Balance

Life, one bicycle at a time.

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Contents

Moments

You ride a bike as you live, moment by moment.

You can't wish yourself forward and you can't undo what you've just done. The hill remains a hill until you are at the top and that skin you just lost to the road is not going to reattach itself.

You're here, the heart in its hummingbird state, the hands reach forward, pedals turn, nose to the air, wind in the face. Beyond that everything changes all the time, the view, the sensation, the bite of the tyres on the surface below. Where you are, what you want and the experience you are having - all of that shifts continually.

Every now and then it comes together in a moment that you can't forget. Mostly good, sometimes terrific, sometimes terrible.

Eleven hundred kilometres into the ride the separation of body and personality occurs. After three days riding with little sleep I am so fatigued I can either stop and be a person, or to continue riding and jettison the weight of having a defined sense of self. I want to finish this, it's only 300km more, so I leave my personality behind. For the moment I am a hybrid creature, pure will and sinew glued to rods and wheels, with one intention, one emotion, one dimension - London.

A moment later and I would have been on the ground, slashed with a piece of chain being scythed through the air by someone hanging out the back window of a car - someone who wanted to hurt me. A chance turn to the left had pulled me inches away from the impact. Panicking, I cut down the side street. I can hear the can accelerating around the block and then, at the very instant I need to get the hell out of there, my chain comes off the back wheel and I am left coasting towards the oncoming car with no way to avoid the thrashing I am about to get.

I can't possibly go any faster - my desiccated lungs scrape inside of my chest and my legs are red flares of pain - but at the end of the race there are five people in front of me and two hundred metres to the line. What you do then is what all sprinters do, you change to your biggest gear, you reach down into the

muscular core of your being and you ask your body to go again. You know when you cross the line you will be shattered into a thousand painful pieces but you hit the turbo anyway. And this once I get the timing perfect and a small tinny gold medal will be mine, the only one I will ever get.

Calling “Bike seven” into the radio, I bid for the job, then ride down to Lambton Quay to pick up a lithoplate that has to get to a printers on the other side of town. I am one of the zero-hour, forgettable people doing the job that the internet will take over in a few years - getting documents around town. I am the sneaker net of the design and legal economy, seeing first hand how logistics and marketing and law relate to paper and machines and roads and rain. I think I am free, but I am living the principle that time is money.

The bike is arrested in an instant beneath me. My arc though the air is started by the dead-stop of the front wheel, the body is still doing twenty miles per hour through the air. For a moment that seems both endless and too brief I am over and above the ground, the things beneath me that you I am about to hit are curious and distant, like a foreign landscape viewed from the plane. Snatched out of the air by gravity, the sharp reality of things imprinting themselves on my soft body starts; thumped, gouged, scraped and bashed, I slide and roll and jolt to a stop. A person reduced to a lump of weeping flesh, I have become the accident.

How could I want to be anywhere but France right now? Many thousands of miles from where I was born, riding an event many times older than I am, feeling every one of the thousand kilometres I have ridden so far, scraped raw by fatigue and sleep deprivation. Yet I am absurdly grateful for the experience and know that trying to separate the joy and the pain would be pointless. So I don’t bother trying to make sense of it, I just quietly sob to myself as I ride along, a cliche of a middle aged man slowly bobbing along through France, realising a dream I never knew I had.

Utter freedom on a bike with small wheels, big knobbly tyres and low gears. A landscape with hills and tracks. No rules about where you can and can’t ride - that’s years into the future. Riding a bike where no one has ridden before, riding a bike where the only limit is your skill and imagination. No one knows I am here. No one is waiting me. I haven’t seen anyone all day. I am on my own and alone with all that comes wrapped up in that, good and bad. It’s a gift and a curse to love this separation and sensation so much, but what can I do, it’s already baked into my bones.

The only accident I have in twenty years of commuting in London happens two days before I am due to go to France and make my comeback attempt on Paris-Brest-Paris. I land on the bonnet of the driver who thought their light was green but wasn't. I'm over fifty, I don't bounce as well as I used to. There's a moment, me lying on the bonnet holding my breath, when all the movement and chaos stops, where I wonder just how much pain is going to break over my body and how many pieces my bike will be in.

Instead of turning at the top lip of the skateboard ramp as I hurtle up it, this time I lift the wheels of my mountain bike into the air and pivot a half-turn, before I bring my bike straight back down the vertical side of the skate bowl. It's the smallest moment of flight and it is electric.

This the nicest mountain bike I have ever owned and I have just snapped the frame. I don't have the money to fix it and I don't care because the rest of my life is in such a state, I am so close to absolutely broken myself, that the bike, cycling itself, my great release and escape, has become part of the problem. I am in a lot of difficulty, too much to get out of by myself. I go to the doctor and snatch the prescription out of his hand. When you are feeling this bad you will try anything - no one can take a while lifetime of this. There are only two options; get better or get out.

I lock the car and head off on my touring bike, out into the unknown England, the England that an immigrant like me has no experience of, the glories and deprivations of Yorkshire. No, it's not a ride around the world, but sometimes a ride around your adopted country can tell you a huge amount about the register that your life will be lived in, the issues that are now yours, whether you want them or not.

Finally I can ride the bike well enough to ride on the road. I strike out on the hot Christmas day, along the quietest street in the smallest town in a tiny country many many miles away from anywhere else, and freewheel down a hill and around a corner. It is scarily good, intoxicating, both the sensation and the freedom. I have been given the gift of pure motion and self-determination wrapped into one magical instrument. I am seven and, though I don't know it yet, this is a life-defining moment.

Do you remember all your bikes - the moment they came into your life, the promises they held, the challenge they presented?

What about the first one? Was it something you wanted it or was it something someone thought you needed? A hand-me-down from a sibling? Were you a child when you got your first bike? Did you use your own money to buy it?

What did that bike mean to you and the people around you? Was it a toy, a means of transport, an embarrassment?

A gasp, a smile, a groan?

The Cowboy

I was seven.

Santa wheeled something into the bedroom, her long hair back-lit by the hall light. The thing she was wheeling made a soft ticking sound. She leaned it against the empty bed opposite mine and closed the door, taking the light with her.

Unless my mother was keeping a terrible secret, Santa was lying face-up on an icy slab, a paper ticket wrapped around the toe, 'Deceased'.

And did I care? I did not. This was much more important than the death of a childhood belief, this was My First Bike.

This was a big deal. In the early seventies in New Zealand you couldn't get a phone or an xbox or an ipad as a present, not even Lego. A bike was, in all ways, the biggest thing a child could get given for Christmas.

I didn't know what kind of bike it was or what colour it was, all I could see were faintest glints of chrome. Despite my desperation to see what it was I knew I couldn't turn on the light to look. It was past midnight so it was the morning of the 25th of December - but that was the kind reasoning that adults failed to appreciate. I tried to will the impressions of chrome into a solid presence, but it remained an idea of a bicycle, a sketch of desire that continually redrew itself in my dreams well after I fell asleep.

When I woke early in the morning there it was, in clear, glowing colour. Bright yellow. White seat with sparkles on it. Loads-a-chrome.

Bigger than life, demanding attention, begging to be ridden.

The Mustang.

I can still see it bright against the black and red chessboard of the bedspread on the spare bed in the morning light, still hear the ticking of the house as the wood warmed and expanded in the morning sun. I can still recall that peculiar stillness that surrounded my Grandparent's house, as if time had lost ambition years ago and was gazing fondly back on the forties.

My grandparents, June and Tom, lived in a house at the end of a dead end street on the outskirts of a small town in New Zealand. Which is to say they lived at

the quiet end of nowhere that was a long long way from any cities and the cities themselves a vast distance from anywhere else in the world. We were beyond the middle of nowhere and this was well before New Zealand came back to the world by pretending to be middle earth.

If you're a New Zealander you might know Taumaranui. Back in the day it was ambitious enough to have a museum, and was useful enough to have one of everything – a hospital, a police station, a rotary, a masonic lodge, an amateur theatre, a golf club, a high school, one restaurant, a real estate agents (Granddad) and a fabric and haberdashery shop (Grandma). It did have two tea and sandwich shops, only one of which my family patronised - the other was dismissed as trendy.

There are hundreds of towns like this in NZ and perhaps millions around the world, all made from the cloth of different cultures but cut to the same pattern. There must have been thousands and thousands of bikes given to children around the world that day, but I was one happy boy.

The bike was a Raleigh. A British bike named after an American wild horse. Aside from its pure chrome-yellow paint it had a single coaster brake and a white banana seat. A small image of a cowboy rounding up a horse with a lasso was stuck to the seat tube. I guess that was meant to be me, the free spirited cowboy taming the wild beast and submitting it to my will.

There was only one problem - I didn't know how to ride a bike. So instead of ranging free on the wild plains I spent the first hours of Christmas day falling off my new bike onto my Grandparent's back lawn.

Christmas in New Zealand is in summer, so it was scorching hot. The cut grass made my skin prickly with heat and the adults couldn't do much beyond slouch in easy chairs, laid low by the effort of having a traditional Christmas meal – lamb roast, turkey, plum pudding – in twenty five degree heat. Just one example of the lingering and absurd influence of Empire.

I have a single blurred photo of me on that day. I am riding The Mustang on the back lawn, barefoot, shirt open to the breeze, a big smile on my face. In the background my cousin Sonya feeds a lamb. The very lamb that grew into a sheep that, a good few years later, I would watch my granddad gut. That I remember well too, the animal's eyes clouding over, the blood springing from the red line on its neck and, once it had been strung up in front of the garage,

the steaming spill of hot intestines flowing down into the wheelbarrow when Grandad slid the knife down its belly.

It's like that, the countryside in NZ. Animals can be cute, briefly, for the kids, but then they had to grow up and be useful, by which I mean get sold or eaten. There was little room for beauty or sentiment for its own sake, everything had to have a degree of the great kiwi virtue - utility.

This is why bikes were for kids. A bicycle had no utility value. This was pre-oil crisis seventies, at a practical level there was simply no need to own a bicycle. More than that, bicycles were reminders of WWII and rationing, and before that the depression. No adult I knew owned or rode a bicycle. An adult on a bike was a failure, a unwelcome shade from the old days.

I wasn't feeling any of that, I was a kid having too much scary fun. How terrifying is before you push off on a bike, to know that this cannot work, to know that you will fall over and skin your knees. But after a while standing there you get brave and push off, flapping madly from side to side, then, as you speed up, things get easier until you are doing that thing that only birds get to do, you are soaring under your own power. Soon enough I had graduated from the back lawn to the driveway and then I was allowed to ride on the dead end bit of the road.

Finally I was allowed to ride out of sight, right to the end of Rangaroa Road, by myself and without supervision. No one else in the family had a bike, so there was no one to ride with me.

On a tiny dip in the middle of that road I discovered two of the abiding joys of cycling: going down a hill, and riding up the other side. It was the smallest of dips, maybe ten seconds of freewheeling and picking up speed before scraping the bottom of the parabola and having to really press the pedals to get up the other side.

The layout of The Mustang and its single gear made going up hill pretty difficult. You sat a long way back on that banana seat, the handlebars' backwards sweep pushed your hips way behind the axle. There was no way to get your weight forward on the bike other than awkwardly standing up and putting up with the handlebars bashing into your thighs.

I wasn't concerned with such nuances of design at the time. I repeated the dip and push endlessly until I was totally wrung out.

Best Christmas ever. The feeling of riding a bike became part of me in hours and has never left.

Over the next few days, while the family were at the house 'relaxing' in the way only families at Christmas can, I was gleefully punting my new bike endlessly up and down the the roads, feeling the difference between smooth tarmac and chip, bumping onto pavements, repeating corners again and again to explore inside the perfection of force that is a bicycle in motion. I was solely occupied with the sensation of being in the middle of this array of forces, striving to understand and control them.

Cycling had a particular meaning for children then. A child learning to ride a bike is getting an early taste of independence, being given a chance to power through life, to self-motivate. A bike was a stepping stone to that very adult world of applying will to a machine with an engine and have it obey. Which is to say a bike is a stepping stone to owning the real machine of cultural participation - the car.

My family was saturated with moving machines with engines in them. A cousin turned out to be a national level enduro rider, various uncles looked after jets for Air NZ, my father raced cars for fun before giving it up shortly after meeting mum. These days everyone is still into their motors - members of the family restore vintage cars, ride 1200cc motorbikes, work as mechanics, still look after jet engines, own motor homes. One uncle once said that the only good horse was one with two wheels and a motor. No one laughed, this was a matter of fact.

At ten I learned to ride a trail bike on my auntie's farm, up and down the lumpy back blocks, trying to keep up with my younger cousins. At thirteen Grandad gave me my first taste of driving a car, taking me out in his mustard yellow Austin Marina on the grassy Tuhua Domain, bumping around amongst the grazing sheep. At fourteen I was controlling skids on the gravel back roads of the King Country and splitting the four hour drive from Wellington to Taumaranui with Mum. Like every kiwi who grew up in the seventies and eighties in New Zealand I got my full drivers licence within a few months of turning fifteen. A rite of passage, a license to, ahem, party.

But my early exposure to the bicycle ruined me for four wheels. I got my first car at forty, given to me by friend who was going back to NZ from London. This coincided with becoming a parent and was very welcome, but before that I had no particular compulsion to own one.

Four wheels just seems too easy. To go faster you just push your foot down. Unless you have the luxury of race-days and a conscience not troubled by over-consumption and climate change, there doesn't seem much point beyond transport. While a road trip with friends or family is certainly fun, the experience of driving has always seemed shallow compared to riding.

I had been given a bike as a stepping stone to the responsibilities and engine-driven joys of adulthood and stolen unseen the real gift – the physical thrill of riding, the palpable sense of being unshackled, the moment by moment miracle of balance. While the cycling was meant to be about finding the adult inside the child then the opposite is also true - cycling lets us experience a simple joy inside our adult lives.

Each time I set out into the cold and drizzle for the morning commute through the dark heart of London's ancient, crumbling infrastructure and take my chances with drivers in their tin-tops and other, suicidally terrible, cyclists I wonder why I bother.

A hundred yards down the road and I come back to it - this is me, sitting on 25lbs of metal, invoking the forces of physics to conjure delight out of the mundane world. Between the first turn of the pedals over forty years ago on a baking hot day in Taumaranui and today's ride to work on a gloomy autumnal morning in London many things have changed, but that simple feeling of joy in balance, at pulling off this magic of riding a bike, is still there.

I can feel the sun on my thighs, hear the heavy chrome mudguards 'tink-tinking' as I ride, still feel my hands wide on the bars, the squishy white vinyl under my bum.

I can still feel myself becoming free.

The difficult second bicycle

If The Mustang was the cowboy bike, something that wanted to be ridden across a flat plain in endless pursuit of the American dream, my second bike wanted to be ridden to the village shop by the vicar's wife.

Truth was The Mustang was a terrible bike for the terrain we lived in. One back coaster brake and a single gear in a city where the hills come at you often and steep didn't work. We lived on a narrow twisting road halfway up a hill, there was nowhere that wasn't too much steep up, too much terrifying down, or too windy to be safely taken at any speed.

I rode The Mustang a lot on holiday in Taumaranui and not so much in Wellington. Still, when it was lifted over a fence by some local crook I cried. I cried a lot. A new bike was needed.

Something came up in the local paper. Three speeds, 26 inch wheels, two brakes. As new. A lot better for the terrain we lived in.

The only downside was it was a 'ladies' frame, one with a dropped crossbar.

I was eleven, in that phase of boyhood just before the hormones kicked in, where my parents rational arguments made sense. It was half the price of a new bike, and the ladies frame meant I had plenty of room to grow and it was otherwise perfect, right?

Right. So we bought it. One hundred whole dollars, cash.

It was another Raleigh and had the obligatory slathering of heavy chrome, but rather than screaming yellow this one was a soft baby blue. The seat was white again but this time had a quilted pattern embossed on top, like it was a cushion you would use to prop up your gran with. The tyres were beige. Not tan or taupe, beige.

It did have two brakes, but in the rain the steel rims meant the thing had the stopping distance of an ocean liner. Having three speeds was, however, a revelation on the hills. I can remember the first time I rode this bike up from the Miramar flats to the top of Seatoun Heights Road without getting off and pushing, a climb of around 80 metres height. This was A Major Achievement in my eyes.

I was just beginning to find my strength and soon after that I was regularly riding it up all the hills, even the brutally steep Camperdown Road, and from there right up the scary road that ended high above the harbour at the prison. I was the only one of my peers able to do this. Let's face it, I was the only one who cared.

Then the hormones kicked in. What Things Looked Like started to matter. No more hard black school shoes on the weekend, I wanted that latest innovation from England, trainers. I didn't want to wear shorts and long socks and hand-knitted jumpers anymore, I wanted corduroy trousers and Adidas tracksuit tops.

The bike that I really wanted, that every boy on the planet wanted, was not a ladies bike in baby blue with beige tyres. We all wanted a Chopper.

Some things that came from the mid-seventies have stood the test of time. Star Wars. Stephen King. Lego. The Chopper is not one of them. Despite its current iconic status it was a triumph of marketing and aspiration over functional design. With ape-hanger bars, stick-shift gears, a big back wheel and small front, Choppers took their design cues from motorbikes of the same name and were about as useful in the real world.

But the real world was changing. The seventies were about more than burnt orange flares, tinted plastic light shades and induction hobs. An instability threatened traditional roles. The gender gap fizzed with energy. Men wore open collars and tight trousers that clearly outlined their sexual promise, but they also wore their hair in waves and suffered knitted cardies, medallions and occasional caftans. Women wore trouser-suits and talked about this 'new' thing called feminism. Some mum's worked. A very few, like my Mum, worked full-time and had actual professional ambition.

The careful workers and savers of the sixties were being swallowed whole by a generation that wanted to (gasp) enjoy themselves. We're talking fondues and shag-pile conversation pits and swimming pools and colour TVs and Queen's *A Night at the Opera* on a record player that had more than one speaker. These things were not Useful or Handy - they were Colourful, they were Indulgent.

Now that I live in the UK I can see how the Chopper came into being. Nothing better to ride the 300 yard triangle between shop, school and home, where mostly you would just sit on it drinking lemonade and encouraging your friends

to go shoplifting. It was a city-kid poser bike, a Triumph Stag for ten year olds, more about social signalling than riding.

My parents thought The Chopper was dangerous. Whether that referred to its ride qualities or its cultural significance it is hard to say, but at the time I had about as much chance at a Chopper as I did of getting my own TV. It didn't take long for my engineering minded father to point out how lethal a Chopper would be in the hills of Wellington. I complained, but even I could see he was right.

Wellington, on a good day, is unbeatable. Set on a natural harbour the sea is a deep blue-green, the rugged coastline is an endless natural kaleidoscope of water, rock, flax and light. On a good day the sun beats down on you, a gentle breeze cools you off and you can spend hours pottering in rock pools, or swimming off white sand beaches that are, by international standards, deserted.

But those days are rare. Sitting on edge of the turbulent Cook Strait there is nothing between the harbour and the roiling mass of the Southern Ocean with Antarctica fifteen hundred miles beyond. In a southerly buster the storm comes straight up off the ice. You can see it coming towards the south coast, a thick finger of black cloud swallowing all colour before it. First the wind comes, then a few huge drops of rain range out of the sky like pigeon droppings. Minutes later the rain blows horizontally across the ground - it doesn't fall so much as attack.

When the wind ran over 50 knots our wooden house would shake and the carpet in the lounge would lift. At this point, reluctantly, my father would concede it was a little too windy to go sailing. The place to be in weather like this is inside, listening to the wind being sliced into howling ribbons by powerlines and watching rubbish bins blow down the street as rain scattered over the windward windows like shotgun blasts.

The worst place to be is on a bicycle that puts you in a position where you function as a sail.

Dad was right. The kids I knew who had Choppers spent all their time pushing them against the wind and up hills , then riding back down in a state of giddy terror. That tiny front wheel, ape bars and all the weight on the back meant they were very light on the front - a touch of damp on the road and you'd lose the front wheel and get a whack on the chin from those ape bars before grazing your knees on the tarmac.

I wanted a bike that looked cool but was practically useless, I owned a bike that was practical and appropriate and hated it with a passion. It was clear that my parents would not buy me a new bike until I needed one. So with the ruthless logic of a teen who cared desperately what others' thought, I decided I would force my parents to buy me a new bike by wrecking my current one and that is what I set out to do.

They didn't notice. They had other things on their mind. About the same time I got this bike we moved house. From a two-bed in Miramar to a three-bed high on top of the bony ridge of Seatoun Heights Road. Moving up, in all ways. I didn't know it at the time but this was something of an attempt by my mother to save the marriage. To get something to change. Anything.

An age-old story this. Marriages that start well but then get stuck on the rocks. Expectations not met. Changes not made. Emotions that can't be described let alone expressed and resolved. Patterns of behaviour and disappointment emerging, clashing, creating an impasse.

It was my mother's second marriage. She left my first father, tucking me under her arm at eighteen months old, taking me down to Wellington to make a fresh start. This new house was an effort at a fresh start inside that second marriage. To say it didn't work would be an understatement.

