to get financing costs, but compounding requires extra work. At that point the math is sufficiently complex for most homeowners to let specialists do the calculations.

But it doesn't end there. Food might cost a dollar or ten, or a hundred for a big load of groceries. Shelter in the city for a year costs thousands. Owning a home ranges from tens of thousands into the low millions. The values aren't changing by simple addition any more. Money becomes logarithmic.

Wealth is money counted using logarithms. A dollar is one, ten is two, a hundred is three and a million is seven. Log twelve would make you the richest person in the world. Log fourteen would handle all annual global transactions, and you still have some toes left to count on.

All that's left is to multiply by a varying percentage for exchange and inflation to determine money's real value. It's practically child's play: well, an older child who's made it into high school believing that what's taught there applies to the real world.

So. We add and subtract to decide how to buy our survival needs. The people we buy from multiply and divide to stay in business. The people who own those businesses use mathematics because arithmetic isn't quite enough. Money is numbers and to a mathematician there are only three interesting numbers: zero, one and infinity.

That's not good news for the person who's excited about making fifty thousand dollars in a year when the median taxable income is eighteen. You can't have half the working population unable to buy the necessities of life or else there'll be violent rebellion.

The idea is that everyone gets enough to survive and the rest of the money is spent on status. Some small things, like my coffee in the café, include a little premium charge for status. Some big things, like yachts costing more than any house, are entirely about status. Yachts can also be a business

expense and business ownership is about status.

Millionaires used to be rich but now we have cities where ordinary homes cost that much. The median worker will never compete, not without planning ahead several lifetimes. Of course you could be lucky—but where's the honour in that?

By the time my mental tirade has ended, I'm ready for the road. Coffee's a good energizer. Around the highway it's mountainous again, as you would expect in mining country. At first the road is gentle along the river valley but then there are some real roller coaster ups and downs. Going down I crouch in my most streamlined pose and manage to roll a third of the way up the next hill, but when I do gear down it's a rapid change through the cogs and I have half the hill left to climb in my bottom gear. Over the top it's the same screaming descent and a hard run at the hill to try to make it up a little further. Racing in big gears is tiring and now my low gear climb is noticeably slower.

At this summit I see a little downhill and then a big climb into the clouds. Going down all I want to do is rest. Without pedalling I coast down and up almost to a stop before gearing down and starting my slow trudge to the top. I keep my eyes down on the road, glancing up every fifty meters or so to pick a landmark for my next immediate goal. When I pass it I glance up again and quickly look back down, concentrating on how my muscles are working, watching out for any continuing strain that could foreshadow damage. As much as possible I keep pressure lined up along my bones. I try to be a cycling skeleton.

I maintain enough speed to keep my balance. Being nothing but bones, I might get chipped if I fall. I might shatter like porcelain. That's not likely. Bones are tough. If there's one part of me likely to be around in the remote future, it's my bones. Archaeologists will look at my fossilized skeleton and decipher every detail of my physical life. My teeth will show what I ate. My back will reveal my posture. My legs and arms will show how active I was.

I'd better be careful if I hope to make a good impression.

If, for example, I missed this next curve, if I pedalled in a daze straight over the edge of the cliff and plunged down through the trees, I'd end up in that ravine. If there was a heavy snow this next winter it might lead to a mud slide in the spring, covering me and the bike, preserving us for future antiquarians.

I don't miss the next curve. I'm going so slowly I probably could go over the edge and make a controlled descent of the cliff, although with the panniers it would be a challenge. Around the bend the sky opens up. I'm still not at the top but a big horizon is in sight. I won't have to get off and push. I don't need to look down any more.

I'm not stiffening up. I have enough reserves to raise my speed a couple of digits. I expected dizziness but it's not there. I am hot and my helmet's been off for most of the climb.

The grade is slackening. This is the hard part mentally where I know I've made it but I'm still not over the top. I try to keep my speed up, to ride right over a hill instead of relaxing on the summit. I want the breeze from my motion to cool me down.

It's a gentle descent this time, which is perfect. As soon as I feel the sweat on my brow start to chill I put my helmet back on. While I was climbing I dangled the helmet off my right handlebar. Now I pop it on with my right hand, switch hands on the bars and use my left hand to fiddle with the buckle til it clips in. I was never good at riding no hands but I have learned to fasten my helmet buckle with one hand without leaving the saddle.

I can coast now. I'm not going fast but at least I don't have to pedal. I can sit upright to let the travelling breeze cool my head and body. This is the least strenuous moment in cycling, without the work of a climb or the concentration of a steep descent. It's a chance to bring everything into balance, to try to ride with grace.