The marriage started to simmer with toxicity in the radioactive prelude to the mutually assured destruction that would soon follow. It was all incomprehensible to me and, in reaction, I entered a dark period. Shoplifting, putting crackers in people's letterboxes, stealing my parents' cigarettes and coughing up stolen chocolate in dirty patches of trees. Not exactly the fledgling crimes of a serial killer, but worrying none the less.

Divorce is horrible. The bloody he-said she-said tallying of blame and fault. People trying to offset the intolerable pain of marriage failure with the impossible task of keeping everyone happy. It's hard to watch as an adult but much harder to be a child in the midst of it. As a child of two divorces I know it can be a release for the parents but it is a potential killer for the children. It's a collision of ignorance, confusion and illogical self-blame that kills your innocence and generates a dense strata of anger in your being.

So yeah, I really felt like wrecking something.

I stripped my bike of anything 'girly'. Mudguards, chain guard, the white seat, the white handlebar grips all went in the bin. It was still a ladies bike, but the significant hacks made it just about acceptable in company.

My crew at the the time was a troublesome trio of myself, my English mate Neil and 'Woody', a fledgling heavy-metal drummer. Neil was the local cool kid, a year older than me. I got to hang around with him because I was both entertaining and easily led - an amusing victim in his schemes.

The three of us would take our bikes and ride loops around the neighbourhood, or play football to the point of collapse on the vast expanse of Miramar Park. We'd kill time building small jumps out of scrap plywood and bricks or practice wheelies. I remember taking a brush and some red enamel paint from my house and slowly painting the name of our gang - Hazard - on the broken tarmac of a piece of junk space. Tagging. Oh yes, we were cool.

Woody introduced me to Pink Floyd, Slade and Motorhead, Neil to his father's pornography, but soon they were gone to the local boy's secondary school, leaving me behind in Intermediate school, no doubt much to my parents relief. I calmed down a bit without Neil and Woody pulling me off the straight and narrow. The dust of the divorce had settled and, after a bruising period of negotiation, somehow my Stepfather ended up with custody, my Mother moving a couple of miles down the road.

So there I was, trying to cope by riding - literally - round and round the house. I spent hundreds and hundreds of hours doing this, making up little obstacle courses and endlessly repeating them, trying to make less mistakes each time and not put my foot down. I would practice balancing the bike, stationary, counting out my previous record, unconsciously expressing the urge to exert control where I was able.

Did I mention I am an only child?

And really, what else was there to do? Two channels of black and white TV. No computers. No children's literature to speak of. I had inhaled the small local library, and had already read through my parents bookshelf, a combination of Robert Ludlum thrillers and books on UFOs and new age spiritualism.

It was a difficult couple of years, and the hated ladies bike came through it with me. I might have loathed it but the three speeds still worked despite everything

I could throw at it, the wheels remained round and true no matter how many curbs I bumped up.

But finally the endless wheelies had exposed the weakness of the ladies frame structure and, hooray, the frame bent half-way up the seat tube, a structural collapse from which there was no way back.

It was, undeniably, time for a new bike.

America calling

This time I was determined to get a bike I wanted. And it was not going to be a Chopper. I had moved beyond that now, Choppers were kid's bikes. I wanted something that was properly cool, something new and exciting. I had stopped looking to England, at Raleighs, at Vicar's bikes and safety above excitement. I was looking in a completely different direction, to the other side of the Atlantic.

Mum had been to America on a Rotary exchange in the 60s but she was unusual. Most Kiwis hadn't travelled at all. In the late seventies we were still a nation of flightless birds, yet to become the intrepid globe-trotters wrapped in merino and fleece that the world knows now. In those days it was three hours on a plane and a months salary to get to the nearest country, Australia. Air New Zealand didn't even fly to London until the mid eighties. The four-week boat trip to the Europe was still a viable option.

Since the Second World War New Zealand had been caught between worlds. Some families were listening to Brahms and reading Tennyson, and some were listening to Jazz and reading In Cold Blood. And then TV came. There was nothing like the tsunami of content that the internet age bought with it, but in the 70s TV took up common residence in the home. I remember getting our first TV, a black and white. I was five and the first programme I saw was something about American Baseball - I had no idea what I was looking at.

Physically we lived with very Kiwi concerns - farming and rugby, sheep and Holden cars - but our cultural references were mostly from America and the UK. No one could decide which approach was better. Were we freewheeling and confident or stiff-upper-lip?

As a kid I had no idea that there was a difference between English culture (Rainbow and Basil Brush and The Two Ronnies) and American culture (Batman and The Six Million Dollar Man and Fantasy Island). But at this age I was sitting on the American side of the fence. Blakes Seven or Starwars? As a twelve year old I had no doubt which was superior.

America also gave us BMX. Bicycle Moto Cross. Late in the seventies some Californian kids took their bikes and hacked them to ride on dirt tracks in emulation of their Motor Cross heroes and so invented a whole new genre of cycling.

As soon as I saw one of these bikes I wanted one. They had small wheels, were low-slung and had buckets of attitude - the polar opposite of The Vicar's bike.

There was a track that I dragged my parents too, out on the coast, where lots of brightly clad boys in full face helmets fell off a lot and sometimes made it to the end of a primitive track cut by a bulldozer into the side of small hill on a farm. It looked scary, and fun - the two are closely related right?

As much as the bikes it was the colours and the clothing that appealed. The quality of the light in NZ is much closer to the light in California than the light of Sheffield. BMX didn't inhabit the world of ochre yellows and deep reds that the The Chopper came in. This was a bright world where people shone in the sharp, angled sunlight that burnt you to a crisp in under an hour. Yellows and purples and bright blues shot through with stripes and sun bursts - a rush of positive spirit.

Now I was at intermediate school my world had grown beyond the Miramar peninsula and included the Kilbirnie shopping area, home to 'Burke's Bikes'. I was so enamoured of BMX that would go to the shop after school and mill around for as long as I could get away with, staring at the bikes.

They had the functional HMX 500 for one hundred dollars and the fully chromed awesomeness of a Redline for three hundred and they had the bike that sat between affordable and desirable - The Pantha.

It was still staggeringly expensive, I think it maybe as much as $180. Dad gave me most of it, but my parents were pushing the contribution line so I still had to save hard on the pocket money and do extra chores in order to join the next cycling revolution. When I had most of the money I pointed to the black and gold one and put it on 'lay-by'.

I was in that shop all the time, looking at my bike. I was in there enough that one of the mechanics there, known as 'Mouse', recognised how hopelessly besotted I was. He was to prove a key enabler in my bicycle habit, but for the time being he just patiently led me through to the back room where my bike was propped up against some boxes and let me stare at it.

The Pantha had mag wheels, and a high bling factor. The black frame was offset by gold and yellow highlights. It even had matching yellow tyres. Sitting on the showroom floor it looked like it wanted to go fast. I imagined myself riding it,

the expansion of my world that would occur as I flew over the urban landscape, both cool and hot at the same time. I yearned to ride it, to make the fantasy real.

Finally the day came where I had the last $10 and I was able to ride out of the shop on my Pantha. Boy did I feel gool on this bike. Black and gold!

Once I started to ride it, however, I realised a few things were amiss. The alloy mag wheels may have looked cool on the shop floor but they weighed as much as the wheels off a truck. The frame, likewise, must have been made of lead. It was heavier, and harder to ride, than my old ladies bike. It felt like I was riding underwater.

On top of that it only had that one gear and I could barely ride it up the hills I had taken for granted on the ladies bike. The brakes, with their long and flexible alloy arms, were as effective as pressing bars of soap to the rims.

To be fair the Pantha was probably a good bike on the BMX track. BMX races start at the top of a steep ramp and you get a hefty gravity-assist start. And no one really used the brakes during a race, they were more or less for show. But there was nowhere around me I could 'do BMX'. There were some local trails in the Miramar hills that, many years later, provided some excellent mountain biking, but they were well out of the league of a bike designed for smoothed dirt berms.

After all the anticipation of owning this thing I was struggling with the realisation that it was worse than my previous bike for just getting around on and no better for doing my laps of the house. The low seat meant it was exhausting to ride more than a couple of hundred yards at a time. The only thing it was better for was 'drop offs', where you ride over the lip of steep bank, keeping your front wheel in the air and trying to land the bike on two wheels. Trust me, there are only so many hundred drop-offs you can do before you get bored.

It was a dismal experience. Thankfully it was also a brief. As I had paid for a substantial proportion of this bike I figured out it was just about ok to maybe sell it and buy something else.

But what to buy? I was confused now. I had taken an expensive gamble and had chosen a bike based on what I thought it would let me do rather than chosen a bike based on what the riding I was actually doing. That's called aspiration. Not a bad thing in a young teen, but in this case I had fallen flat on my face.

Was it Mouse who brokered the next deal? I can't remember if it was him or whether it was a friend of a friend, but just a couple of months after buying the Pantha I found myself swapping it for something very different.

My next choice had a lot more to do with the boy who rode up hills from the bottom to top without stopping than it did with the boy who saw himself doing battle on the BMX course in a full-face helmet. And this time I was lucky, I landed the right way up.

More than that - I landed the right way up and then vaulted to the heavens.

Ten speeds and true

I was an instant convert. I didn't look back at The Pantha for a moment. I had A New Great Thing.

Actually it was a very old thing. A dark blue Raleigh - back to Raleigh - with a battered paint job that was mostly primer. Ten speeds. Steel cottered crankset, gear changers on the downtube, heavy wheels. Ten speeds. Steel drop handlebars, corroded alloy stem, steel seat pillar and a battered old leather Brooks saddle. And ten speeds.

Did I mention it had ten speeds? I didn't know anyone who had a ten speed. What on earth would you need ten speeds for anyway?

Looking back it's easy to see this bike was a beast. To start with, it was bent. Someone had crashed it and the down tube had a definite kink where it joined the head tube. The paint was chipped and fading, all the parts were heavy and old. Not even when it was new was it Raleigh's finest. It was a cheap racer, built to a budget. A much abused example of the starter road bike of its day, and that day looked like it had been ten or fifteen years previous.

Clearly I was diddled on the swap. The Pantha was worth a lot more - it wasn't beaten up, bent and old. I have the feeling the boy who swapped it with me had dragged his dad's old bike out from under a pile of old lawnmowers in the back shed and was super pleased to be getting an up to the nanosecond Pantha in the swap.

But those ten speeds. Total revelation.

You went as fast as you could, then you changed up another gear and you kept pushing to go faster until either the road ran out or your heart was leaping out your nostrils and you collapsed laughing into a puddle of your own lactic acid.

This wasn't about picking your way round obstacles or doing wheelies, this was about speed and effort. My effort made it fast, no limits other than what I could bring to it. Physically it demanded everything you had. This was just as I was accelerating into my mid teens, growing and getting stronger by the minute, so I had a lot of energy to give.

Soon I was a sweat-drenched addict, craving another burst, sucking up huge lungfuls of air and willing my screaming legs to turn one more time.

I was totally hooked on the sensation of it, not just going fast, but the thrill of tucking your head down and suddenly accelerating down hill, then leaning deep into a corner, going around it much faster than a car ever could, or of sprinting all-out purely for the fun of it. And I could climb hills again, longer hills, steeper hills, faster. I started to time my ascents on my wrist watch, pushing harder and harder to best myself by a few seconds.

Not only faster, but further. I had just started high school and I had bucked the trend of going local and was going to the distant central city school instead. My father wanted me at his school, the local, and my mother was equally determined I would not be going there.

Rongatai College was the kind of place you got strapped for walking on the grass in hard shoes. Or not having your socks at the right height. The headmaster was a pervert. I mean that literally - he resigned a few years later after being caught videoing 'experiments' on how to best use the cane on 'willing' participants.

These days he would be prosecuted. At the time many pupils and ex-pupils supported him, a clinical example of how the groomer and the abused form one solid wall under the sign of patriarchy. Nice guy, fun school.

My mother, bless her progressive socks, wanted me to go to a 'worse' school, Wellington High School. 'High' had ethnic minorities, a loose uniform code and girls. More importantly it had a lot of clever kids with progressive or arty parents who thought that it was the right thing to do send their kids to an inclusive and socially tolerant school.

I was the kind of bright boy who was going to University anyway, so if it was a bit shit academically (it was) it didn't matter much (it didn't). In NZ there were just Universities, not good Universities and Russell group universities or any of that. Excusing medicine, none of them required a blistering array of stellar results to get in, so going to the right-on school was a low-risk strategy.

My new high school friends had parents with broad backgrounds. Dan's were a teacher and accountant, Justine's were artists, Karl's were doctors and Jewish public intellectuals, Peter's dad was a philosophy lecturer and owned an ARP synthesiser. I never quite worked out what Greg's parents did. So now instead of figuring out how to avoid mirrors while shoplifting with my 'friends' I was figuring out which bits of wire to put where to get a sound out of this massive

electric box. It took about an hour to get anything of the ARP, but when you did it felt like the world had changed.

When I went to my friends houses I had conversations around the dinner table and it seemed that some of the parents had minds subtle enough that they could argue from just about any point of view, just for fun. Home for me at the time was a vacuum. Any good feeling had been sucked out of it by the negative storm of the divorce. It's not that there wasn't love there, I know he loved me, but he was of the generation who didn't quite know what to do with it.

Being a parent now I have more sympathy for this state of affairs, and more forgiveness of the unavoidable sins of parenting than I had at the time. But it did seem grim. Dad would come home with the takeaway, or maybe stretch to meat and two veg, then he would play the piano for an hour or two. The piano was his emotional outlet - he is a gifted amateur musician - and I have a whole sub-strata in my subconscious of easy listening tunes and Jazz classics, all of them eternally linked to this sad time, a playlist for the lost. I joke now that I was raised by wolves but the reality is that I was living in a state bordering on minor neglect. I never wanted for anything materially and dad would always ferry me around as needed, so the basics were covered. But the house was never full of voices, we never had parties, seldom was there laughter. It had two boys in it, one older than the other, both trying to understand what was hell was going on.

There is the 'busted home' theory of athletic achievement (see Lance Armstrong) and I would have to put up my hand here. Wanting to be out of the house was, given the circumstances, understandable. 'Proving myself' is something that has never left me, though who it is I am trying to impress, and what will satisfy them - I still have no idea.

Still, there are plenty of other adolescents with better family situations who ride bikes. Lets not forget just what a fantastic way cycling is to burn up all that youthful energy, to take all that anger and confusion and hormonal accelerant and turn it into jet fuel.

I would ride the five miles to school very quickly indeed, often less than 15 minutes, always less than 17 - point of honour - have my day at school, then do my paper round, then ride home, back up the hill. On arriving home I would put a pint of milk, a couple of tablespoons of sugar, a couple more of powdered chocolate and then a scoop or two of ice cream into a big jar and shake it into a

milkshake. After downing that I would go out riding for another hour or two, finishing with the ride up the hill again. Limitless energy.

Occasionally I would see a real racer out on the road and feel overawed. They wore strange, multi-coloured clothes with impossibly exotic and unpronounceable French and Italian brand names on them. They wore odd, dainty shoes with holes in them. They had brightly coloured bikes with really skinny tires. And they were always riding super fast, so I could never catch them to talk to them. And what would I say that would not mark me out as a dork?

I would still go into Burke's once a week and talk to Mouse about bikes. So it must have been in Burke's that I saw the poster about a 'Turn up and race' event for youth at the local Velodrome.

Racing. Seeing just how fast you could go. Seeing if you were better than everyone else.

By this time I had got some chamois shorts (because that's what real cyclists wore) and mum had made me a cycling shirt, so I didn't look like too much of a dick when I showed up at the track, nervous, excited, looking at the other boys there and wondering where I stood.

Because it was a 'turn up and race' event we were all on road bikes. The Haitaiti velodrome is very long and not very steep. It was also made of concrete so it would be impervious to the kinds of damage our clunky old road bikes would cause if we fell off.

After a few laps to get used to riding on the track we all lined up and rolled over the starting line. I can't remember how long the race was, probably only a few kilometres, but I do remember two things about it.

I came third. And I loved it.

The next race I entered was a proper one. It was a handicap race, where the slower you were the earlier you set off - but the first one back won. It gave slower riders a chance of a win and gave the fast riders something to chase. Having no 'form' I got the longest handicap and the chasing group of real racers on their better bikes didn't even get close - I won it by a country mile. Brilliant.

I was hooked. I thought about nothing else for the next couple of years. I became, pretty much over night, a boy racer.

And the two things a boy racer needs are a crew and a proper racing bike.

The wheels

Standing in the kitchen and begging my father for $100.

He was not budging. His belief was that this cycling thing would pass, a teenager's fancy, and he would be footing the bill for something that would be abandoned and forgotten within a couple of months.

To be fair I did had a string of discarded hobbies behind me. One issue with being an only child, even one with friends, is that you get a lot of time alone. Being an inventive sort I had tried to come up with systems for war gaming where the non-existent opponent's moves were controlled by dice, I had built huge sprawling marble tracks that went from the first floor of the house down to the ground with epic amounts of card and tape, I had tried to get excited about model making but realised I didn't have the patience. And of course there were no computer games or internet. In that context cycling was perfect, it was something you could do alone and not lose out. And it wasn't a thing just for kids, adults did it too.

So I knew he was wrong. I knew that this cycling wasn't just a fancy, that it would last. Yes, it was a lot of money at the time, specially for something second-hand. But I knew that $100 was nothing to pay for a set of wings.

What I was pleading for were The Wheels.

I had made a connection with a German Guy. Yes, in the neighbourhood I grew up in being German or Chinese or Swiss meant you got that kind of title because there was ever only one of you. The German lived on the same street as Woody the drummer, so maybe he introduced me. Or I might have seen an ad in the local paper. Remember those?

However it happened I found myself sitting in his house looking at a pair of wheels. All the wheels I had seen or ridden before had steel rims and thick spokes. Built to last, not built for fast. What the German Guy had in front of him was a pair of racing wheels. Campagnolo Hubs laced to Fiamme Red label tubular ('sew up') rims. The spokes looked like piano wire they were so thin, and the tyres were about as thick as my thumb.

I picked one up. I could scarcely believe it. My hand did that involuntary thing where it shot up because I was expecting something heavy. They seemed to be

impossibly light, they must have been a third of the weight of the wheels on my Raleigh - how could these things actually hold a person up?

Even by today's standards these things were feathery - a Campagnolo Record back hub was around 250g and the rims 330g. So I'm guessing a built up wheelset minus tyres and cogs would be in the 1.4kg territory. That's still a light wheel, even with all the modern advances.

Not only were they light they also spun forever. I am not one to drool over mechanical aesthetics but those hubs were super smooth and very good looking. And they were made in Italy. In the real Europe. By Campagnolo.

Tullio Campnagnolo, the company founder, was the one who invented the quick-release wheel - something that hasn't changed that much in nearing a hundred years. Campagnolo dominated the racing bicycle parts market for many decades, until the 80s when the Japanese got in on the act and started to do what they did with cars and motorbikes - make better ones that lasted longer for less money. But in the eighties Campy was still the by-line in quality and cool.

One hundred dollars. I was making twelve a week doing a six-day paper round. I told the German I didn't have the money, couldn't afford it. He wasn't stupid, he understood how to play it. "Just try them.", he said. He pumped up the tyres, dropped them onto my bike, adjusted the brakes and let me loose.

Riding downhill they felt weird. Because they were so much lighter than my current wheels they had less centrifugal energy and so the bike felt tippy and odd. Not a great start.

The magic happened when I turned around and rode back up.

When people say that it doesn't really matter what you ride I think back to those five minutes spent climbing the hill back up to the German's house. These wheels made a huge difference. It was like someone had given me an anti-gravity halo that bent the time-space continuum - I seemed to be riding up the hill 50% faster for no extra effort. The very same hills I had struggled to ride The Difficult Second Bicycle up now seemed trivial.

In cycling wheels matter. At a basic level you need the gyroscopic effect of rotation to provide the magic that makes the whole balancing on two wheels thing work. And spokes - who thought of that? Who came up with this outrageous idea that a few dozen bits of flexible steel weighing a few grams

each could be made into a structure that can keep a human off the ground at fifty miles an hour? It seems barely credible.

In racing the wheels really matter. An ordinary racing frame with extraordinary wheels is a much better bet than an extraordinary frame with ordinary wheels. People will spend £2000 on a bike with average wheels where they would be much better off buying a £1000 bike and spending the extra £1000 on some good wheels. But then that £1000 bike with the good wheels doesn't have the same cachet as the £2000 bike, even though it will be quicker - people like to be seen to be in the know with their… what shall we call them? Preferences? Brand values? Biases? Let's face it, as a species we are incurably shallow.

Once you've been around bikes and cyclists awhile you start to look at rider's wheels, not their frames so much. A lot of riders will buy 'factory' wheels at various price points - and that's the way to buy standard racing wheels - but others will spend the time to get wheels made for them, carefully selecting hubs and rims, going into detail about spoke counts and weights and rim widths, choosing a good builder and paying a little bit more for a custom set of hoops that suit their style of riding, their weight, their aspirations. Hand made wheels are the mark of someone who knows what they want to be doing. Custom wheels are the bespoke suits of the cycling world and they scream class. At least to the few of us who watch out for such things.

Back in the eighties all wheels were handmade and pretty much everyone had exactly the same combination - shallow rims, 'tubs' and low-flange hubs. Modern wheels are faster but they are not as versatile or as comfortable. The wheels I was trying out were the exact same wheels that the pros rode in every race of the year at the time, from the cobble-strewn Paris-Roubaix to the individual time trials and the long mountain stages of the Tour de France. One good set of wheels was all you needed.

After burning back up the hill I got back to the German's house winded but ecstatic. I wanted these things very very badly. Not only were they fast they made you want to go faster. Can you become addicted to pure sensation? Of course you can. These were cycling crack.

We have already established that I didn't have that kind of money. I could not afford these things, but I needed them so badly it hurt.

So I went home to dad and begged.

In the end he made some complicated arrangement with Mum that I was never party too. I didn't know at the time that Mum was paying ‘maintenance’ and, despite her lower wage, she was paying for a significant chunk of my upbringing, so really he didn't have much of a leg to stand on if Mum thought it was ok.
And she must have thought it was ok because the lump of cash was passed down to me and then to the German.

So I got the wheels and they formed the backbone of my racing cycling over the next couple of years. I gladly suffered the ritual of fixing punctures by literally sewing the tyres back together because the weight and ride quality was so good.

My father was wrong about cycling being a passing fad - and don’t our teen selves love it when our parents are wrong. To be fair he was right about tattoos and the future importance of computers and the need for good spelling.

And The Wheels, while they may be abandoned, are never forgotten. Though I haven’t seen them since 1994 I still have them. They are hidden right down the back of my father’s attic where they remain, unless someone has found them and done the sensible thing and thrown them away.

They will only have totemic value now as they have probably rotted and corroded to dust, but the only objects I have owned which have had as big an impact on my life was my first computer, my first mountain bike and, much much later, a maisonette in London.

Wheels matter, The Wheels mattered to me, a lot.

Gios Negra

Noting my early racing success Mouse did me the great honour of lending me a frame he had lying around. It was way too small for him, but even so it was a very generous thing to do. At this distance in time I can't even recall Mouse's real name - wherever you are Mouse, thank you.

The frame, stove-pipe black, was stickered as a 'Gios Torino'. Bikes from the Italian factory of Gios Torino in the eighties were works of steel art. While I would never want to start an argument about which country had the best bike makers in Europe it would be fair to say that Italy had an awful lot of them and Italian bike companies were plentiful and powerful in the Post war period right through to today. Many high-end steel frames that come from 'English' brands today are still made in Italy.

Gios Torino found fame under several riders in the 80s, from Vlandrian hard-man Roger De Vlaeminck to the fiercely aggressive Italian rider Giuseppe Saronni. 'Gios blue' is a vibrant ultramarine blue, as recognisable to cyclists as Bianchi's celeste, Raleigh's hot red or the bright Holdsworth orange.

So a Gios was a really good bike. My bike, under the stickers, was a more mundane affair. Most likely it was an kiwi-made frame using Japanese tubing from local builder that had been adorned with a spare set of stickers lying around a bike shop somewhere. So not a Gios at all then.

Some people could afford to care about the provenience of their frames, and in their eyes a locally welded bike made of Japanese tubing was not a proper bike. There was (and still is) lots of tosh talked about the difference between bike steels. The types of steel that are suitable for making bikes out of are a lot more similar than they are different. There would be very few people who could tell the difference between identical frames made with similar grades of tubes from the various manufacturers. The geometry of the frame, coupled with the diameter and thickness of the tubes and the welding methods, have more bearing overall on how a bike rides than the country of origin of the tubing. And whether a bike is right depends on things like a rider's weight, their style of riding an so on - bikes are definitely a case of one person's scream being another person's song.

I can't say I cared whether it was a real Gios or not. It was a perfect size, was half the weight of the old Raleigh and was a big leap aesthetically - it looked like an Italian frame and that would do me. Back then all frames pretty much weighed the same and had more or less the same design across the board so really once you had something half way decent the rest was vanity.

So now I had The Black Gios and The Wheels, so it was really only bits and pieces I needed. As I was funding my new bike habit with a paper round, new proper campy parts were not something I could afford. I had to make do with the new kid on the block, Shimano's 'inferior' but significantly cheaper parts. So I ended up with a bit of a rag bag of parts, some new, some begged, mostly 600EX, one of Shimano's early efforts at a racing group. Back in those days there weren't any compatibility issues, no index shifting, everything just worked with everything else. You bought it, it fit. Easy.

By this time I had joined the local cycle club, Port-Nicholson-Poneke, or PNP as it is more commonly known. They had run the event at the track and they were the only club in Wellington proper, so there was no choice.

For those of you used to dodging a litter of lycra-clad cool kids on carbon bikes on the weekend and (in London at least) waiting in queues of thirty or more bikes at the lights on a weekday morning, let me set the scene for you.

This was 1980 in a country that was rugby mad. My cycling club, which covered the whole of the metropolitan Wellington area of 250,000 people, had a membership of about 30. I would guess there were about 200 racers in the whole region. The only other people you would see on bikes back in those days were other racers and the occasional weirdos with beards riding Dawes Galaxies, inevitably British expats (we'll come back to those gents in about twelve bikes and thirty years time). There were no 'sportives', no mountain bikes, no hipster rides to the coast, no groups of friends going for a ride together instead of playing golf, no ride to work day, no commuters on Bromptons, no charity rides, no consideration of cycling as a mode of transport, no special lanes, no lobby groups, no bike insurance, no slathering hatred in comments on the Daily Mail.

There was racing or there was nothing.

The heart of PNP was 'The Brays', a family who had the good grace to welcome legions of sweaty cyclists with their carpet-shredding cycling shoes into their homes. I learned to ride rollers in their garage while Sandra Bray selflessly

made us all cups of tea. Dave and Sandra ran the club and their two children, Fiona and Andy, were members. I don't really think they had a choice. The Brays even had a van that was good for cycling duties - it had a sliding side door and a skylight - pretty flash back then.

Most amateur sports clubs on the planet operate in the same way - a couple of extremely dedicated people at the core who do the boring stuff in order to give others the room to do what they loved. There was, inevitably, a 'cool' clique, a couple of people with talent and aspirations and then 'the rest' who formed the base of the club, bulking out the numbers and generally doing it for serious fun. I fell in with a subset of riders who gathered around the certifiably bike-mad Oli Brooke-White and 'track stand champion' Henry Chlebowicz. Oli and Henry worked as mechanics at The Bicycle Village and, due to its close location to my high-school, I defected from Burkes and took up residence there.

After school, for as many days as the shop owner would tolerate, I would go down after school and sit in the workshop and chat to Oli and Henry while they worked, looking at expensive parts as they came in and generally talking about results of races overseas that we could, literally, only read about.

Magazines had to be shipped to NZ so were both very expensive and three months out of date when they turned up. Reading the impossibly exotic International Cycle Sport was the only way we got any news cycling news from the continent. These mags gave us iconic images of the cyclists of the era - Moser, Saronni, Fignon, Hinault and the occasional American like Le Mond - as they got coated in mud on Paris-Roubaix or ascended the heights in The Alps.

It's impossible to communicate just how removed and exotic these racers were. They were half a world away riding in places we had never visited. They spoke foreign languages and had names that we had no idea how to pronounce. The idea that a kiwi would ever even be able to ride The Tour was unthinkable. We didn't know that had already happened in 1928 - there was no cycling literature or histories to read that would tell us.

Basically we drooled over the magazines and did our best to copy the look of the bikes, clothes and, most importantly, the attitude of the European racers.

Looking back from today's standpoint the bikes and kit bordered on primitive. All frames were steel, all racing bikes were ten speed with friction shifting. Your chamois in your wool shorts was actual goat leather, the soles of your Sidi cycling shoes were wood and you nailed your cleats to them. Everyone's gearing

was the same - the seniors had 42/53 with 13-18 and us colts had 42/52 with 17-21 clusters. You had toe-straps and a single, small bottle on your bike. Lights were as effective as a candle. They were so dim the notion of a high and low was pointless. There were no HRMs, no power meters. I didn't even have a speedo. I used to watch the mileage in the car as we drove local roads to learn how long they were and time myself as best I could with a watch with hands on it. Even a stopwatch was an expensive extravagance.

Training regimes, if you had one, were basic. One mid-week fast ride with the crew, a race on the weekend, a long ride on the other day in the weekend. Rinse, repeat. I mostly trained the same way I raced - by riding everywhere as fast as I possibly could. Only the best riders had things called coaches, the rest of us made it all up based on handed-down knowledge and trial and error. Mostly error.

It was all very much seat of the pants. But I had the important things - I had my crew, I had some adults to organise races and to point at the start line, and I had a bike that was plenty good enough. It didn't make me sigh like Trevor Rice's Benotto or the Rossin's of the Meo brothers, but 'The Gios' did the job and I rode the hell out of it.

The Gios was the bike I learned to grit my teeth and suffer the first lacerating ten minutes of a race on, it was the bike I slowly moved up the pecking order on, it was the bike I trained on and rode to school and to friends houses and raced on. It was the bike I first jumped my scratch group and won the race on.

And in those experiences as a fourteen year old learning the ropes I had more in common with a Roger De Vlaminck or Saronni than I realised at the time. It was nothing to do with 'the look' or the bike or the language or the terrain. I had a thirst for competition and desire to win. That is the baseline of being a racing cyclist and that has never changed.

Kriterion

This race happens all over the world, once or twice a week through summer, thousands of variations. The kermesse, the criterium, the circuit.

Criterium is loosely borrowed term from Criterion, or Kriterion: to separate, choose, decide, judge. An event that judges the participants, that elevates one to the status of winner.

The format is largely unchanged since I was racing as a teen in the eighties. In the forty odd years since then you can add social media, a few more gears and power meters, but it's the same form, the same experience.

It starts with the embrocation. In my day it came in a brown glass bottle. When the lid comes off you know about it, a rich sharpness bangs up into your nostrils like smelling salts. With your freshly shaved legs slapping this on is like rolling in nettle, encasing your legs in a stinging mesh. It feels good, astringent, like you are getting ready for something serious.

You bend forward and a buddy pins on the race number so it lies flat. You do up your shoe laces and do the racers clip-clop to the bike. You are cold, wearing the least you can, knowing in fifteen minutes you'll be sweating large.

Pushing off in a low gear you spin the legs out for a while, doing a series of to-and-fros near enough to the start line to not get caught out. Once the blood is flowing you do a few short hard efforts to really wake the system up. There are a couple of dozen of you now, circling and sprinting around the start, gulls over a fishing trawler. The richer riders use rollers, their legs flashing round like a juggler's skittles.

As you warm up, you say hi to the people you know, club mates, and watch the other riders, seeing who has new kit, seeing who 'looks fast'. There are as many behaviours here as riders – the casually nonchalant, the deathly serious, the visibly nervous.

Someone blows a whistle, the radius of riders tightens and slows and stops as riders come to the start line. Some go to the front to assert control, some come to the back to get the first draft.

It is suddenly silent. The blocks of shirts in club colours work as flags, declaring lines of allegiance. Below that the bright colours of the bikes themselves jostle

for attention and dominance, bright reds twist and warp in the morning light with the hot lemon, the arcing silvers and acid blues. Laced through all of it are the treble notes of silver, the arpeggio of light on spokes.

The riders hot breaths form a light mist around the group. All in all it looks like a child's drawing of a locomotive straining against an invisible load, ready to burst forward in a clatter of energy.

The race director, clad in a massive jacket against the cold, reminds you of the format – an hour and a lap – and asks you to be careful on the tight corner at the end of the finishing straight, the morning damp has yet to be burnt off by the expected sun. A few riders suck in deep drafts of air like greedy stoners, vainly hoping to offset the first burning moments of effort.

If you're lucky you get a starting pistol and the satisfying retort of it. If not the race director might just casually wave you on with a quiet 'good luck' as he presses a button on a stop watch and steps aside.

There's a moment where the pace is comically glacial, a gentle rolling wobble, as everyone straps themselves into their pedals.

Then it's all on.

If you were hoping for a gentle start you are in for a shock. Three riders hit the front, sprinting away hard, winding up through the gears and hitting a pace that feels like the end of the race not the beginning.

Ok, it's going to be that kind of race then – a savage start, perhaps twenty minutes of out and out speed to see who has the legs. You breath deep and forge ahead with the rest.

It's good, the feeling of speed and application of force, and you relax into it knowing that you have about ten minutes of this grace period, where the speed is easy enough to keep, before the real strain starts.

At the end of the finishing straight the first rider, about ten in front of you, ducks into the apex and sprints out of it full gas. You know you have to be near the front now, if you get caught at the back then the constant slowing and accelerating has a 'slinky' effect and you end up working harder than you would if you were at the front. Everyone knows this and everyone is trying to do the same thing – be near the front but not on the front.

As you come out of the first corner you put down a little extra power to move up on the outside of a couple of riders and by the time you get to the next corner you're in fifth place.

Behind you the line of riders begins to stretch out into a single long snake, a sign that the speed is high. And the snake hisses. There's a particular sound of a mass of riders, the additive sound of expensive, finely-laid tyres on tarmac, the gentle whirr of the chain, the click of a gear change, small sounds of movement and annoyance from a single beast.

A few minutes later you find yourself at the front. As always with cycling you have a choice – to contribute or not, to stay for your turn or drop back. If you do your turn you are backing the current strategy, if you drop off the front too soon everyone knows about it, they take a view, they mark you as a passenger, someone to be eliminated later, to be outplayed.

For the time being you play it straight and keep the average speed as high as possible to 'snap the slinky' to thin out the also-rans, those off form or a bit ill.

Being part of a fast moving group is a buzz on it's own, staying inches from another wheel at twenty five miles per hour plus takes nerve, more so when there are people a foot away from you left and right and you are heading into a corner big enough for two.

There is a surprising amount of chat inside a group – above the hissing beast people talk, make quips and comments, oaths and short shouts of caution or intent. Every now and then you bump or lean into someone, shoulder to shoulder. You would never do with non-racers, they would just freak out, but once you are used to it there is a kind of allowed intimacy at speed. You see this when you watch racers on TV travelling in the peloton, they gently guide or robustly push each other out of the way, holding out a hand to the buttocks to stop a rider who looks like they are coming over the top, endangering the precious front wheel.

Twenty minutes and four laps of this and it begins to hurt properly, this maximum effort can't be kept up forever but no one wants to be the one to capitulate. The pain is sharp in your lungs, like the very air is acid. Deep in your legs there's a willful tearing of flesh. You know everyone will be feeling it now, and that now is the time to keep it the pressure on – just an extra minute at this pace could break the field in half.

And there it is, as you come around the sharp corner again and sprint hard there is a split, just five metres, then ten, then twenty, but that's enough. Twenty metres at this pace is a gulf and the riders behind won't have the will to bridge it. They have to choose now – rest for a bit then attack with everything to bridge over or just grind out the rest of the next forty minutes as a grim training session.

With the break made the front group slows fractionally. The front rider begins their coast into the corners a little sooner, leaves the press out of it a little later and pursues it with a little less aggression. Behind him the remaining riders begin to bunch up again, to take the full width of the road as the back of the lead group catches the front.

Everyone takes a breather, for while the pace has been high it's also been steady and we all know what happens in the second half of the race. The first selection is made, but it's been simple and direct – now things get tricky.

It's time to take stock. You feel strained, you are breathing hard, but all around you you can hear the unconscious grunts of other riders. Everyone is going hard, everyone at the front has made the cut by shredding themselves, the question now is how much more you can take and where you will place the energy you have left. From now on you can't just ride one hundred percent the whole way, you have to choose where to go strong because it will take an increasingly long time to recover from each effort.

Peloton poker.

This is just the amateur level of the sport so it's pretty crude, there is none of the radio-controlled finesse of pro racing, but still you have cards to play and a steadily decreasing time to play them. You look for signs of weakness in those around you – the dropping head, the slightly desperate look behind, the reluctance to take the front. Riders looking at the ground as they ride cannot win – your energy has to be up and forward. But you also look for signs of people who look too good – some are better at hiding their pain, and some look stiller and less troubled the more in pain they are in. And this is really why racers wear sunglasses - to hide their tells, to mask their intentions.

By now you know whether you are really on form. You know that in the ten left at the front there are probably three or four who can win. You know who they are because you train with them, or race with them, all year round. They know you too, where you are good, where you are weaker. They expect you to want to

be in the final sprint – the last fifteen seconds where outright velocity is more important than finesse, or weight. A flat sprint is a drag race, and you are good at that.

But you are thinking different. There's the smallest incline on the back of the course, barely thirty seconds long. It's a power climb, nothing that troubles you the first ten laps – you don't even change gear for it – but by the time you are reaching the last twenty minutes of the race you can feel the pace drop a little each time you go over it. There's a collective agreement to take it easy developing, a chance for a breather.

It's a classic point to attack – almost a cliche, but anyone who can get five seconds over the top of it has a chance to hold that to the line two minutes and three corners later. The corners are important – it's hard to attack through a corner, hard to make up time, each corner is ten seconds of neutralised riding.

The chalk on the lap board now reads eight. You are deep in oxygen debt now, everything hurts, from your shoes you tightened too much to the headache that cleaves your brow.

If you could point a heat-sensitive camera at a rider now you would see a blazing rainbow. The toes are blue, this extremity so far from the heart is stuck out in the cold morning air, but the thighs and glutes would be red-hot, a twitching blur of effort spinning 90 times a minute, each side held together with the cool lattice of tendons and fascia and bones – girders and levers and skin all flexing together to spin.

Above that the body seems passive and still, craning forward to the bars, the barely warm arms and hands do as little as possible. Cyclists are the T-rex of the sporting world, spindly forearms just there to balance the gruesome heft of the legs. But in the middle of that still mass there is a bright pink flare, the high-hat of the heart pumping blood at over one hundred and eighty times a minute. The heart is like the hummingbird at the centre of being, a fluttering, unreal hum of energy that seems alien to the apparent stillness that surrounds it.

Around the heated zones of effort a giddy fizz of chemicals rotates. The blood carries as much oxygen as it can while toxins and heat are driven out of you by sweat. Exertion is a hand on a sponge, determined to wring you dry. But there are other drugs in there – the opiates trying to keep a lid on the perception of pain, the short-acting lactates that act like whips, both fuelling you and flaying you at the same time. In between the bright lights the normally active organs

and functions have slowed. Digestion is too much of an energy sink, excretion is similar, and your body has simply shut the energy for that down – not needed for now.

Two laps further now and the riders that you left behind long ago are threatening to come back up to the lead group. You know at the moment of joining the pace will drop out of the race as everyone takes a moment to adjust. You also know that's a perfect time to attack, just as concentration lapses.

What you need is the element of surprise. The classic way to launch a late attack is to wind up on the outside of the group and blindside them by coming off the front at a high speed on the other side of the road. Anyone following then has to get across the road as well as along it to have a chance to hold the wheel.

And that's just what someone does now – an all-in attack. Instantly everyone ducks over to their side of the road and you can tell from how people are riding that they are giving everything. You know you are giving everything just to make it back and yet there is a deeper spark somewhere that wants to say something to you, that signals from beneath the complexities of pain and fatigue and the urge to just stop.

Twenty seconds of hard chasing and you are all back together, breathing in gasps from the combined effort. In another twenty seconds you will be at the rise again and someone will surely have a go again, a suicide attack with a whole lap to go.

This is the imperfect moment, a moment where everything is wrong. You are on the front, the hill is coming, you are shattered, everyone expects you to wait for the sprint.

So you give it everything and play all the cards at once.

Certain failure. Within seconds you feel awful and you aren't even on the incline yet. When it comes all you can do is look down at your feet and will them to keep tempo. You know you are not going fast enough.

And yet no one catches you. At the top of the incline you sneak a look back under your arm. You have twenty metres from nowhere.

The group behind could catch you quickly if they got organised, if they could make it many against the one, but the previously dropped back group have just

made contact with the lead and that moment of confusion has given you that chance.

Now you have to take it. Powering off the top of the hill you commit to the attack.
The trick now is to keep yourself a shade under physical explosion point and press on. The task now, almost impossible, is to not look back. If you look back you will lose heart. Like Orpheus, if you look back your prize will be taken from you.

You just set your mind to going as fast as possible for the five minutes the last lap will take. It's no time at all but it feels like forever. You are already flensed and broken, but so is everyone else, now it's just about will.

Behind you the negotiations are beginning, a small group forms for thirty seconds that starts to peg you back, but then someone reneges on the deal, perhaps they skip that turn on the front, and suddenly that group splinters. A solo rider counter attacks and everyone is suddenly chasing them, not you. It's an important moment, they have all settled for fighting for second.

You come over the incline again, this time buoyed by the fact the chase is now fifty metres behind. It's not enough yet, but it gives you hope.

As you come into the finishing straight you know there is a likelihood that a strong sprint for second place will increase the speed so much that they could fly past you in the last ten metres. It's happened before, plenty of times. You don't have any speed left, you are simply playing out each last moment of push against the time it will take to cross the line – the very idea of going any faster is a cosmic joke, a stark impossibility.

You have everything out in the wind now. It's not pretty, there is no room for finesse here, you are rolling around on the bike, fighting for every turn of the pedals, even as time expands and that last fifty metres to the line stretches beyond credibility.