All sports have a level past which they become art. Football has been

called ballet. Cycling has a beat like music and passing through the fluid air requires a sculptural form. Moving through landscapes feels like photography. Most often though, riding is like dance.

When the average teenager thinks about making a fortune it's in sports or music or movies or TV. Stars make eight figure salaries. Even local success will draw six figures, one more than the average worker. I don't suppose someone earning fifteen thousand a year usually says, "I earn a five figure salary," but she does. Three figures more, and magazines would print her name in ten-best lists. She's over half way there, logarithmically. It doesn't sound like much, yet the common adjective for eight figure salaries is "sky high." It's sobering to think that the average artist or aspiring athlete remains in the four figure range, not quite what most people assume is crucial for survival.

Celebrity at the local level operates at a dramatic discount from the mass media published prices. Minor stardom must be its own reward, judging by the payment or rather lack of payment. If there's one industry that's really been automated, it's the entertainment industry.

I know that because my own relative financial freedom began by contributing to that automation. I worked as a technician earning a multiple of what the creative people got—not all of them, of course, but certainly the ones within a standard deviation from the median. When you're at the median, you're doing better than half your peers. That's not bad. It shouldn't be bad.

Unfortunately entertainment is well-suited to network delivery. You can harvest wheat and ship it on a train or you can take a performance and carry it on an electronic carrier wave for distribution at the speed of light. It might be expensive to blast up a few satellites but after that it's hard to beat the transportation economies of scale. Nothing moves faster than light. This is a big country and light crosses it in two hundredths of a second. Trains take days.

Maybe that's why I choose to travel at a fraction of the usual highway speed, though within the limits of a touring bicycle I still often try to go as fast as I can. I admire speed, but when anything slower than light is second rate, I need to bring things back into physical perspective. I have to understand with my body. I need to feel how I'm going.

The countryside is flat again, with long yellow grass growing sparsely on dry ground. There are only a few trees higher up. I go down another long hill with the road widened to accommodate a passing lane. I see fruit stands signalling the start of the next town.

I check the prices as I ride past. The orchards stretch away covering most of the valley bottom. It's peach season. I like peaches.

Prices are high at the start of the strip and go up again when I reach the commercial district. Back I go to one of the little stands where I can save a dime a pound. They still measure by pounds here. Metric is a new fangled imposition. These people don't like change.

And why should they? In the warm air any breeze is like a caress. While I was riding I didn't realize how I was sweating. Cooling now is voluptuous. I pick out a bag of peaches and a bag of cherries. There aren't many cherries. The season is ending. Juice here is pressed, not from a concentrate. I fill one of the water bottles with juice, and another glass to drink right now. I get a big smile when I pay.

Down the road I stop by the native friendship centre. Events are posted on the bulletin board by the front door. There's a soccer league and a dance on the week-end. I read a poster left over from the spring powwow. There's nothing today. I was just curious. I like the sound of the phrase, "friendship centre."

I turn left at the town's only traffic signal and climb up toward the next junction. The roadside cut is dry gravel and sand. Only the hardiest weeds survive down by the ditch where they get occasional rainwater. All the orchards are irrigated.

I turn south at the junction, staying close to the border. The road ahead is level, kilometer after kilometer. I build back up to my ground-eating pace. The fruit stand signs are definitely homemade. Folk art.

On it goes, the hypnotic rhythm of pedalling. Evening is coming and in the changing light I actually see purple hills. The air is still warm. Grasshoppers startle me when they jump in the roadside grass. I can hear crickets.

Beyond the orchards I face another climb. Cars here speed along expecting traffic to be light. According to the signs, speed limits are checked by aircraft. There are no planes in the sky. To compensate, drivers go as fast as aircraft. In fairness they give me room as they jet past.

The country here is so arid I pass a succession of dried out alkali lakes. Fences surround them. I wonder if there's some valuable mineral deposited on the lake bed by the evaporating water, or if the fences are to keep cattle away.

The ponds must fill when the snow pack melts, drain during the hot months, then sit dry and white at summer's end waiting for the coming snows.

The sun has gone behind the mountains and this time it's cooler climbing out of the valley. It's still early. Summer twilight lasts a long time at this latitude.

I must be getting used to pedalling up hills. This is a climb but I'm looking at the scenery and daydreaming. Earlier I would have felt heroic going up this hill. Now that would be melodramatic. I'm not pushing but the numbers show I still move at my usual uphill speed, slow though that is.