Inexplicably you cross the line barely in front of the charging group behind you. The moment of victory barely registers though, all you have is the joyful release from pedaling and a desperate pleasure in the act of stopping.

Even as you roll to a stop, your chest heaving, the waves of nausea start. You know you have ten minutes of this, then another hour where you can barely stand up and a day's worth of hollow after that. You turn back to the finish line

and then practically fall off your bike onto a patch of grass where your gear is laid out, your chest still heaving.

One of the old boys from the club comes over and says well done and you smile briefly before the pain submerges you again. A few riders come and slap you on the back, your friends, but most stay away and muse on their missed chance, or nurse a growing resentment to you. You know that, despite the direct and honest way you won this, some of them will think up ways to dislike your success, to invent reasons you don't deserve it. Such is sport, even here, in an amateur event of zero consequence.

Yet even here, in the very bottom rungs of the sport, the urge to win, to compete, to be morally superior, is absolute.

The Kriterion is no laughing matter.

Gios Rosa

I had a solid year racing the Gios Negra, won a couple of handicap races and was generally turning into a handy rider. I am built L wide and M high, or 'a bit hobbity', and so the type of riding that favoured me was strength and sprint related. I am what is known now as a 'puncheur' which is a polite way of saying that I can't ride up hills longer than a kilometre at any speed and I am not the outright fastest in a sprint – it's the worst of both worlds cycling type. The short aggressive rides that the young riders did back then really suited me.

I was a good time trialist too. There is not much difference between riding a time trial and riding to school as fast as you possibly could because you were late. You have get to the end of the ride with not an atom of effort left in your body. And I was late to school all the time.

The whole thing was done on instinct. The lack of coaching, of specialised knowledge, of measurement devices made it all guess work. There was no comparing heart rates on forums, no development squads, no scholarships. The comparison was made on the road, in a race and the ultimate judge of fitness and form was your position over the line.

In those days you used language not statistics to describe your performance. Terms like Tempo and Threshold came from what they felt like to ride, not a set of numbers quantified by your power meter. The strange horse-racing like abstractions you still hear out of racers mouths these days come from the pre-data logging era:

I had fresh legs today
I haven't found my form yet
I was on the rivet

The last one of those refers to sitting well forward on a leather saddle to generate maximum power. Despite leather not being used in racing saddles for upwards of thirty years this one endures and shows how a good description will hang around.

Cycle racing is a very hard sport and the general difficulty was increased in New Zealand as the road racing season was in winter. In its infinite wisdom New Zealand Cycling made this glorious decision, something to do with keeping the top riders (whoever they were) in sync with the European season. So for the

sake of a few kiwis attending the world champs and getting thoroughly done over the rest of us had to race and train in the worst conditions imaginable. Combined with the gear – designed for a European summer – we were often soaked and freezing. A typical approach at the time to 'winterising' was to buy a pair of large rugby socks, cut a hole where your cleats were, and wear them over your dainty Italian cycling shoes. In a Wellington winter that gave you five minutes of pseudo-warmth before the wind and rain froze your feet anyway.

All good character building stuff, but looking back on it I am a bit horrified. I remember riding along on pitch dark on A roads into howling gales and driving rain with lights that were less effective than a child's torch on a bike without mudguards and being sprayed with dirty, gritty water by passing cars (aka Belgian toothpaste). Soaked to the skin, the only thing that kept you from hypothermia was the heat produced from going as fast as you could. I must have had a huge amount of energy to burn, and a huge drive to push myself.

This was just what you did. It's what people who race still do. The clothing is so much better now and the lights are fantastic but it's still hard riding at night in winter, in heavy, inattentive traffic with cold rain trickling down your neck on the promise that someday it's going to be warmer and this hard training will pay off.

I'd moved part-time jobs by this point. At fourteen I'd given up the paper run and was working in 'Manner's Meats', a butchery run by a shonky sexist arse called Pete.

Boy, was I naïve. $22 a week to work from 4-6:30 every day, late on Fridays and Saturday mornings.

There were three guys who worked there. Pete, his henchman Matt, and an apprentice whom the other two were slowly turning into a carbon copy of themselves.

They called me 'Mork' - after Robin William's character in Mork and Mindy – because they thought I was weird. Their definition of weird was: Didn't play rugby, didn't call Maori 'darkies', didn't rate every woman who came into the shop on their *fuckability*, didn't talk about masturbation the whole time. And let me tell you butchers talking about *fuckability* while wearing white gumboots and hair nets and cutting deep into flesh is an alarming proposition.

I suppose I was fascinated, I hadn't spent any time close to people like this before, proper misogynist racist bigots. I spent most of my time out the back at a huge double sink, sluicing blood off trays, washing knives, wire-brushing the chopping blocks, sweeping up rat droppings and listening to the radio. I also ran some deliveries, bought their food for them, mopped the floor and cleaned the display windows once a week with vinegar-doused newsprint.

Remember my fabulous home life? I guess work was better than sitting at home by myself. Most days when I finished I would go down to the Hungry Horse Burger bar, buy a hamburger (horseburger?) sit and play 'spacies' for half an hour before then going out training in the dark, arriving home somewhere near eight or nine. Then I would go upstairs and read until one or two in the morning.

Which is probably why I was riding like an idiot the next morning to get to school on time, having slept late again.

This was 1981, the year of the infamous Springbok tour of New Zealand. There were violent protests and a lot of civil disobedience. It really split the nation. There were two sides and the positions were clear – either you thought that apartheid was bad and NZ should be boycotting all sport with South Africa, or you thought that sport and politics shouldn't mix. The rugby lovers were on one side and the pinko-lefties were on the other. But a lot of the silent middle got involved too – Mum sat on the motorway in protest and the rest of the family stopped talking to her for a while.

Needless to say the butchers were pro-tour. I, typically, was split down the middle and could see both points of view. I remember a massive demo march in Wellington. Instead of joining it I rode behind it and around it on my bike. I didn't participate so much as observe. It took me many many years to understand this tendency to stand back from events. I like to think and create, to move and joining feels like being held captive inside a set of rules rather than being guided by a higher purpose.

I was just beginning to see that I was a little different to many people I knew. I was 'sensitive', perhaps made more so by the dreadful home life. Every Briggs-Myers I have done in the last 30 years has me as INFP; introverted, intuitive, feeling, perceptive. Ideal characteristics for a writer, not a great set of characteristics for fitting into a macho culture or being at the centre of the action in any field.

So it's no great surprise that I hated the common mindset of the kiwi male at the time with a great passion. If the common direction of the New Zealand male was towards Rugby and being a good bloke and respecting the spirit of ANZAC and all that other horse-shit I would set on a different path, just because. I would follow the individualist track and listen to music made with machines and have floppy hair and read European fiction and do this weird sport called cycling. And I would stay away, at all costs, from alpha-male normal.

And what better way declare all of that than that than paint your bike pink?

And so The Pink Gios was born. It was The Black Gios repainted in Maglia Rosa pink. The Maglia Rosa is the leaders jersey in the Giro D'Italia, the real cyclists favourite cycle race.

I am not sure I would want a pink bike now, but considered in context it was about as radical in its way as a tattoo was back then – something only gang members and sailors had. It was a romantic gesture in a very unromantic country, new wave to your disco and cock-rock. And an elegant, too-subtle, way of telling the butchers to fuck themselves.

Cycling had – and still has – a very peculiar aesthetic. I can't think of a sport that is so extremely difficult where men look so feminised. Skin tight lycra, shaved legs, dainty shoes, lots of colour, wearing names of ice cream and anti hair-loss shampoo on their backs. Cycling is it's own form of drag. I found that very funny, and enjoyed the contradiction. I suspect this is also a factor in why cyclists are so generally despised these days – the wearing of lycra by grown men is just too threatening for many.

I left that job soon after. And soon after that, after a good two years of using it, Mouse called the loan of The Gios in. Fair enough. I'd had a good run with it. I'm not sure why, but I either couldn't afford it or I didn't think to offer, but I didn't just buy the thing off Mouse. I stripped the parts off it and took it back in its extreme pinkness to Burke's cycles – god only knows what Mouse thought of it – and was left with the immediate problem of being a racing cyclist without a bike to race.

The Divine Comedy

I picked an old racing frame from the paper for less than fifty dollars. It was sticker free, not even pretending to be a real bike of any kind and the owner had no idea what make it was. It was steel and about the right size, that was all that mattered at the time.

I don't know why I didn't petition my parents to buy me an actual decent racing bike – by this stage it would have been justified. I suspect I was becoming a bit arsey and contrary at this point – why be beholden in favours to my parents? Where would that get me? Nowhere. Making my own way in the world and not asking for favours, typical only-child divorced kid behaviour, and if that meant that the bike I would ride was the club joke, then so be it.

This un-named frame was various colours, mostly a disgusting puce. The paint was old and chipped, the geometry out of date, I suspect it was a racing frame from the late seventies. I put all my stuff on it including The Wheels and started racing it, as is. It looked awful and I played up to it by putting mismatching handle-bar tape on it and a cheap bright yellow BMX saddle on it.

My results stayed exactly the same. It proved my point that the frame doesn't matter that much as long as the wheels are good.

Actually they were getting better. I was sixteen now, I had served my apprenticeship and, as this was my final year in the youth grades, I was among the oldest and strongest in my age group. I was confusing statistical reality with personal merit but such ideas were over my head at the time, I just liked being near the front.

At this point I had managed to recruit my very good friend Dan into the cycling fold. Dan was a total natural on a bike and was beating me within a month of starting to ride properly. He was an excellent climber and had that useful body type – long and lean – that makes good athletes.

The thing that Dan and I bought to our racing at this point was a good dose of teenage 'awareness of absurdity'. We had entered that stage that clever kids do of finding pretty much everything from school to parents to racing to career expectations absurd. Everything was pointless and yet very funny. Why was everyone so effing serious? We would ride races at 100%, and, at the same time, be laughing at how seriously we were taking ourselves.

Somehow being on a rubbish bike made things even more fun. Riding in groups with expensive immaculate bikes while riding something that looked like it had been pulled out of a skip was hugely entertaining. It was like racing against Ferrari's in a battered old Escort and winning.

This is why the comedy was divine – we could laugh, give the flash guys the finger and win – all at the same time.

It was on this bike that I won my only two medals. Part way through the season the region had a round of races where riders from clubs that didn't normally race together could compare themselves before the end of year regional championships – they were called the 'Halfway-Centres'. That year it was held in the Nelson area, so after a quick flight in the morning we had a ten mile time trial in the afternoon. I can't remember the time I did, but I remember a fast tail-wind out and a furious stomp into a bad headwind on the way back, so the time wouldn't have been great. But I did get second, which surprised me. Antosh (who we will meet below) was first.

The next day I somehow read the road race perfectly, timed my sprint just right, and won it by a matter of inches from a guy called Darien Rush. Darien's Linkedin profile reads: 'Former NZ & Oceania Elite Road Cycling Champion, Olympic & Commonwealth Games Squad Member'. He was the real deal and if the course had been two feet longer he would have won it, but I wasn't complaining.

Two medals, silver and gold, both on the anti-snob bike. Being naturally sceptical of my own abilities I would say I was lucky but then you don't do well in a time trial by luck. I must have been, by pure accident, right on form.

Of course it's nice to win, but the problem with that is that people start to want you to take things seriously. And this was not a time of my life to start doing that.
Well, not sport at least. Kiwi's take their sports, even their obscure sports like cycling, very seriously. I didn't quite know it yet but that laugh I was sharing with Dan would soon turn into a full-on anti-sport rebellion.

I was sixteen and suddenly aware there was a world beyond Wellington and Wellington High School. How did I know about it? The newspapers were no good and magazines took too long to reach us and were too expensive to actually buy. So I got to know a version of the outside world through… novels.

My friends with older siblings started passing round the kind of books that a group of clever arsey boys might like – Catch 22, World According to Garp, Slaughterhouse Five. I loved this style of American writing, the pure energy, the language jumping off the page.

But left to my own devices I read Euro fiction: cool, intense writing from Hesse, Grass, Mann, Camus. I'd been visiting Silvio's bookshop on Cuba St where you could buy a tatty, discarded Penguin Classic series for a dollar a throw. I stacked them up by my bed and retreated there in the late evening and read for hours.

What have cheap paperbacks got to do with cycling? Nothing. And that was the point. Up to this stage in my life I had wanted to be that thing that seemed obvious that a clever kid should be – a scientist. I had a bent for Astronomy and even at twelve I was going to lectures up at the Carter Observatory to learn about black holes. I think there was the boys natural curiosity there – where am I in the universe? But also there were decent, big ideas in Astronomy. Concepts that made your head bigger on the inside. I was beginning to need that. Something more. I was beginning to notice art and girls and clothes and girls and how my hair was cut and girls.

Cycling was not a cultural phenomenon in its own right back then. There was none of the hipster cultism, the MAM(W)IL networking, the post-ride espresso culture. There was no sustaining framework around cycling, no scaffolding. Cycling was just riding a bike, as fast as you possibly could until the finish line meant the hurt could stop.

And by this time realised I was an above average rider, sure, but I knew I was never going to be great. How do I know this? Well let me introduce to the real thing, a guy called Antosh.

Antosh was a cousin of Henry's and he was a total natural. Absolutely gifted. He was lean but somewhere in there was a massive heart and a resolve that never gave up.

I remember him leaping off the front in a race and getting 50 metres on four or five of us. Four or five riders is about the perfect size group for pulling in a lone rider – it should only take a couple of minutes to pull back 50 metres. We got him back to 5 metres, and then the others in the group assumed he would give up and slip back to us, which would have been the sensible thing to do, to conserve his energy. Nope, he just kept going. I remember rallying the others to go again and then winching him back, seemingly a centimetre at a time, until

finally he was back in the fold. Then he did exactly the same thing again and won. A pugilist on a bike.

That was what raw physical talent looked like. He had what the top riders have, strength coupled with a deep but very well controlled aggression. Antosh is still a pretty awesome cyclist, and although local supremo Alan Rice always said he could take it right to the top if he wanted, he must have never wanted it enough.

Like with most things regarding excellence, sport is around 50% genetic lottery and 50% application. You need the right blend of ambition, you need aggression, you need good genes and kinaesthetic talent and the ability to treat training as a serious pursuit. The good athletes study training, they set goals, train for them, analyse, rework, race, vomit and then get back on the bike. Good athletes, it almost goes without saying, don't like to win, they need to win.

The truth is I was not – nor am I now – mentally suited to enduring pain. I am too neurotic, not steady enough, too flaky, too hot and cold. INFP. Good athletes find a way of moving outside of pain, and that requires mental toughness, a single mindedness, that was beyond me. I was, and remain, guilty of being someone who just loves riding my bike.

So there I was, being confronted with my own physical limits by the superior Antosh and having my mind blown by a series of terrific books. I was beginning to see sport as a contradictory thing, sometimes humorous and divine but more often than not a paradoxically pointless waste of time.

These insights were not pointing to a career at the highest end of cycling. Not that I had ever deluded myself into thinking I was going to win the Tour de France. Maybe that was the marker; if I had dreamed about winning the Tour de France then that ambition might have taken me somewhere. As it was I had stumbled onto a moment of success as indicated by two pieces of rapidly tarnishing metal – one silverish, the other one a bit goldy.

Did I know those two medals would be the highlight of my sporting life at the time? Nope. Am I still just a little bit proud of winning them? Yep.

But with my two medals freshly won, my cycling club, no doubt a bit humiliated by the state of my bicycle, decided to do something about it. They chose to help me out by being the first recipient of the club's loaner racing bike.

Or, as we knew it, the dead man's bike.

Suffering

"Suffering is our unit of measure, our currency, and yes, our virtue. It is also the single most difficult thing to explain to the non-cyclist."
@Csos on Velominati

Suffering is a word you hear all the time in cycling.

Sports people, being a body-led, kinaesthetic bunch, are often not the world's best describers, so a few words get used time and time again and become rammed with meaning:

> **I made them suffer –** putting other riders under the kosh.
> **I was suffering –** other riders were putting me in pain.
> **You have to know how to suffer –** describing the willingness to put yourself in the hurt locker in order to win.
> **Suffering for my sport** - as in the lifestyle you have to live.
> **Suffering** - as a way to describe the desperate pain of trying to go faster.
> **Suffering** - a way of describing the nobility of cycling.
> **Suffering** - a way of describing the quasi-mystical element of enduring pain in the pursuit of excellence.
> **Suffering** - the cost of having The Passion.

The dictionary, somewhat tin-eared when it comes to cycling, gives only two meanings of the word;

1. Being subjected to something unpleasant
2. To undergo martyrdom or execution (archaic)

In cycling it can mean both at the same time; it can describe the pain of the sport, from the way you are riding on the day to the gritty ouch of a road rash, and it can describe the metaphysical yearning behind the cyclist's task, a bid to understand the agony of existence by seeking a kind of death and rebirth through exertion. Suffering will lead to redemption – on the good days at least.

Let's start with the first definition, the simple truth of discomfort and pain.

Bike racing is genuinely hard. All endurance sports are hard, but having been a runner as well I think there is something about having your weight supported

by the bike that lets you push beyond the point where you would fall over when running.

I know when I've really pushed myself on the bike when, as I finish a ride, I have to lie down and wait for ten minutes for the nausea to go away. That nausea wash is very common at all levels of the sport. I remember a cyclist I used to race against who would regularly throw up after crossing the line. Not uncommon.

Even at the local amateur level racing is very demanding. When new riders try their first circuit race the shift in intensity really catches them out. In an hour-long circuit race the pace is on from the start, you don't get a chance to warm into it, your heart rate is maxing out in a minute and it stays there the whole way. You don't manage the pain, you suffer it – you are just shifting the pain level from just about endurable to this really fucking hurts.

This is the universal constant of cycle racing. You can add all the tech you want on top of it, but the fundamental experience is that of suffering to go faster. The bikes might have changed, but the look on the racers faces hasn't. You can't fake it. Even when the cheat and sociopath Lance Armstrong was riding up those hills drugged off his face he was still, undeniably, in the depths of suffering. The drugs made him faster, but they didn't make it hurt less.

As kiwi lead-out supremo Greg Henderson puts it: "Training is like fighting a gorilla. You don't stop when you're tired; you stop when the gorilla's tired."

Well that's as it should be if you want to make it to the top. If you want to be a pro. The daily question the racer has to ask themselves is – how much am I prepared to suffer? And then they have to go out and do it. You don't prove it by planning it or writing about it, you have to put blood on the road.

Much as I loathe Armstrong he describes this wanting pain well: "Cycling is so hard, the suffering is so intense, that it's absolutely cleansing. The pain is so deep and strong that a curtain descends over your brain…. Once, someone asked me what pleasure I took in riding for so long. "Pleasure?" I said. "I don't understand the question. I didn't do it for the pleasure; I did it for the pain."

All cyclists have to deal with pain, but only racing cyclists have to inflict it on others. Sure, they are not punching their opponents in the face, but made no mistake, the aim is to annihilate, to vanquish. That's why there are so many great photos of two riders riding side by side up the climbs in the grand tours.

They are trying to match each other, to gauge the form of their great enemy, in order to break them into little pieces. This is what getting 'the look' from Armstrong meant – I am going to kill you.

The perfect sport for a sociopath then.

Enough about simple suffering and sensation, enough about combat. Let's get archaic, metaphysical even.

The Buddha was all over suffering. Dukkha (suffering) is the first noble truth: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering. When the very worldly cyclist Faust Coppi said simply that cycling is suffering I suspect he was not conscious that he was paraphrasing the Buddha, and he was certainly not telling anyone to avoid the suffering, he was just stating a fact. Racing cyclists ride directly into suffering and are generally not too distracted by Eastern insights, no matter how true.

Racing is a product of the Western mindset and it's a sport that is best thought of in terms of the religion of that society, Christianity.

Even in our post-religious society there is something of a protestant hangover in the toil of the British cyclist grinding out a big gear along an A road at 8 o'clock on a cold Sunday morning in the 'Club 25'. A certain resolute oppressiveness threads its way through British cycling. Often when you read about the history of British cycling it all sounds very grim. It's suffering, yes, but the kind of suffering that comes from a country that folded it's ambition into the solitary and often miserable slog of the individual time trial, a country where the highest form of cycling is enacted by separating it's participants; where suffering is kept, politely, to oneself.

Europe is more Catholic about its cycling. Cyclists are followed like saints and are expected to suffer as much – their small silver crosses bobbing on their pigeon chests as they climb and climb and climb up the world's steepest and highest passes, or nail themselves to the crosses of their time trial bikes.

In the catholic view of cycling to suffer is to be made penitent by being stripped back to the bone, to be dissolve oneself in the heat of the divine. Only then are you allowed to approach Godhead. You make the sacrifice in order to overcome the mundane and touch the (Sidi-clad) foot of God.

You can see this moment of anointing in Tour de France on the big mountain days. Riders who have trained for hundreds of hours, that have been sheltering in the gentle air of the peloton, have to come forward to prove that they are worthy to take on the holy shroud of cycling – the leader's jersey.

At the front of the race, climbing the high mountains, they destroy themselves in public as commentators pick out their weaknesses. Slowing down has a moral dimension. You haven't worked hard enough, you are not trying hard enough. But to win is to become iconic. The great riders become images of suffering for glory. Anquetil, Coppi, Merckx, Hinault. Like religious figures their faces are etched with pain. They burn themselves to mark themselves worthy.

For the ones who are so gifted for those, who can suffer and triumph, the glory is endless. The worldly spoils are relatively modest by sporting standards, but they join an exclusive order of the greats. Their suffering has bought them to a state of grace, from here they need never turn a pedal ever again, nor do they have anything to prove to anyone. They undergo transubstantiation by fusing with the eternal presence of a brand.

The faithful worship the saints of cycling on the weekends, cranking up Box Hill or out along one of the world's countless time trial courses, each one of them pushing that little bit harder remembering what the great one did on Ventoux, or the Alp d'Huez. The legions of the average ride in their name, ascending to the sites of pilgrimage via a sportive, high-tech versions of the old penitents who found grace by crawling their way to the sites of the saints miraculous deeds.

Cycling is suffering. Everyone suffers. Suffering is the universal constant of cycling. Speed varies greatly but suffering is eternal. The newbie carrying too much body fat with the puffed red face grinding up the local hill at the tail end of the club social ride is suffering as much if not more than the latest wunderkind crushing the spring classics in Belgium.

What is strangest of all is that cyclists, all cyclists, from the greats to the panting newbie, don't just hang up their wheels. No, they keep putting themselves through travails time and time again.

Once you have won the Tour De France three times does anyone care it you do it five times? What about the club Vets like me, with nothing at all to prove and the prospect of a victory about as remote as winning the lottery? Doesn't it make sense to hang the wheels up in the garage and retreat into reminiscences?

Still we persist, we continue to try. The reason why is the final shared secret of all cyclists, what makes them the faithful. We all know the suffering but there is something else; that thing that overtakes you, that means you have to watch yourself at dinner parties lest you start raving about your next big ride; that makes you think that having another bike cluttering up the house is a forgivable character quirk rather than just an ugly obsession; that has you gazing at maps and building bicycles in your mind.

This is the thing that keeps the pros coming back to the insanity of racing year after year, this thing keeps you motivated and on your bike in the deepest, coldest winter and makes you take holidays filled with hills and rain and joyfully tolerate getting older and slower.

And it's a topic to leave for another chapter – The Passion.

Dead Man's Bike

The story of how the club had a frame it could lend to a promising young rider is not a happy one.

I didn't know Mike Podmore that well, he was a couple of years older than me and, even though we had a common friend in Oli, I didn't train with him because he did the kind of training that us 'colts' didn't need – long miles. He would ride a hundred miles a few times a week. I was happier at ten miles absolutely flat-out, a hundred would have bored me to tears at that stage of my life – a weekly fifty felt long enough.

Let me leave the telling of the story to Oli, off his blog:

"Mike was a lad from Island Bay with a single-minded determination to succeed in his sport, with a view to eventually heading to Belgium to try his fortunes on the big Euro stage. I accompanied him on many training rides as he trained hard towards this goal, and as he prepared to race the gruelling Dulux Tour of the North Island. Along with other good race performances over the year a gutsy performance as eventual Lanterne Rouge in the 1982 Dulux convinced him he had what it took once he'd put in "more miles, Oli, more miles…" so off we rode around and around his favourite one hundred over the Akatarawa ranges until I was in the form of my life, or completely broken.

"Eventually it came time to farewell Poddy as he flew off to meet his destiny. That destiny proved to be a cruel one. He was killed during his first pedal strokes on Belgian soil, while riding to meet up with his new club. In the middle of the afternoon he was hit head on by a drunk driver crossing over into the wrong side of the road, killing Mike instantly. His death hit the Wellington cycling community very hard and he was sorely missed for his Muttley snicker and great good humour."

How brutal is that? Killed going out on your first ride. The irony is that we ride on the left in NZ, so he would be concentrating hard and telling himself to keep right, keep right for his first time on Euro roads.

Oli's sidelong reference to his 'lantern rouge' performance in the Dulux Tour of New Zealand shows that Mike had the stamina, but also proves the adage that you get better at the kind of riding that you do. Seems obvious, but if the kind of

riding you do is long slow distance and you never put in speed work then you are going to finish the race, but you are most likely to be last.

A season racing in Belgium would have fixed that for Mike. An acquaintance of mine who tried racing there many years later said it was blisteringly fast and that you only needed one gear – the biggest one you had. And this was a man who competed in the kilometre time-trial at international level.

I'm ashamed to say it but Mike's death didn't really register with me at the time.

Death can seem like a distant and odd thing to a sixteen year old. Now, being a parent, I can't imagine anything worse than losing a son in the prime of his life. Somehow his parents found a place of generosity inside their grief and gave Mike's old kit to the club. This included an ALAN racing frame, rather conveniently in my size. Spurred on by the embarrassment of having me ride around on an utter piece of crap while winning medals in their colours, the club decided I would be the first recipient.

ALAN were an innovative Italian cycling company who not only produced the first aluminium racing cycle (1972) but also the first carbon racing frame (1976). Depending on who you believe ALAN stands for Aluminum ANodised, or it's an amalgam of the owner's children's names - ALberto and ANnamaria. Either way works and is a typically Italian response; high tech, high love - no difference.

In an age of steel bikes ALANs looked utterly gorgeous, like polished jewels. Now days we like our bikes stealthy and black, but back in the eighties it was all about the blinging paint job, so the cool anodised shine of the the ALAN looked like the future. Being made of aluminium they were a good half a kilo lighter than a steel frame. They were constructed by using threaded aluminium tubes that were 'screwed and glued' into place using techniques borrowed from the aeronautical industry. It's a method of manufacture that seems quaint in an age of 3d printing and carbon moulding, but at the time it was radical. A bike frame that was glued together? Next you'll be telling me they can make bikes out of plastic!

There was one serious drawback. Without going into the theory of metallurgy you will have to trust me when I say that an aluminium alloy tube of a similar diameter and wall-thickness to a steel tube is going to be a lot more flexible. Even by using very thick tubes as ALAN did the frames still felt quite 'soft'. There was so much deflection in the seat tube I could quite comfortably get the

chain grinding on the front derailleur while riding up hill while sitting down. It probably wasn't the best frame for a burly lad like myself, but it looked so good I didn't care.

I swapped out all my parts onto the new frame – exactly the same parts and wheels, third frame – and had a shiny new bike. This happened a month or so after my medal-winning spree at the 'halfway' champs so I should have been set up nicely for the end of year regional champs, and then possibly the nationals. There were much stronger riders in the region (Antosh and Darien and Dan for example) but I might have edged into a team at fourth or fifth spot.

Maybe.

I only have one photo of me on the ALAN. It's a terrible shot. I remember the race, it was a criterium around Kent and Cambridge terrace – my kind of race, short, flat and very fast. I finished third or fourth, Darien won it.

Darien won it both because he really wanted to win it. He was gunning for regional selection – which he got and he went on to do very well for himself as a cyclist. It was the last race I remember riding, though I must have dribbled through a few more. I didn't want to win and when you don't want to win what's the point in racing? I just felt tired and was starting not to care. Like a lapsed Catholic I had lost The Passion.

Away from the bike it was a crazy few months.

You know when people say they changed overnight for apparent reason and you think 'nah, people don't change that much'. I felt like I changed out of recognition.

Prior to this I was good at math and geography. I took economics and physics rather than art history and French. Then I took a series of after-school drama classes run by a Theatre in education group.

It was like someone had thrown a switch. I simply stepped out of one life and into another and remained there for ten fun, chaotic, stressful – and very poor - years.
I had always had a performative streak, but in those days in NZ that kind of thing was generally considered to be 'showing off'. I had even been told at primary school that drama would be good for me because I 'needed to get it out of my system'. And fuck you too Mrs Martin.

But now here were a bunch of feisty misfits and gloriously artistic oddballs swanning around doing trust exercises, wearing dungarees and telling me it was ok to be playful and show-off.

Hold on. This was not about suffering. This was about, you know, being happy and joyful.

To say that I forgot about cycling is an understatement. I dropped it from my life in an instant and didn't even notice it was gone. Cycling seemed one-dimensional in comparison, a shadow of a real experience.

In theatre you connect with people – it is the basic proposition. In cycle racing the aim is to separate yourself from everyone else – that's what winning is. I am stronger. I am better. Kriterion.

I'd had enough of that.

I started going to the Public library after school and listening to records at the listening booths six at a time, randomly sampling everything from Bach to American minimalism to free jazz to punk. Upstairs, in the beautiful New Zealand room, under the scowling regard of the librarian, I started to read the back catalogue of Kiwi poets and novelists and discover that New Zealand has its own amazing artists and writers. It was also occurring to me for the first time that New Zealand was culturally distinct. It was its own force.

It was there in the New Zealand room, in among the art books and monographs, I started to discover the rich alternative seam of 'not kiwi males', those who had forged an identity based on art; the Sargesons and McCahons and Baxters and Curnows. Those were the big names at the time, but there were plenty more and I started to recognise them as 'my men'. Men who were happy to push beneath the surface, look at the myths and ask questions. The kind of men who might paint their bikes pink, just because.

I gave up tough and took up flexible and expressive instead. I started writing a journal. I started writing poems.

That was the bomb that was going off in me – culture – and in the theatre I got to take part in it. I had found a place where you were allowed to be happy and sad and difficult and provocative and arty. Where you could be all of your selves at once.

This was particularly useful for someone like me who was at the time (and remain, perpetually) a bit shattered. The easy thing to say here is that multiple divorces are not a great recipe for settled personalities but I would also have to say that I am by temperament and most likely genetic lottery a person without solid borders. I seem to feel things more acutely than most others, for better and worse. The 'artistic temperament' I guess.

Looking back on it I can see that cycling had been an important part of my transition out of a suburban mindset. Looking at our lives from a European perspective we really were culturally isolated and cycling was my first bridge to a wider culture. I can see there were connections between reading Camus and knowing what a peloton was, between learning about futurism and riding an Italian racing bike and knowing that Kraftwerk were absolute bike nuts.

From a post-colonial perspective I was beginning to see the light – culture was not something that is best imported. There was more than enough going on around me both in art and cycling. Just as I was coming to the artistic culture of New Zealand I let the cycling go. It would be many years before I would begin to see cycling as culture proper.

And the ALAN? Someone noticed that I wasn't turning up for races and wanted the thing back. They were probably disappointed in me, and fair enough. So suddenly I didn't have a bike, instead I had a box of those same components I had used to put together the Gios Negra a few years previous. They probably ended up in a parts bin or on a mate's training bike somewhere, I can't remember now.

I saw an ALAN in the street just the other day, chained to a pole. Since the hipsters 'discovered' 80s bikes in the noughties it's nothing to see a bearded man riding a Rossin or Guercotti road frame with the stupid narrow bars on, but here was an ALAN with a proper old Campagnolo groupset and Cinelli drop bars on it. It could have been the very bike that I last rode in 1984.

This was the same day I was beginning to write this chapter – chance surely? I stood for ages gazing at this ghost from my past, the nearby smokers looking at me like I was mad. The ALAN is still a lovely thing to look at, a proper jewel of a bike, one where the frame captures the spirit of engineering excellence and elegance that all bikes are but few show.

I didn't appreciate the bike enough at the time – I didn't know it would be the nicest bike I would own for decades – nor did feel the loss of Mike nearly

enough.
So on the street I took my time to say a very belated thank you to my Club and Mike's parents and made a silent prayer (what else to call it?) for Mike as I stood on the side of busy London street near enough to 35 years later.

Girl's bike Dandy

About this time I left school.

No, I ran from school. As soon as I reached the end of sixth form and had enough numbers to get into University I left and no one could tell me anything else.

These days you would call it a gap year, back then I just wanted to get out, I wanted to go acting, to learn about the world as it really was – school seemed deeply inadequate as an experience.

I was immediately employed on a Council scheme, something called 'Summer City' where I worked in the children's events tent with some impossibly cool older people who had been on the dole too long – they must have been in their early twenties.

One guy in my team was unreliable and generally disliked. He was pale and sweaty and listened to aggressive industrial music from bands like Foetus Productions. On the mantlepiece of his tiny workers cottage he proudly displayed the withered remains of a road-kill cat. The room was painted blood red.

He was not the most appropriate person to be dealing with children and only escaped being sacked because I covered for him - I guess I was an easy patsy for him. His finest moment was putting raw meat into one of the 'guess what's in it' boxes in the pitch-black touchy-feely tent. I can still hear him cackling with delight as he told confused children it was just wet plastic. To anyone we traumatised, I can only apologise.

Being young and naïve it took me a while to figure out he was a junky. More interesting to me than his stories about going around town trying to talk chemists into giving him codeine tablets was his obsession with his motorbike. He was as into that as I had been to my bicycles. Second only to his devotion to scoring was his love of this motorbike. It was a single-cylinder Yamaha 500 which often 'broke down' leaving him 'unable to come to work'. The fact he lived ten minutes walk away didn't seem to count for much.

To his credit he never offered me any drugs and was honest enough about it all to make me see that it was a dead end, and he was, despite his obvious junky lies, an interesting and clever guy. I hope, wherever you are Harry, that you

found something good to do with that bigger life you had in you. This was, of course, the kind of real life experience I was looking for, though looking after kids all day turned out to be something of an, errr, acquired taste.

After Summer City I started hanging out at a tawdry amateur rep theatre and jumped with both feet into any production that would have me. To say the quality was patchy would be an understatement - the company harboured all manner of failures, weirdos, up-staging has-beens and a spectrum of talentless hacks.

Which is to say it was a great way to learn about theatre. Having to deal with the worst luvvies, the eternally hopeless and the utterly useless is a good way of learning what you don't want to be very fast. Not coming from a drama family I had no sense of stagecraft or what to actually do on stage, so floundering around in terrible amateur productions was like an accelerator programme.

At the same time I left home and went on the dole, or the arts scholarship as we called it back then. No doubt the hard-working members of my family were scowling into their cups of instant black coffee, but I didn't care, I was learning about all sides of life.

I met my first flatmate doing a production at Rep. She was a rough diamond from Palmerston North who had a boyfriend inside - and she wasn't on the porch when she said this. She also gave me one of my most memorable stage experiences ever when, stoned off her tree on hash oil, she looped back twenty pages in the two hander we were doing, unknowingly turning our little slice of middle-class comedy into an avant-garde experiment.

After six months of being on the dole I got thrown into a work scheme and ended up being a 'trainee gardener' in the Otari plant museum. It was, like all work created by policy and the need to keep visible unemployment down, a complete joke.

My boss was a recovering heroin addict and my co-workers were Eugene, lead guitarist with the punk group Flesh-D-Vice (still going strong), a hippy drug dealer, a hard-arsed suburban neurotic mother who owned an equally neurotic Alsatian who never stopped barking and a guy covered in tats, just out of prison who wore a trench coat no matter what the weather and did donuts in the car park for hours on end in an old mini. He conversed in grunts and carried a personal storm cloud of aggression with him at all times.

The amount of work actually done each day was dictated by the ebb and flow of my bosses methadone doses, his 'slips' and the runs in the hippy's combi van to go and score hash oil from his connections. A good day had a couple of hours digging in it, tops. As for the gardening it basically amounted to building paths and planting some trees. I did a lot of staring at the sky, listening to all manner of life-stories and wondering what was for lunch.

The work schemes were scandalously well paid too, so to get to work I got myself a bike. A motorbike. First I got a crappy old farm bike and then quickly moved up to a Yamaha RD250, an old-school two-stroke that barely moved until you got to 7,000rpm, then accelerated like a maniac. On the twisty back roads of suburban Wellington it was an evil, exhilarating ride. Harry would definitely approve.

I had had the good fortune to learn to ride a motorbike on an uncle's farm when I was ten. My younger cousin was a mad Motocross rider and turned out to be a world class enduro rider who might have had an amazing career if he hadn't had hemophilia as well. One of my family Christmas memories is out in the back of the King Country, with grandad, grandma, the aunties and uncles, all teeing off on the freshly-mown hay paddock, with us kids haring around on motorbikes to retrieve the balls.

So motorbikes weren't alien to me and I loved the fact that you got one of the best bits of riding a bicycle – scything around corners – pretty much all the time. Dangerous as all hell of course, but I was 17 and had no conception of loss or real pain.

Back in my gardening job I was learning a lot about the criminal underbelly of Wellington, but not learning much about gardening or what I was going to be doing with my life. Good sense prevailed at the end of summer when I decided I really needed to be spending less time with a strimmer and perhaps realise some of this supposed potential that I had. My not-a-gap-year had exactly the right effect - get some real life experience then get the hell back into education to put off any more real life experience for a few more years. I also got into the Summer Shakespeare at Uni and met a whole range of young actors who now constitute the 'mature' layer of NZ theatre and, in passing, a lovely young woman called Stephanie.

I sold the RD250 as I went to university and bought a rattly red vespa scooter instead. This thing smelt like a lawn mower and left clouds of smoke on the road

whenever you left the lights. The brakes were appalling – in the wet you might as well have used your feet. But my god it was cool.

It was also painfully unreliable and I left it beside the road somewhere after yet another breakdown I couldn't afford and bought an old Honda CB400 off my then girlfriend's father. He can't have liked me much – the frame was bent so the bike took left hand corners very well and right hand bends hardly at all. It had none of the rapid energy of the RD250, this was more a steady as she goes ride, but it got me around Wellington pretty well for a year - all you had to do was remember to lean very heavily when turning right.

My University career was patchy at best. I never finished. I kept getting distracted from my English degree by being in plays and 'DramaSoc' and, after a wash out first year, decided to do no acting for a year to see how I got on. I got straight As. I even got an A for the very selective Creative Writing unit. Officially I was smart and arty. Unofficially I was an insufferable wanker.

I was also totally lost. My suspicion of adults and their fucked-up world meant I was fiercely independent and consequently didn't seek advice from anyone. I was making it all up as I went along and subject to the whims of my own imagination. I can still have five great ideas before breakfast but these days I am selective about which ones I actually put energy into. Back then I just did everything that came to mind and was continually wearing myself out and abandoning projects for the next new thing.

It took me many years to realise that this cleverness and creativity was a mixed blessing. Perhaps exaggerated by my brush with heavy use of the green herb my mind had just kept accelerating since being 'unlocked' by theatre, and I was beginning to experience episodes that I would – many years later - be able to put labels like 'anxiety' and 'depression' on. For the time being it was just more experience.

I would often have so much mental energy, so many ideas in my head, that I would have to walk for hours around town late at night, staying out until that time of night where police cars slowed down to look at you, making sure you were safe and not drunk. I spent many nights stomping round the docks looking for solace and calm from the whispering ocean.

A desire to escape Wellington and invent a better me led a move to Dunedin, to Otago University. I sold everything I owned (a few books) and left town, arriving in Dunedin at the start of the academic year. I had a pack full of clothes,

a couple of hundred dollars and nowhere to stay. I knew no-one, and slept under a hedge in the botanical gardens for a week while I looked over the notice boards for a flat.

I found a tiny room that contained a saggy wire-sprung single bed in a flat at the top of a long hill. The first night I was there the other flatmates got drunk and, with ebullient gusto, destroyed all the furniture in the kitchen. I thought I had entered a mad house.

Turns out they were a nice bunch when they weren't drunk. Even better, they weren't students. They were local boys who knew where the best beaches were, what bands to see, where to drink, and soon enough I was tapping into their world – going to gigs and sitting in the back of the van on long drives out onto the Otago peninsula, a staggeringly beautiful array of sandy beaches and dunes nestled into steep grassy hills. Empty beaches with crashing waves suited my outlook at the time.

One day I went looking for something round the back of the flat and saw a discarded old 24 inch wheel girls bike, battered and rusty round the edges. It might have been pink at one stage in it's long life, but now it was undercoat grey and bare metal. I was heartily sick of the forty minute walk to University, so I pulled the pump off the frame and tried pumping up the frayed and decaying tyres. Amazingly, they stayed up. I put the seat up as high as it would go, reversed the handlebars to make the reach as long as possible and jumped on it, pointing it down the steep piste of Stafford St.

I survived, just. The bike had a single old coaster brake which was binary in nature - either off, or full on.

It became my daily ride. It was a long long way from riding a top of the range racing bike. This was the kind of bike you just left outside a lecture hall and no one touched it. It was not so much a bike you owned as a bike you adopted, like a sick and deformed puppy. A bike that only a soft-touch like me could love.

And I did love it. Being free of the need to achieve anything on the bike meant I could hack around just for fun. I would take great delight in riding it home from a party, across the deserted late-night tarmac of Dunedin, just doing laps of a parking lot or the Octagon. I didn't have any lights but I never really needed them - I just rode backstreets or on the footpath. Dunedin was a small place, after midnight there wasn't any traffic, the main danger was running over a

drunk one-day-to-be-rich law student lying face down in a gutter, moaning into their vomit-stained rugby shirt.

Being on a bike had the added advantage of making me faster than the dickheads who would have tried to beat me up - the kind of guys who hated 'lefties' and would become the corporate nasties and tin-eared Audi-owning husbands of greater Auckland.