Trying to make friends has been the most important search of my life. It's like prospecting for diamonds without a shovel. I can understand social life as a fair trade but emotional empathy doesn't make the same kind of sense. I do understand that empathy is the foundation of enduring friendships. Empathy for me is rare; it can't be created, it has to be found; and, for me at least, it's hard to recognize.

I do better with more casual acquaintances, the kind where I'm neither hostile nor indifferent, helpful when asked, polite otherwise. But politeness too easily becomes a way of distancing myself from people. When I'm uncomfortable I wear politeness like armour.

That's how I pass through social gatherings the same way I'm passing through this town, in plain sight yet invisible, like a branch carried along on the stream, never dissolving into the flow.+

Over the years I've managed to find and keep a few friends, mainly outsiders like myself, along with a contrasting couple of outgoing empathetic others. Leadership can be like alienation that way. Look outside to keep succeeding, or surviving.

Being a hermit is logically tempting but it would be anathema to what remains of my emotions. In my experience the essence of life is humiliation and for that you need other people. Among those other people will be a few who want you for something other than a cheap joke. Those will become your friends.

In such a situation keeping friends becomes the most important thing in life. You'll sacrifice your career, your best ideas, your health to keep your friends; and you can't allow them to know what you're doing because if they let you do those sorts of things they really wouldn't be your friends, would they?

It's all a paradox like so much else. Systematically I account for my visits with them, my phone calls, gifts given and received, trying to hover in that space between clinging and remote. With a small number of people, countable on my fingers, I've managed to find that balance. My primary task for years has been to maintain those relationships.

Now instead I'm on my way to meet someone I love and she will have to come first. No one I know knows her. With them I've always been alone.

They don't know her and she doesn't know them. If I manage to make this work all that could change. It's not retain but I've made my decision. It's

time, I'm ready, eager, to give up everything to be with her.

I don't expect it to be easy. I've struggled all my life to forge a social life and now I'm prepared to abandon everyone I've ever known to overcome a deeper loneliness. Another paradox.

I do know that love can't be subordinate to friendship. You can't abandon your mate to go hang out with your buddies. You'd lose one and end up despised by at the others.

But there just has to be a way to have both. Humanity needs a social network beyond the family, otherwise we're all just a patchwork of feuding clans. Depth only comes from reaching out, particularly for those of us who have to reach so far.

On top of the hill is an astronomical observatory. The site must have been chosen for moistureless air, less optically dense than its humid counterpart. On the other hand there's a big telescope in Hawaii, right in the middle of the ocean. Maybe there's less traffic pollution there, blown away by the Pacific winds.

I also seem to recall the Hawaiian mountain is higher than the one I'm climbing now. There's no comparison in size between the two operations. This is just a little telescope on a little mountain.

The highway grade increases near the summit. I'm still taking it easy and the bike climbs on autopilot. I've made it and now through a notch in the plateau I can see a bit of the big lake ahead. I stop, get off, stretch and look at the view. There's another little alkali lake in the draw below me. I'll pass it tomorrow.

On my left the gravel road to the observatory is blocked by a gate. It's still early evening, but it is more pleasant setting up camp while there's daylight. The gate blocks cars. I can ride around it easily enough.

I follow the road up to the top. There's a tower that looks like it might be rigging to support the telescope tube and there's a foundation but someone's stolen the building.

The tower pointing skyward and the foundation pad create the effect of an open air Inca religious site. It's obviously unfinished, construction halted for whatever reason but, as it is, it could be a landing site for small visiting spacecraft. Nearby I find a sheltered hollow in case the wind comes up during the night. There's no sign of rain so I don't bother with the tent. I make camp.

Night falls and the heavens light up. Stars spin all around me. There's no moon. I hear occasional passing cars but the hill hides their headlights. I carry my little bike light but I don't turn it on as I walk back to the observatory site. My eyes have adjusted to the night so that the stars make it bright enough to see. A coyote howls and after a few moments I hear the answering yip and howl. They're a long way away.

The moon rises, just a sliver, not much brighter than the stars it passes. I can see planets above the distant mountains to the south. I sit for a long time picking out constellations, noticing how stars cluster in certain places and elsewhere the sky is almost empty, no matter how long I stare. There aren't many empty places. The sky is crowded.

As the night deepens the stars seem to come closer. It feels strange not to be moving. From time to time I stretch but miraculously there are no aches and pains from the day's ride. I lie back and look up through the tower for the time that one bright star takes to cross.

It's quiet. I hear distant mice. I don't move. I see what could be the shadow of an owl glide across the Milky Way and swoop. My breathing is quiet now. I'm starting to relax. I get up and walk back to camp, reckless of the sound of grass under my feet.