I was not one of those guys - I was still trying to be as opposite to those guys as it was possible to be, and was affecting a very bohemian look. My favourite jacket was made of black velvet with gold leaves printed on top. With that and a top knot (I couldn't afford a haircut) and my signature long shorts, long socks and pointy shoes, I looked for all the world like a cross between a Georgian dandy and that pile of clothes spilling out of a plastic bag at the door of a charity shop.
All of this shabby chic and self-conscious posing piled onto a tiny girls bike. I must have looked utterly - fantastically - ridiculous.

I really didn't care. Despite only lasting six weeks in my degree course I continued to take Drama and soon had a whole raft of wonderful people who broadened my horizons rapidly - these were the kind of people who did martial arts and wore animal tails, who could talk as knowledgeably about macrobiotics as the therapeutic uses of storytelling. We were young and had the energy to do everything interesting, all the time.

I did a lot of performing. The most things I was in simultaneously performing or rehearsing was five, and somewhere in there I had my first short play performed. Mercifully my long-term memory has decided the details of this event did not need to be kept and I can't remember what it was called or what it was about.

But always there, between the various versions of myself I was inventing and discarding, between the parties and rehearsals, was the girl's bike. Those short rides around town trying to find parties, the longer forays late at night just for kicks, these were old territory. The joy of control, the desire to go as fast as I could up a hill, the sweeping glide of a long downhill corner, the thirst for a solitary immersion in the environment - all this was still in my bones.

Riding was something of an anchor, time out from the demanding work of being me. Unconsciously I was using the bike as a way of controlling my mental state - or giving myself time out from it. My bike was becoming my anti-depressant, a

very cheap brand. And I would have happily seen out my Dunedin days on the girl's bike had it not been for a bike shop window moment.

I still do this, as my family will attest. If there is a bike shop window anywhere in radius I will cross the road to look in it. The last time I had seen something revelatory in a window was a BMX back in Wellington when I was an impressionable twelve year old.

This time it was in the window of a south Dunedin bike shop, where I saw a bike that I simply had to have, not because it was fast, or Italian. No this bike was in a whole new format that had me immediately seeing cycling in a new way and thinking about many new possibilities.

The question and the promise of this bike was this - what kind of bike would you need if you were going to ride off the road most of the time?

This was 1988. What I was looking at was called a mountain bike, and it was going to dominate my riding for the next ten years.

A bike found three times

I didn't know what this bike was. I hadn't heard of the brand and had never seen anything like it - but I instantly knew what this bike was for. Small, strong 26 inch wheels with wide rims and knobbly tires. Cantilever brakes - the kind of brakes you only saw on touring bikes. Flat bars. A triple up front and seven gears out back for a wide-ranging twenty-one speeds. A set of chunky forks.

It was called a 'Montana Sport' and it was produced by KHS, one of the original Taiwanese we can make bikes as good as the rest of the world brands. I didn't know it at the time but it was a copy of a Specialized Rock Hopper - the Ur Mountain bike.

I could barely sleep thinking about this thing. Like some opium-soaked romantic I imagined myself scaling alps on it, then soaring down sunset-tinged ice fields, loop the looping through soft clouds and hearing the distant trumpets of Valhalla saluting me.

In the back on my mind where the days when some of us from the cycling club would go 'cyclo-crossing' on Mount Victoria in Wellington. Cyclo-cross was very big in Europe, a way for roadies to keep fit in the winter. It involves hour-long races lapping an artificial circuit, usually knee-deep in mud, ridden on specialist bikes. Cyclo-cross is fast, furious and bonkers. It's been reinvented in recent years as a even-more bonkers format with compulsory shots, costumes and post-industrial environments - enormous fun.

What we were doing was less sophisticated. We would do our best to imitate the continental riders by riding along a few benign dirt tracks on Mount Victoria for a couple of minutes until mud clogged our brakes, or the tracks started to climb, rendering our bottom gears way too tall. It was a waste of time, but somewhere in my bones I had a memory of the delicious soft crunch of fine gravel under my tyres and images of the enticing tracks of Mt Victoria snaking away under the pines.

The Europeans might have been cool but they didn't have the innovative edge to think up the format of the Montana Sport. In England there was something called the 'Rough Stuff Fellowship' where knotty men from The North rode their touring bikes over ridiculous terrain (off road in Iceland anyone?). For them the

challenge was riding an inappropriate bike over inappropriate terrain, not making a bike that might make that task more, well, fun.

Once again it was those bloody Americans and their habit of innovation at work, hacking a thing meant for one thing and turning it into something else and inventing a multi billion dollar market at the same time. A bunch of guys started riding their cruisers down dirt roads in the Rockies. Finding out that that was more fun that being run over by trucks on the roads they started tweaking frames, building wheels specially, putting touring gears on their bikes and seeing what kind of trouble they could get into.

Soon enough they were setting up companies to make and sell their gear and the whole thing of Mountain Biking was born. Many of their names and early companies live on (Bontrager, Specialized, Breezer). These guys were the grown up versions of the boys who had invented BMX, guys who didn't really give a shit about the mainstream, they just wanted to do fun stuff on bikes.

And here, very near the bottom of the world a visible sliver of that spirit of innovation and adventure was just a sheet of glass and a thousand dollars away from me.

No, I didn't break the glass, but I did do something about as stupid. I went into the shop the next day and took it for a test ride. And then I bought it on hire-purchase.

It should be obvious that I didn't have a lot of money at this point. I had just enough to pay the rent and eat, buy cheap wine and old books, but that was it. I recall my rent being $100 a month. So $1000 was a big commitment. One that I was never going to be able to keep. I am not sure what I thought was going to happen when I couldn't pay the monthly terms, but whatever it was didn't really matter the minute this thing was mine.

I rode it around a bit for a day or two, trying out the old BMX moves, dropping off ledges, twisting through trees, bouncing off kerbs and generally having mini fun before I went into an outdoor store, tried to memorise an outdoor map I couldn't afford to buy, and headed to the hills for some big fun. Pineapple track to be exact.

It was a revelation. A bike, on walking tracks, in the great outdoors. My favourite form of propulsion taking me from the inside of city to the top of a remote hill in less than an hour. Here I was, the wind whipping around my face,

utterly alone, standing before a view that soaked away any cares in the world. A double endorphin rush - the thrill of the ride with the joys of being in the 'proper' outdoors. Really big fun.

Idealistic Romantic Individualist? Me? You bet.

As you would expect this heading off into the hills became a regular thing. No one told me where to go because no one I knew had ridden a mountain bike in the hills around Dunedin before. There were no trail maps or grades, there was no trail grooming, no bans or special riding areas, there was just 'that out there' and me on a bike to take it all on.

It was too good a thing not to share though, and I did soon acquire an accomplice. Dan had come to Dunedin to study Physio - another arrow to a very full quiver. Dan had the good sense to avoid me in the day and I don't think he was interested in theatre at all. About as much as I was interested in physio I guess, but we found common ground in riding, in just seeing what this new style of bikes could actually do.

Here's his take on how he found mountain biking:

"I've got a new bike with a 21-inch bottom gear" said Allen, knocking on my door one random day in Dunedin. That's how we got in touch 30 years ago — went round and knocked on each other's door.

Twenty one inches. It didn't make any sense at all. It was like saying it had square wheels or a frame made of cereal.

"Just shut up and try it." he said.

So up and down Hyde St I went on Allen's weird machine, with its fat tyres and upright stance and triple front chainset. My legs spun into nothing, met no resistance at all. It was absolutely the stupidest feeling I'd ever had on a bike. It didn't make any sense at all.

"Follow me" said Allen, leading me on my heroically high geared fixed wheel road bike to the bottom of a steep dirt track in Logan Park. "This bike can go anywhere." said Allen. "Up, down or sideways. Just try it."

What followed was an utter revelation. A flood of sensations so vivid I can still feel them today. This is what we wanted our Raleigh 20s to be when we skidded down steep paths in the Botanical Gardens. This made all the sense in the world.

Just as he had done with road bikes, club racing and Yamaha two-strokes, Allen had led me to a new state of mind. A new format of movement. An epiphany. I bought one immediately."

This is a common story of early days MTBing in NZ - and I suspect around the world. There wasn't a scene, there wasn't a magazine or a website, just pure word of mouth - a bike borrowed for an hour off a mate. It was an insider pursuit, a whispered knowledge, a delightful secret.

On solo days I kept pushing out on longer rides, on snowy rides, on steeper rides. I had a base of fitness from my racing days that no amount of student drinking could destroy and a will to go up and up and up into the hills so that I could come all the way back down, as rapidly as my non-suspension forks would allow.

On a good ride the feeling was magical. When you knew the trail, when you were feeling sharp, then twisting and turning, moving your weight around the bike, exploring the endless ways that gravity, momentum and the magical gyroscopic forces in your wheels interact - it was utterly absorbing.

The bikes have changed a lot over the years, but this feeling hasn't. Being at the top of a slope. Letting go the brakes. Gaining an irrevocable energy that will hurt you if you don't do something with it. Pleasure, disaster, broken bikes and grazes, laughing and flying; it's over to you now...

As Mountain Bikes go the KHS was a dismal affair really and I have ridden many that are considerably better but the fact that I was doing this first was unbeatable. No matter that it was a knock off, I loved it. It was the only possession I had that was worth more than $10, literally. I would often just stare at it at the end of my bed (yes, I know) and imagine where I would go next, and what I would feel like as I rode it.

That was until one afternoon when a couple of burly guys with mullets and a shitty van came and knocked on my door. Seems the shop that sold me the bike didn't take kindly to not getting any money for it. Oh well, I thought, that's the end of that as it disappeared out the door.

For a while I just footed around, missing the bike and trying not to care that much. That was until I got a call from my father. Apparently the bike shop had sent him a bill. For $1200. Outstanding amount and the cost of a couple of

heavies with mullets and a shitty van. And he wanted to know what it was about.

Oh shit.

That this should occur never so much as crossed my mind. Dad sighed very deeply. Almost as deeply as when I had been caught shoplifting from Modelcrafts and Hobbies as a troubled eleven year old. Then he put the phone down.

Turns out he paid the bill. Apparently this was better than having my credit score decimated. Not knowing what a credit score was I can't say I would have minded, but apparently such things were important and needed protecting. A few years later I utterly destroyed whatever credit rating I had left all by myself, so this was the last bailout from a long-suffering parent. Thanks Dad!

So I was rather surprised when the bike shop rang me and told me to come and collect my bike. I was even more surprised when I turned up to find that, for some reason, they had repainted it in black, red and orange fade and had put 'Kuwahara' BMX stickers on it. I found my bike again, and it looked hot.

Trying not to seem too elated, I apologised for my total lack of clues and fucks and then then rode out the door.

It was a bit too good looking as it turned out and the cheap lock I used wasn't much of a deterrent. Soon the bike disappeared and once again I was shoeing it around town, very very glad I didn't live in the same town as my dad and could avoid telling my dad that the very expensive thing he had just bought me had been stolen and of course I didn't have insurance.

A month later I was walking down the street outside University when someone on my bike rode past. Adrenaline surging, I ran after him until he reached the next traffic lights and challenged him, expecting a fight. Instead he calmly dismounted, apologised, said he'd found it on the lawn outside a party and handed it back to me. I was almost disappointed I didn't have to fight for it.

And I found myself in possession of the KHS/Kuwahara for the third time. Riding resumed. Smiles were had. A better lock was purchased.

Then, after two fabulous and occasionally delightfully strange years (no space to mention the ghost, or the music, or living in a Priory or being a Moa) Wellington called me back. Dunedin was a fabulous place but I hadn't actually

got around to any study and people kept telling me that I had some acting talent and that maybe, just maybe, I should take it seriously and go to drama school. So I upped-sticks again and moved back to Wellington, bringing the Kuwahara with me.
Hours after arriving back in Wellington I was on my mountain bike and up on Mount Victoria, snaking down the trails that been impossible on my road bike, grinning from ear to ear and trying my best to ignore the wind and the driving horizontal rain.

Perfection.

The Courier Experience

Readers of a certain age will remember the quaint life we lived before the internet. They will remember walking, or driving, or riding around town on a Saturday night propelled by rumours of a party, hoping to meet your friends 'somewhere on Aro St'. You'd turn up to the party and there would be no one there but the hapless host so you'd make your excuses and leave, only to find out the next day everyone arrived half an hour later and you missed the party of the week.

Another quaint ancient practice revolved around the newspaper. You'd buy *The Post* on Saturday, take it home and go over certain pages with a pen in your hand ready to circle a phone number. This was called 'looking for a job' and it took all of 5 minutes a week. I suppose if you were really serious you went to an agency, but I hoped I would be going to drama school in a year so I didn't want that kind of job - I didn't want to be tied down (man).

Within a month of getting back to Wellington I saw an ad I couldn't ignore - an ad from a new firm called Office Express looking for something called bicycle couriers. Get paid to ride a bike all day? Seemed like a no-brainer to me.
So I turned up to a small office on Taranaki street (two sweaty rooms lined in brown formica) and was interviewed by Tom and Steve, aka Bike 1 and Bike 2, the two guys who had set this thing up.

As I demonstrated the key requirements for the job (a bike, the ability to speak, easy availability) I was employed on the spot. I was the fifth subcontractor for the company and became instantly known by the romantic and evocative handle of Bike 7.

I had a day shadowing Tom, one of the founders, who it turned out was younger than I was. 19. As diligently as I was foreshadowing 90s slacker attitude he was forging ahead as a shining example of 80s self-starter endeavour.

Here's how it worked: A dispatcher called out jobs and if you were near you claimed it. You went to wherever it was, picked up the item, took a ticket for it, delivered it in less than an hour to wherever it was needed. At the end of the day you took your ticket stubs back into the office and you got half the ticket price. A standard one hour job was $5, so you got $2.50 per ticket. A standard

day was worth about $80-$100, so that was about 40-50 jobs a day. A really good day might be nearer to a hundred jobs.

The job took as long to learn as it took you to read that last paragraph. It was a classic kiwi, zero-hour, paid by performance, subcontractor opportunity. If I'd had my head screwed on the right way I probably could have claimed lycra depreciation and tyre wear as business expenses - but then I would have had to declare my income. Opps.

Most of the early riders were bored firemen. They worked long shifts and then had a week off and rather than sit around and watch TV they would pull a few days on the bike to make a bit of money and keep fit. There were a lot of 'Steves'. Temperamentally they were ideal - totally reliable, fit and impervious to weather. There was certainly an appreciative sector of the receptionist population. Firemen. In tight shorts. Enough said.

This was long before the rise of the MAMIL. In the late 80s we would have been the first cyclists that many people would have seen in the city. We had the luxury of being a novelty where now couriers - and cyclists in general - are seen as smears of humanity by the Clarkson set.

I was, as ever, the clown. I can't stop my performative self leaking into my everyday life so I would do things like wear bright-red tights, or put fluffy dice on my handlebars. One day I answered my radio in appalling 'Allo allo' French and caused enough mirth that I was forever known as 'Pierre'. Even in my McJob I couldn't help but play up, spin a new personality, invent something.

As for the cycling it probably won't come as a surprise to you to learn that your style of riding becomes somewhat, errr, loose when you are a courier. The perception of couriers is that they are some dumb grunt on a bike trying to look cool while they just about run everyone over. It certainly can look like that, but the aim of the courier is not to go fast it's to not stop. You want to keep a steady speed as it's the slowing down and speeding up that takes concentration, wears out your brake pads and reduces your ticket count. Stopping gets plain boring when you have to do it 500 times a day.

So after a while you start to read everything in terms of mass, direction and velocity. Doesn't matter if it's a car, a truck or a person, everything is processed as an object moving in space, something to be ridden around with the greatest possible efficiency. This is why couriers look like they are ignoring you and staring blankly past you. They are assembling a complex map of movement,

hazards and impacts of which you are but one 55-90kg object moving at around 5kph. Pedestrians are pretty low on the hierarchy of things that might kill you.

It also won't surprise you that this perspective puts you in conflict with the general car driving population. They get cross at watching cyclists wantonly break laws. These days I am a very cautious rider but back then I simply didn't give a shit. As long as you didn't hit anyone (and I never did) then any manoeuvre was fair game.

Not everyone saw it that way. I remember one guy in a cement truck chasing me down the middle of the road screaming 'you deserve to die' repeatedly out the window at me. Easily outrun, but you don't want to get in the way of one of those, trust me.

Like any job there's a rhythm to it. You do countless 40 minute laps of the CBD, endlessly circling the one-way streets, taking the same corners dozens of times in a week.

Round and round, in and out, up and down.

Day in, day out, the seasons playing out, fair weather and foul, you learn things. You learn to deal with the cold and having rain driven down your neck and being saturated at 9am with a whole day in front of you.

You learn every pothole on every street. Which manhole covers are slippery in the rain. Which cracks you can ride over and which to jump. You learn all the shortcuts, where the pavement is a viable option, which alleys go nowhere and which are a secret back way into a building. You know the heights of certain kerbs - which ones are an easy bunny-hop, which ones you need to wheelie onto.

Given Wellington's climate some days it was more like sailing than riding, so you learned the wind-shear of certain buildings and the streets where the wind gusts like a cannon. The Northerly would funnel down Lambton Quay, forcing you to a crawl as you made your way up towards Parliament, your satchel like an air-brake. Then you'd go onto a howling broad reach as you headed briefly east in front of the railway station, where the whitecaps on the harbour became momentarily visible between the warehouses on the docks. Then you'd get the benefit of a top-gear run down Waterloo Quay, easily outpacing the 30 mile an hour traffic, the wind snapping at your back like a pack of playful wolves.

There is a hard-won delight in this kind of mastery of the environment. When you're fit and in the groove, circling the city for hours on end can be magic. You are a long long way from the stress of the people you see as you go - the designers getting something to print for a deadline, the lawyers trying to close a deal. You are outside that. Sure, you are in a lot of traffic and often the weather is absolute shit, but you are not inside, in an office, owned by The Man (man).

Instead you inhabit the hinterland of people who are not central to the whole capitalist endeavour, yet still have a supporting role in it. Couriers, cleaners, sandwich jockeys, baristas. No one cares who you are, and that has its own attraction. Yes I might be in a lift dripping road grime, dirty rain and sweat with a couple of suits looking at me, slightly appalled, like I was a kind of tramp, but at least I could, should I want to, call them arseholes, lay down my radio at the end of the day and never go back. Such things pass for freedom when you are young, and whose to say that feeling is wrong even now - who wants to be part of a machine?

And back then it was machines. You'd hear them through the door. The rattle of an electric typewriter, the whirring-clank of the printing presses, the nervy staccato of the dot-matrix printer, the long steady stride of the photo-copier. It's hard to conjure this world for people now, it seems distant and heroically naff. A world where you walked into an office and wouldn't see a bank of computers and monitors. Instead someone might be typing, someone else would be at a layout table, or a desk with a pen, with ink in it, writing on paper. In trays and out trays. And a lot of people were smoking.

My dad smoked a pipe. At work. Inside. All day.

In the late eighties we were still in a world where faxes were not good enough for official documentation, where advertising and marketing material was assembled by hand or drawn. A world of letraset, instructions by hand to typographers, photo lithography and print proofs that had to be checked by eye, where corrections had to be sent back to printers and then back to agencies and then to the client and then back to the printer. Cycles of the marketing machine to the law machine to the finance machine to the politics machine. Then back around again.

The CBD was a constant and endless stream of physical documents, a whirling vortex of proofs, letters, contracts and litho-plates that had to land in the right place at the right time to make all the other bits of paper make sense. We were

the way these things moved around, the ultimate sneaker-net. Seen in this way we were entirely functional, a pluggable unit of delivery that took something from one place and put it accurately into another place, a 'transfer protocol', in the electro-mechanical pre-internet of things.

Looking back on it I wasn't escaping The Man (man), I was just avoiding the full horror of having to stare into his dark eyes from the position of a desk. Instead I was riding round his feet, poking him in the ankle, but still serving. Just another orc to the dark master of capitalism.

At the time it was mostly just great fun, in a young man in unnecessary danger kind of way. And I was Pierre, how could it not be tres amusing? But while I enjoyed being Pierre I was not sticking around. I'd been mucking around on stage during the year and had the good fortune to get into Drama School, so I rode out my second summer and then bid Office Express goodbye.

I'd also met the woman who is now sitting over the table from me many years later, reading my drafts and having the good grace to chuckle every now and then - hi Steph! - so it was a great year all round.

Oh, the bike?

I started out on the 'Kuwahara' and then Tom sold me someone's old steel racing bike for $300. It was just a collection of black Reynolds 501 steel tubes in a very standard set of angles with a basic Shimano group set. A classic steel road bike.

There was none of this fixed-gear posing, ace-of-spades card in the spokes or tattoo nonsense, that was still twenty years in the future. Aside from the fact it had had 6 speeds at the back rather than 5 it was pretty much identical to the Black Gios I had started racing on seven years previously. In fact the frame is almost identical to the one I rode into work on today, over twenty-five years later.
I sold it back to Tom when I left the company, it was a one of those bikes that seemed to live in the business. A workhorse.

So now I was back down to one bike, my Diamond Back.

My Diamond back? Did I mention that somewhere in that year I had bought a new mountain bike?

Via the Apex

If I close my eyes I can still remember this thirty seconds, over thirty five years later.

On this sheltered side of the Mt Victoria, in among the hushed pines, I am hunched over my Diamond Back Apex, arms long and loose, my arse way back off the back of my seat, which is jammed onto my chest. I am at full stretch as the front of the bike drops off the edge and down into a steep flood of pine needles and loam. I have entered a fold where the steep of the hill wrinkles into a chute. As my front wheel drops away the back wheel locks as it comes over the lip. I am feathering the brakes, trying to keep the front wheel from slipping out as I skid left and right down the slope, dodging pine trees and their horizontal branches - a goth running through a phalanx of Roman spears.

I have been riding this same 40 yards of hillside for an hour, trying again and again to get the line right. Sometimes I make it a foot further down before I get the weighting all wrong and the front wheel goes, or I jump off the back of the bike and it continues without me before smacking into a tree, or I go over the top of the front wheel, cartwheeling down the slope, whipped by the pines for my inattention.

This time, slowing to a stop and lining up my wheels, I inch towards the steepest bit. There is no traction here, just dry dirt barely clinging to the hillside. With nothing to bite into the bike quickly accelerates, threatening to buck me. This time I manage to get my weight forward enough that I can take a brief dab on the front brake and slow down a little, then punch through a deep line of pine needles before hurtling down again, off towards the four foot vertical drop onto path that marks the end of my task.

The only way to nail this last bit is to just let go and hope your body can work it out as you go. It's too steep to yield to thought, if you think about it you'll fall off and hurt yourself.

Still stretched out with my arse just about scraping the hill behind me, I point towards a narrow slot where a wash of water has dug a channel, creating a slot a couple of inches wide in the otherwise vertical bank. As I reach it the bike drops with sudden lurch and I am onto, then past, the moment of no return, way

over forty-five degrees. Now it's just a case of hoping the front wheel doesn't twist as the full force of the bike hits the path beneath.

For a moment a painful crash seems inevitable and I think about pushing myself forward off the bike and into a giant leaping roll, trying to avoid breaking a wrist, but instead I use that last moment of influence to pull on the bars in an effort to lift the front wheel an inch or two higher as it hits the path. It's a big gamble, now I don't have time to fall safely I'll just face-plant into the hard dirt if this goes wrong.

But it works. I roll out of the drop and gently squeeze the brakes to stop. A little corner of Mt Victoria is mine. No one else has ridden that line, I'm sure of that. It's a first.

The first time, instead of turning over the top of the half-pipe I lift the bike into that moment between up and down, pivot through a half circle and push the wheels back into the ramp as I come back down into the bottom of the pipe. 180 in a half pipe. It feels like flannel shirts and Californian sun, skater cool, street cool.

Filthy with mud, rims hissing and grinding with grit, freezing cold and being buffeted by bouts of cold, hard rain. I can barely stay upright the wind is so strong.

It's winter - stormy, wet and cold, what am I doing out here?

I just needed to get out, shake off drama school, get way from having to do anything. Now I am most of the way through a classic Wellington Epic, out to Johnsonville on the road then up and over Mt Kaukau and back via the high ridge track over Karori. So far the ride has mostly been on flooded roads and muddy farm tracks, with a bit of single track up the hill.

Now, coming off the bare exposed ridge, I drop into Wilton's Bush, a glade of native trees above Karori. The same place I was a 'gardener' years previously. Suddenly it's still. The wind is brushed overhead by the dense canopy of native bush. It's mid afternoon but feels like dusk, the weak winter light is having a hard enough time getting through the rain clouds let alone down into the knots of trees.

It feels like you are going inside time, inside the past. Native bush, before we messed the countryside up with farming, grazed it bare and then rebranded it

as 100% pure. It's a moment of grace, like finding the perfect quiet church in a bustling European capital, a moment of awe and wonder.

With the rain washing down the tracks they are deep with mud and water. Everything is wet. The hill is a mudslide, more like an avalanche than a trail. Numb hands work the brakes, trying to balance speed and traction. It's impossible not to slip, you just have to work out the best way to lose traction, how to work with it. My glasses are blurred out and I am operating pretty much on instinct, feeling the trail through my fingers and their conversation with the bike. I let the brakes go on the tricky bits, trying to accelerate up and over the slippery roots, rocking back and forward on the bike to get traction first on one wheel then the other.

It should be a horrible experience. I am not even sharing it - there will be no talking about it in the pub afterwards, no moment we can remember years later.

But it's fantastic. It's a sensual cascade, from the water running down the inside of my helmet through to the rasping tickle of a fern on my hand, from leaves slapping me in the face like small waves to the sharp cuts across the shin from branches. The world is shrunk into a tiny funnel of experience and I am large within in.

The riding is so difficult and engaging that I don't have time to think. All my being is pushed out onto my muscles and skin and nerves. My brain must be working, but instead it feels beautifully absent, as if thought and consciousness itself were dissolved by the knowing wrap of the trees and plugged back into the earth.

Coming out at the bottom I am exhausted, soaking, bloody - and utterly alive. The descent took maybe fifteen minutes, but it feels like I have been across the universe and back.

Lining up for a mountain bike race. The infamous Karapoti Classic. Only 50km, but three huge climbs, one mostly a carry. If you could do it under 3 hours you are a legend - I never got close but Dan managed it.

Standing among the starters, waiting to run over the river, I am suddenly aware that mountain biking is 'a proper thing' with personalities and a scene. I am a long way from the heart of it. Dan is right in there as he is doing lots of races by now and there are many here today who will define mountain biking in NZ for decades to come.

I take my place on the start line and do a respectable 'middle of the pack' time and know that my mountain biking experience is quite different to most here. I don't do the sport of it and never will - I really had done with racing. I want to ride outside those markers, but I am also not an epic adventurer. I am never going to ride my MTB to Everest base camp like Jonathan and Johnnie, I am not going to do The Great Divide like Simon. I was not going to go on and create a whole industry like the Kennett brothers. And I was never going to do a fast time on the Karapoti, I just didn't have racing fangs anymore.

Drama School ruled out racing (too poor) and epics (not enough time). I had no cycling ambitions beyond the outright pleasure of riding, but I didn't mind, I was still that kid riding around the block and delighting in having something so simple, so direct, so mine. The block is bigger that's all, the block is the unending Mountain Bike delights of New Zealand and I was happy with that.

Having the ride of a lifetime down one of the rutty farm tracks off the back of Hawkin's Hill, going insanely fast and floating the bike up and over the waves in the track with effortless mastery.

Coming up to the left-turn I see an overflow ditch that carries water from the wet basin at the bottom of the valley to the final steep sluice to the sea. I see it but I don't do anything yet, I don't need to, I just need to do a small bunny-hop over it.
At the last moment I see that the side far side of ditch was much higher than I was expecting. I was going to hit it - it's too late to change up to a big jump and too late to slow down.

It's like riding into a foot-high concrete step at 25mph and what happens next is inevitable. The front-wheel stops dead and the momentum kicks me over the bars and I take the long superman flight over the top. After my half-second of freedom in the air I hit the deck, sliding and grinding my flesh into a nasty mix of gravel, dirt and rock.

Minced and in shock, I slowly stand up and look back at my bike and wonder if it's ok. The front wheel has a six inch wave in it, the front tire was flat. The forks were ok but the frame itself had suffered and had the tell-tale kink in the top tube that indicated it had bent under impact. Ruined then.

After checking I had nothing worse than acres of weeping gravel rash, I leaned on the rim enough that it would fit through the forks, fixed the puncture and

rode at a snail's pace down to Red Rocks where I rinsed the dirt and gravel out of my wounds in a stream. A kind man with a ute gave me lift back into town.

I'd been lucky really, it was the kind of crash that you have no control over, the kind of crash that puts people in hospital and takes months of recovery - but I was riding (slowly, painfully) away from it.

I rode the Apex round town for a bit but the frame had twisted slightly and the handling was ruined. It had been the only thing I owned with a value over a hundred dollars, now it was worth nothing. I had just graduated from drama school and didn't have a job. I couldn't afford to have it straightened, I couldn't afford to put the parts on a new frame.

Eventually someone put me out of my misery and stole it - not a difficult thing to do since I was no longer locking it up. And it wasn't like I was doing it for the insurance, I didn't have any.

I should have invented some post-industrial ritual and laid it properly to rest, or turned it into a lamp stand, instead it was easier to just have it drop out of my life, no questions asked.

The end of the Apex. Three years of massive small adventures.

I had bought the Apex hire purchase from Burkes Cycles, where I had bought the hopeless Pantha BMX. I kept up the payments this time. There's not much worth saying about the bike itself - the only proper way to describe this bike is to tell you about the epic range of things I did on it.

And that is the measure of a really good bike, when the experiences are bigger than anything much you can say about it.

As a consequence everything must fall apart

It was a couple of months before I got around to getting another bike. Dan connected me with a guy he knew who was getting rid of a Scott Team Expert. Dan was sponsored by Scott for a while there so he knew when bikes were coming free after a season's racing.

This bike was a cut above The Apex. It looked like a race bike too, with a lovely deep-green flecked paint job and neon stickers. The frame was lighter, the groupset better and, most importantly, it had suspension.

When I say suspension I mean it had one inch of travel in the front fork care of 'elastomers' - basically springy pieces of plastic. It wasn't the most sophisticated suspension even back then, and often it felt like a pogo stick, but when you were moving up from solid forks even bad suspension can take the sting out of the trail.

I had some nice rides on this bike, for sure, but my life was changing fast and I wasn't coping that well. While I was at Drama School. when I had strong boundaries and routines, riding my bike had been a nice counterpoint to the daily challenge of living in close proximity to the armpits and egos of twelve other drama students. But now I was out in the messy real world trying to find work and to get along. Even when you are doing well being an actor is a worrying business and I was accumulating a lot of stress and anxiety. The old trick of riding it out was becoming less and less effective.

The first sign of the coming trouble: I was riding back home after performing in a very successful but stressful play and got a puncture, right out by the airport and near enough to midnight. A puncture, no big deal right? But I couldn't take it, I simply exploded in anger and tears and found myself repeatedly kicking the bike, to the point of hurting my foot. Stress, frustration, an internal storm of self-doubt and a nagging feeling of worthlessness all vomited out in a black rage. Not so much a puncture as a blow out.

And then the real shit started to come down.

I don't think I have ridden a bike as hard as the day she broke her pelvis. I had taken her up the Rimutuka incline, an easy, girlfriend-friendly, ride. At the top

there is a clearing and a couple of gentle banks. I was showboating, riding up the banks, encouraging her to have a go at riding down them.

If I can ride up it you can ride down it.

But she didn't know enough. Or rather, I hadn't taken the time to teach her. I was not in tune.

It was the kind of fall that I would have rolled out of and not so much as thought about, but she went over the bars and fell awkwardly on the cold, hard ground. I didn't see it, but I heard it. The scream. The kind of animal sound that leaves you in no doubt that something awful has happened. No visible broken bones, no scars, no blood, just a flood of pain deep in her core.

I thought she had broken her back.

There was no one around. We hadn't seen anyone in the last two hours. This was before mobile phones. We were five miles up a track.

It started to rain.

It was a difficult thing to do but I left her there, covered in a jacket, and rode as fast as I could towards the road. Half way down I came across some other riders and asked them to help, to stay with her when they got to the top.

Eventually I found a house with a phone, called up the ambulance service, and within ten minutes, as I was riding back down to the car, I could hear the helicopter overhead, some forty minutes after the accident.

It was 'only' her pelvis, not her back.

It was serious injury though and caused her a lot of grief. And me a lot of guilt. I felt responsible - something else to feel bad about. Her nerve-shredding scream lived with me for decades.

It took another year but the relationship fell apart too. She had seen something in me and was prepared to take a bet on it, but I threw it away. Not my best moment. I didn't have the tools to dig myself out of the hole I was in. I didn't want her in there too, to see that level of ugliness, and I didn't, 'couldn't', ask for help.

It is an unattractive form of egotism to think that your own pain is so much worse than everyone else's. I was incapable of seeing that, I was operating

under the logic of depression and anxiety, which has its own rules, its own way of seeing the world.

At the time the prevalent belief about the creative temperament was that suffering was part of the deal, the price of creativity. It's not true, I know that now, but at the time I put up with it all for a lot longer than I should have. I dealt with the symptoms as best I could, taking night-long walks, enduring the crying, feeling hopeless for days on end, and hiding everything from shame - all that was normal. But each stressful episode took me a little further out to sea, a little bit further from other people and any help they might offer.

Something I know now but didn't then - if you can't ask for help then there's no way out but down.

We are still in the early nineties. People with tattoos and beards still rode Harleys not Pashleys and were more likely to beat you up for fun than design you an app. Mental health issues weren't hashtags on Instagram, they stayed hidden.

Being an actor you are aware that the idea of self is contingent and partial. You are aware that narratives, particularly those the self tells itself in order to be healthy, are fictions. The ultimate narrative - the story of me - is as much a creation as Ulysses. Most of the time people don't even think about it, the creation and maintenance of a sense of self is just built into consciousness, it just happens.

But when you stress this mechanism with depression and anxiety and then load the complications of being an actor on top of that then the whole thing can fall apart pretty quickly. It's not inevitable that actors lose some sense of self - in fact actors usually have an excellent sense of themselves - but for someone like me who came into it a little broken it can be a one way ticket to being properly smashed.

Through this bad patch, which lasted a couple of years, I was still riding the Scott, and having good rides too, but they were becoming less about having a life than about avoiding it. I was still getting in some epics, but more and more I was simply taking off on the bike for a couple of hours and obsessing over a short obscure downhill, something that was edgy and required complete concentration.

I started hunting for new challenges, searching for difficult descents along the ragged edges of Mt Victoria, or in the obscure paths and gullies on the Miramar peninsula where I used to go as a teen on long, rambling walks. The more vertical and difficult the better - nothing less than total commitment erased my troubles.
I was riding by myself all the time now. Understandable perhaps, I didn't want to be responsible for anyone else on a ride, but worse than that I just didn't want to see anyone, I could barely tolerate people I didn't know very well. If I had been a climber this would have been my free solo period.

Longer bad episodes became regular, several days where the stress would build and build, self-loathing quickly following - why can't I cope with this? It got to the point that I wouldn't be able to do so much as enter a shop to buy anything - the thought of having to deal with people was too much.

Those who have been in this kind of territory will know how messy and desperate it is.

You wake up and for half a second you feel normal, then you gasp as the prospect of the rest of the day slams down on you. You hold it together long enough to do a show, or a rehearsal, and that seems like the easy bit of the day. You are acutely sensitive to everything and yet you feel unable to express it, like you are inflating inside yourself but unable to let off pressure. You bounce from anger to shame to desolation without being able to control the shifts. If you're lucky, you find sleep.

You will do just about anything to stop feeling this way. This is why people put a knife to their flesh or burn themselves - to puncture the horror. I remember talking to a therapist many years later and saying that I never self-harmed, that I only hit myself. He looked at me like I was bonkers and asked me how hitting yourself wasn't self-harm?

He had a point.

Eventually the pressure would break. Often I would ride or walk myself into a state of exhaustion until a final, engulfing wave of negative emotion would crash over me and then somehow I would fight my way to the surface, up into the sunlight again.

The irony is that after one of these episodes I felt fantastic. Not everyday great, beyond great. After the storm of a mind destroying itself passes, the silence and

the stillness are profound. Having no sense of self to defend you merge with everything around you. For a day or two you bathe in the arms of angels.

And then your head starts to duck under again. First for a moment, then an hour, then a day. The cycle repeats, in a darker key.

Here I was at a stage of my life where I should have been enjoying some of the rewards of hard work and talent but most of it was a misery. Don't get me wrong, I had some terrific times too and knew some wonderful people, but the up-down cycle was exhausting. There was no way this was going to keep going without something breaking.

The first thing to break was my bike. I can't remember what did it now, but I had a small crash, or jumped off something and the frame broke at a really unlikely point, at the drop out. Again I couldn't afford to repair it and I am not sure I even cared by then, because shortly after my mind broke.

I simply couldn't move. I was kneeling on the floor unable to take action, I couldn't so much as think of anything without it causing me so much stress that I would instantly burst into tears. This time there was no sight of calm on the other side of the crisis, this was a proper, incapacitating panic attack where bad thoughts kept twisting in on themselves without rest, turning each moment in to a hellish forever.

Catatonic on the outside, on the inside an endless scream. The kind of animal sound that leaves you in no doubt that something awful has happened. No visible broken bones, no scars, no blood, just a rising flood of pain deep in your core.
Even I knew I couldn't help myself out of this one. This was the end of the road; turn around and get help or end up dead pretty quickly.

I was, like many people approaching very dark places, certain that people would be better off without me - that I was utterly worthless and that anything was better looking at this endless vista of pain. I was one thought, one moment of resolve, away from the final act of negation.

Perhaps it was all that actor training, that ability to place yourself slightly to one side, like you are your own material, but I was able to find the thought that this wasn't inevitable and with that I was finally able to go for help. I knew I needed it, and fast.

Steph took me to the doctor. I spent an hour in tears explaining what had gone wrong, something of my history. The doctor reached for the big guns, prescribing some heavy duty tricyclics - old school sedatives. Addictive, dirty, very effective. I snatched the script out of his hand and spent the next week at Steph's house, hiding, while the drugs kicked in.

Anafranil. For depressive and panic disorder, with agoraphobic benefits.

An actor with agoraphobia, brilliant.

The next couple of months were spent recovering, being looked after by a couple of very good friends and getting used to being on strong drugs. My mental state certainly relaxed and I was very grateful for it, but the sudden shift into being artificially 'calmed' was not entirely comfortable - when you are used to feeling like utter shit for so long it's strange to feel less, like you have been gently lobotomised which is, of course, exactly what had happened.

I am sure I am preaching to the converted but for those who 'don't like' pharmacological solutions all I can say is until you have been in this space you have no idea what you are talking about. People get in real trouble with this. When it's a matter of life and death if you have a choice you choose life, and not in an ironic Trainspotting way, you just grab anything that looks like a handle and you are grateful for any relief it gives you.

It took a long time to sort of all this out - with a combination of drugs, meditation, cycling, therapy and a great deal of time and patience - but I had swung past the low point. Looking back I feel very fortunate to have had the education, insight and friends enough to see me through. And I was very glad that I had worked out many years previously that I didn't have the kind of brain that worked well with illegal drugs - throwing a bunch of opiates or stimulants into that mix could have resulted in a very messy end.

So what did I do with all this? I did the least logical thing. Instead of recovering and getting back to work I decided to leave the country. I was giving up everything just as I was getting good at something - something of a bad habit I am prone to.

This was the end of my career as an actor. Here I was at 27 without a degree or profession or much of an idea of what to do next. I only had one sustaining desire and that was to write. So I wanted to move from one tenuous career to another.

So the broken Scott went into a lock-up with the rest of my life. It didn't amount to much, the rest of my life - a pile of second-hand books, some clothes, some cycling kit and that was it. I had enough money for a return ticket to the UK where I would hang out for six months, then I planned to go and live in Australia.

I jumped on a plane and left the country. I had no idea at the time I wouldn't live in New Zealand again and if you'd told me that I probably would have said good riddance.

It's not the country I was fleeing of course, it was the idea of myself, the stains of my history on the streets.

Good riddance.

As if it were that easy to get away from yourself.

The Perfect Drug

> *"I only took drugs when absolutely necessary, which is nearly always."*
> Fausti Coppi.

For some the nobility of suffering is not enough. They ride to win. They willingly plunge themselves into years of pain, each racing season a bushy cactus of opportunities to suffer. Sometimes riders find they are not quite good enough, sometimes they find the deck is stacked against them. Sometimes they have bet all they have on this career and they need it to pay.

The win at all costs sociopath par excellence is Lance Armstrong. Nested around him were many men, not quite as good or possessed, who needed to get paid, or needed to be near the top step. They were all - including those they rode against, their managers, team sponsors and companies who ran racing and the UCI - saturated in EPO for a decade. Top to bottom, the whole stack of vested interests and participants was dirty. Even the spectators, wanting to be wowed by the heroic image of Armstrong as a cancer survivor, were implicated.

Armstrong's story, only unique for the scale and the intensity in which he destroyed people who threatened him, is but one of many that follow the same inevitable logic.

In its basic form it goes like this:

Axiom A: I want to win.
Axiom B: If I go faster I will win more.
Axiom C: Drugs make me faster.
Moral get out clause pre 1964: It's not illegal
Moral get out clause post 1964: Everyone else is doing it.
Conclusion: I'd be stupid not to take drugs.

Cycling and drugs have gone together like rhubarb and custard since the day the pedals started turning. Cycling is a 'winner takes all' sport, there has always been more to gain by cheating than by being caught. The difference between first and second in terms of legend, money and value is immense.

And cycling as a whole has always been about money. The Tour de France was created to sell newspapers, these days it can make stupid products a household name, or provide convenient green washing (looking at you Team Ineos). The

big-value sponsorships that sell ‘The Dream’ of self-perfection through exercise, right through to the Lottery-funded Olympic squads selling Brand Britain, it’s always been about the ROI from creating a heroic image to sell against.

What is more extraordinary is the number and range of drugs that have been used over the years. Before WWII cyclists took ‘normal’ drugs; Opium, cocaine, brandy. Painkillers, things to numb the sensation of effort, to get over tired muscles and rancid saddle sores. Early Tour De France riders would tuck ether-soaked handkerchiefs under their chins. Riders in six-day track events took everything they could, including small doses of strychnine as a energising tonic. Managers were prone to doping their charges as if they were racehorses. No great surprise then that the first death by doping happened on the track at the end of the 19th century.

After WWII the manufactured drugs kicked in, from powders and liquids to pills. Invented way back in 1887, amphetamines gained use in WWII as a way to keep soldiers going for long periods of time. Post war they quickly found a happy home in cycling. Champion Jacques Anquetil admitted doping in the 50s with a brazen attitude - of course we take drugs, shrugged it off.

As tests for drugs got better in the 60s the game started to change. For a start drugs were made illegal in cycling. That ruled out blatant use of amphetamines and teams started to look elsewhere, to the blood. It’s one thing to get some speed from your speed, it’s quite another to indulge in systemic blood doping. From transfusions of your own rested blood to artificially boosted blood carefully brewed in a lab by the team ‘doctor’, things started to get serious. They developed a half-decent test for transfusing (detecting plastic particles from the transfusion bags in the blood) and the game changed again in the 80s and early 90s - complex brews of growth hormone, cortisones, steroids, more sophisticated amphetamines and artificial opioids.

The 90s started the era of EPO. Originally meant for kidney failure patients, EPO artificially boosts your blood’s oxygen levels. This means better performance and a massive boost to recovery as oxygen is a key agent in the transfer of energy around the body. How much is this worth? About ten percent. When three weeks races are won by a number of seconds ten percent is a country mile. And they didn't stop using the other stuff either, they just chucked EPO into the mix, performance (not health) carefully managed by the team Doctor.

The lid was blown off this in the 1998 Tour. The whole Festina team was chucked out when a hapless masseur was caught with a boot load of EPO - like all drug empires the most risk lies with the mules. But then, outrageously, the EPO era lasted ten more years, right through Lance Armstrong's seven 'straight' wins and right to the extraordinary 2006 tour where six favourites weren't even allowed to start and the winner was retrospectively tested positive for testosterone and booted off.

During this period the use of EPO was tacitly tolerated (read, approved) by the world cycling authority, the UCI, under the directorship/dictatorship of Dennis McQuaid, the Seth Blatter of cycling.

It was all very dodgy - Armstrong failed a drugs test in the '99 tour, blamed it on trace drugs in saddle-cream and donated money for an EPO detection machine to the UCI in the same year. Breath taking hypocrisy.

So EPO was the big one, but even since the Armstong era some cyclists have continued to use EPO, confining it to out of season 'boosters' and micro-dosing. And they continued to use a whole range of drugs that had never gone away, from human growth hormone, cortisone, catabolic steroids to artificial opioids and increasingly sophisticated steroids.

Until very recently they were plenty of riders abusing Tramadol - a synthetic opioid:

> *"It was originally designed to be a bit of a low grade non-mind altering opioid for chronic pain, a bit like methadone in that you don't get a big high like shooting heroin but it's definitely an opioid and for an athlete in a sport that's painful everyday, it takes the edge off it and makes it less unpleasant. It's addictive too."*

And lately cyclists have been busted for taking pills called GW1516, an EPO-like medication that was discontinued at trial stage because they caused high levels of cancer in animal trials. How much do you need to want to win to risk sticking that kind of crap in your body? How much effort would you have to go to even find some?

If you follow the sport there will be no surprises in what I've written above. What's more worrying is that the big growth area (excuse the pun) is in amateur and particularly Masters competition. An amateur 'coach' was banned a year or two ago for injecting his 17 year old son intravenously with

Nandrolone (an anabolic steroid) without his son's knowledge. Classy. Abuse in Master's level cycling is rife, particularly of 'Doctor T', testosterone.

The future is, of course, doping at a genetic level. Just as we can use an individual's genome to make custom drugs to best treat cancer and genetic faults, there is no reason why the same thinking and technology couldn't be used in doping. I would be surprised if some kind of doping at this level wasn't being investigated now. And I suspect that the dopers have learned their lesson - there's no point in being ten percent better than the competition when one percent is good enough.

So that's pain and strength, the obvious areas for drug use in a sport, but what about drugs for the mind?

1996 Tour De France 'champion' Barne Riis 'won' on EPO. But it turns out he was also on Human Growth Hormone, steroids and Prozac at the same time. Prozac?

> *"The pills made me feel much more positive, which allowed me to see possibilities rather than limitations. This really seemed to help at stage races, which can be very stressful mentally, and where maintaining a positive frame of mind could really help."*

Here's another description of Prozac use from a pro rider of the 90s:

> *"The drugs lead you to other addictions. The anti-depressants almost automatically accompany other doping treatments. I took up to eight pills of prozac a day when I was racing... Prozac cuts the appetite, keeps you in another world, a world where you're not afraid of what you're doing. You're no longer afraid to inject yourself with all the crap. It takes you to a world where you don't ask any more questions, especially you don't ask your doctor questions either or your sporting director."*

That is an extraordinary quote. Eight prozacs a day? To keep you 'in another world?'

But the thing about Prozac (an SSRI - serotonin re-uptake inhibitor) is that it doesn't work unless you have depression. There is no benefit to people with normal mood, though there are side effects which are 'useful', like suppression of appetite. Riders were using Prozac to medicate away the depressive effects of the drugs they were using, the stresses of their career, and any innate tendencies towards depression.

While there is good evidence that at least one family of drugs regularly abused by cyclists, the corticosteroids, cause major depressive episodes, you would think that putting that amount of junk in your body and then pushing it to the limit would have mental health consequences, even if you weren't prone to mental illness in the first place. Frankly it would be difficult to be caught in such a trap, in a world that was pretending to be healthy but was full of addicts, and not to have some degree of lowered mood.

Self-medicating with antidepressants isn't just going to help you feel better about cheating, it means you can hide from any underlying depression for a very long time. And trust me, the 'underlying issues' will make themselves known to you sooner or later.

There are many stories of cyclists losing the plot once their career ends:

> *"Then one day all of the sudden it stops and you become dramatically depressed. Look at Pantani, Vandenbroucke and all the others we don't even talk about. There are numerous other cyclists and former cyclists that are addicted to cocaine, heroin and other medications."*

Note in the above quote that the cyclist equates heroin with 'medications' which in itself shows you how far drugs had become an accepted normal in his world.

Pantani, a very high-performing depressive, died a few years after the end of his career from a cocaine overdose. A friend describes visiting him prior to his death.

> *"The door was locked. The room was very hot. The room was in chaos. There were empty cans and a candle in a bottle. There was white powder everywhere. [...] He was smoking [cocaine], sniffing it, burning it, reducing it to resin or oil and putting the drops in his nostrils. He was eating it. Another physique would have collapsed."*

Vandenbrooke battled psychosis and depression and made multiple attempts on his own life, finally succeeding aged 34.

If you need further evidence of how doping destroys people then google Jesus Manzano whose confessions and selfies of him shooting EPO show you how close cheating with EPO makes you look like a junkie. You can see how the medicalised use of injections could make the transition to being a 'proper' drug addict once you retire easy. One might feel more justified as a doper than a junkie, but running around in cars to late night pickup points, sticking needles

into your arm, using makeup to hide the tracks, lying to everyone around you - the mechanics are the same, the journey similar.

If you have never heard the self-justifying bullshit of an addict then it's very similar to the self-justifying bullshit of a doper, you don't even need to change some of the phrases. Everyone else was doing it, it made me feel better, I was a better artist/writer/rider on it, yada yada yada.

A brilliant career outcome then - you torture yourself for fifteen years on the bike, take acres of drugs and diet like a model to make it through. If you are lucky you don't get caught. Then, at the end of it, at thirty five, you are dumped by the sport and - deprived of the drugs and/or excitement and with nothing much in the way of an education or alternate profession - you have to either have to grow up very quickly or you will become a depressive, junkie, petty thief or similar.

It's no wonder the traditional route out of the sport was to open a bar - you could at least drink yourself into an early grave surrounded by admiring locals.

But what does all of this mean for us, the weekend warriors, MAMILs and MAWILs, the commuters, tourists and casual cyclists? Where do we stand with drugs and cycling and mood? Is there any commonality between an Armstrong or a Pantani and ourselves?

It's clear that anxiety and clinical grade depression have a happy home in professional cycling, but what about us cyclists down here at ground level? What do cycling and depression do to each other when you experience them close together?

Let's start with the basics.

Material things, like bike frames and bridges, fatigue under stress and eventually break. Materials do not get stronger once they are created - it's a one-way path from being a beautiful frame in a bike shop to a rusty pile of tubes, or a shattered mess of carbon shards.

Only biological entities respond to stress by overcompensating and getting stronger.

Good stress ('eustress' to give it its clinical name) enlivens us, it makes us stronger. Going for a run, lifting small numbers of heavy weights, yoga - these all impose stress and are tiring but the mindbody bounces back through

overcompensation and thus gets stronger. This is the way that training for strength and endurance in any sport works.

The body thrives on it. First it loads you up with natural painkillers as you exercise, then afterwards it bounces back, it gives us small rewards for overcoming our lethargy - jolts of endorphin. You feel good after exercise, lifted. Sometimes the next morning getting out of bed is a bit challenging but then the day after that - boom - you feel awesome.

That's the way of healthy exercise; stress, recover, get better.

What happens when you add depression to that? The common thinking - well researched - is that cycling can be good for your mental health. Mild exercise in small to medium doses is a proven benefit to those suffering from mental health issues.

There is also good evidence that exercise can have very good long-term effects on your brain:

> *"Although physical exercise is an acute stressor, chronic [regular] exercise can have neuroprotective effects instead. These effects are illustrated by the finding that subjects who had undergone physical training had lower levels of cortisol both at rest and in response to a stressor than sedentary subjects. We conclude that regular physical training can reduce the severity of several symptoms that are related to various mental disorders such as depression, AD (Althzeihers) and PD (Parkinsons)."*

But this doesn't mean that exercise will make chronic mental conditions magically better. The opposite of depression is not feeling good, it's feeling normal. That sounds counter intuitive, but the chemical pathways are different. Serotonin is the one that monitors mood and endorphins relate to feeling good. This means it is perfectly possible to be in an overall wretched state and yet get a rush from cycling. Again, this sounds counter intuitive, but cycling depressives will recognise that as being true.

This can be a complex mental space to be. You can be enjoying your ride but can be floored by the effort of fixing a puncture. Sometimes the mental effort of hunting around the house for all the gear needed to go out on a ride can make you ill with worry and anger. This makes getting on the bike a complicated thing - you know it can do you good, but at the same time there are plenty of

triggers for bad stress and panic attacks: fatigue, mechanicals, rain, over-reaching yourself, traffic.

And there's simply no way the euphoria from a good ride or race can compete with serious clinical depression. What's awful is that you feel like it should. People tell you to get out more, to ride it off. But that creates more pressure. The worst thing is someone telling you to go for a ride to 'clear your head'. When you are seriously depressed this is about as patronising as it gets. If you just ride more you'll get better? Nope.

There is a benefit to exercising on the bike, the endorphins give you a moment of relief, they give you a chance to glimpse something else. However research on the benefits of cycling tend to indicate that the effects tail off quite quickly. The benefit is measurable with 15 minutes of mild exercise, peaks at 30 and remains beneficial up to 90 minutes, but after that there is no further effect. So that four-hour ride on the weekend is about as good for mental health as a ride to work. From the study quoted above:

> *"There are many neurobiological hypotheses that may explain the wide variety of observed responses to exercise. Acute exercise appears to improve mood by activating specific cortical areas and by inducing the release of neurotransmitters and trophic factors that contribute to adherence to a program of regular physical activity. Chronic [regular] physical exercise appears to induce both neurogenesis and angiogenesis, which are important for improving behavioural and cognitive function and for improving the health of patients with mental disorders. Moreover, as the studies of athletes that were discussed in this article have shown, physical exercise can modulate mental health in both constructive and destructive ways."*

Reread that last sentence - physical exercise can modulate mental health in both constructive and destructive ways. That is to say it's not a given that it's an outright benefit all the time. Exercise is 'obviously' a benefit, but things get less clear when the person you are talking about is already taking exercise to the extreme.

Serious endurance athletes do not have a normal relationship to exercise. I'll come back to this in later posts, but let's just say for now that when ordinary people say 'some exercise will help' they don't have a six hour MTB winter epic, a double-century road ride or a Paris-Brest-Paris in mind, they are more likely

thinking of an amble up the towpath for half an hour - the kind of riding normal people do.

When you are mentally ground down over-exercising is not a great way to recover. By exercising too much you make things worse. The good stressor becomes the chronic bad stress. Riding a bike for hours a day makes it a chronic low level stress, no better than the day at the office you are trying to get away from.

> *"Although regular exercise has the potential to promote mental health, an excessive level of exercise can have adverse effects, such as overtraining. In addition to exercise, other factors associated with a high level of pressure to perform well and other stressors, contribute to the high prevalence of mental disorders among elite athletes."*

Overtraining is now recognised as a serious issue in endurance athletes. Even many mentally-healthy cyclists live in a state of chronic depletion. They ride too much, don't recover properly and exercise for performance not fitness or health. They may be 'bike fit' but they are literally out of shape - waddling along with their bums out, their pelvis tilted to hell (I am guilty on that score). Really talented amateurs have it the worst - they have the stress of fitting the training in around sitting at a desk for 8 hours a day and don't have professional masseurs, chefs and structured downtime to cope. You would be surprised how much time pro cyclists just sit around, recovering.

Overtraining doesn't mean being a bit tired:

> *"It is also worth discussing the acute effects that exercise has on mood and adherence to an exercise program… diagnoses of various mental disorders are surprisingly common among athletes who have been subjected to over training, fatigue, competition-related stress, injuries, failure and retirement."*

So if that's the case, then we have to ask - might it be particular personality types who get into this kind of thing in the first place?

If you have a propensity towards depression or obsession then perhaps cycling was a good way to cope with some of the symptoms of a fledgling mental illness?

Perhaps you were running away from something, perhaps you had found something you could pour all that mental energy that you had into, somewhere

all that intensity and anger could be transmuted into something that looked like winning, that was approved by society?

Taken to the extreme perhaps you want to break yourself apart? One academic found that a significant percentage of ultra distance riders on the Ride Across America were doing it to explicitly trigger a crisis in self - to watch themselves crack and see if they could put themselves together again.

> *"Most people who are driven to be the absolute best in anything… when you think about it, it's quite abnormal behaviour and there must be a driving force behind that other than the absolute want of glory."*
> Graham Obree

Sounds healthy right?

Exercise at an extreme can easily become a form of self-harm. And it can be tricky to tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy exercise, particularly if you don't have a coach.

In my case cycling had always been something that had given me a way to deal with life - a way to ground my spinning brain, a compensation for a lack of faith, a tool to use to induce exhaustion or escape all the pesky, irritating people. A lot of that was about putting distance between myself and trouble. Of course trouble is faster and fitter - eventually it will catch you.

I am not saying that my depression was caused by cycling, far from it, but after fifteen years of hard riding it was doing nothing for me. More often than not it became an acute negative stress. Cycling had become part of the problem, part of the lived experience of depression and misery.

I am certainly not alone in thinking this way - here is an extract from a blog by a serious amateur cyclist:

> *"I have become more aware of the tightrope I walk in relation to cycling: it does make me feel good more often than not, but I have also had experiences before, during and after rides where I have had quite extreme negative episodes which do not seem to be coincidental. Sometimes the stress of getting ready to go out on a ride seems to be a trigger (not being able to find my pump or glasses; realising that the bike I want to use is unroadworthy or unsuitable for the weather); sometimes I have had to stop by the side of the road, completely numb; and sometimes after a ride I*

have felt like I never want to ride again."
Col de Spandelles

Earlier I asked if there was any commonality between ourselves and a Pantani or an Armstrong. For many years I thought that, because I had done a little training, that all I had to do was scale that to understand what a serious cyclist would feel.
I no longer think that. I know my efforts and talents are barely in the foothills of the pros. I know this definitively because I often use a power bike in the gym and the figures coming out of that don't lie - I am a recreational cyclist at best.
No, my similarity to Pantani lies in a different place.

Let's do a thought experiment. Imagine my life had been somewhat different and I had become a professional cyclist and who suffered from crippling anxiety and depression. What if I had been someone like a Pantani, someone who loved to ride fast and had a huge amount of talent and opportunity but now looked at the bike and wondered if I had what it takes to win at the top level?

And what would I have done at that moment had someone offered me a chemical solution?

I answered this question as soon as I had started taking antidepressants - if you're desperate enough you'll take anything.

I would have taken the EPO. The dopers desperation was the win at all costs, mine was to stop drowning, but we were all willing to take the drugs to get the benefit. There's the communality.

I would have taken the EPO, then added the human growth hormone, the cortisone, the lot. Then I would have needed the SSRIs to feel ok and then, when my career ended, I would have been an utter and total mess.

Just as well I wasn't a successful pro then! Better to be mortal, better not to be a suffering saint of the bicycle, better not be be dead five years later in a hotel room with a nose stuffed full of powder (Pantani), better not be a morally bankrupt has-been endlessly making excuses for themselves and trying to find races which will let him ride (Armstrong), better not to end up in rehab after beating up prostitutes (Ulrich).

So what's the cure for all this? If cycling is meant to be part of the cure but it's really part of your problem, what do you do?

You have to stop.

Not ‘rest’. Stop.

For a good while.

At this time of my life - I was 28 - I just gave up riding for a while. It wasn’t conscious and if someone told me that as part of my cure I had to give up cycling I would have found that incomprehensible. It just happened as a natural consequence of other things I was doing.

I couldn’t afford another bike after the Scott died, I was saving for something else. I went to the UK for six months and went on precisely one bike ride in all that time, on a borrowed bike, in winter on busy roads - it was horrible.

It wasn’t just the cycling I stopped. I didn’t really worry much about a career or the future. I sat in cafes in Manchester and drank lots of strong dark tea, walked in the Peak district, did quite a lot of writing and didn’t so much as look in a bike shop window.

I stayed with a lovely, very normal, English family and learned how to drink warm bitter. I went to ‘house parties’ and House Parties, I discovered deep bass and blippy-skwarky music and went to The Hacienda. I stayed a long long way from any drugs but the ones that the doctor gave me, and generally chilled the fuck out.

There is plenty of hope for depressives who also happen to ride. There is hope over the months and years it takes to get better, and a bike can be part of the cure given time, but there is no point making yourself ride if you’re not getting anything from it.

And somewhere in that winter in The North of The North I got some sanity and motivation back, and when my six months visitors Visa ran out I got on the plane and made my way to Manchester’s doppelganger, Melbourne, where I began another life entirely.

A bike is a bike is a bike

Stepping out of the English winter and onto the tarmac at Tullamarine was like jumping into the middle of a nuclear explosion. Searing white light, a wall of intense heat.

Welcome to Australia.

On the shuttle bus into town everything seemed obscene - too clean, too bright. Buildings had room for litter around them, houses were detached. After the compression of space in the UK it seemed that even atoms had more room to move here. I knew what to expect, I was from this side of the world, but I was still having that culture shock that brit kids get when they go down under - the unsettling notion that you might have room to breathe, the sudden giddiness of possibility and space.

I wasn't travelling though, I was settling. Staking out new ground to build a healthier self on.

I had some friends who let me couch surf for a couple of weeks, then I moved in with Evan, an old friend from Uni, as a lodger.

Evan was a writer and, like all good writers, worked in the secondary service industry. He was generous enough to hook me up with my first job in Melbourne - working at 'Moonlight Cinema' in the Botanical Gardens. And as I often finished picking up bottles and putting away the screen way after midnight, after public transport had ground to halt, I needed transport, quickly.

I found a suburban bike shop down the road that did a side line in trade-ins and had a look around. And there it was, The Green Bike. It would best be described as a piece of utter crap. There were three reasons I bought it: It was the right size. It was dirt cheap. I didn't have a choice.

How cheap? $80. In terms of quality it was about as poor as you could get. The frame was made of very heavy plain-gauge tubing. It had mushy, pointless brakes. It had a saddle that looked like a cheap vinyl sofa in a student flat after a rowdy night. Steel rims guaranteed that it wouldn't stop in the rain. There was no alloy involved - it must have weighed near enough to 35 pounds.

And yet the advantages of having a bike, any bike, are instant. For the cost of two midnight taxi rides from work to home I had a whole summers worth of transport.

As the roads were generally empty late at night it was great fun riding home after a few late night beers in a t-shirt without lights, blowing along suburban streets that were still radiating heat from the day.

I didn't have any fancy gear left. I wore normal shoes, normal shorts, ordinary clothes. I was just a guy with no money trying to figure out what to do next. I had the two tools that I needed to start again - a battered old laptop to write on and something to get around on.

In London today I walked out of the office and took photos of bike racks within a couple of minutes walk. You can see examples of The Green Bike everywhere - pieces of rubbish, utility bikes, cheapies, bikes that get people through university, that get people to jobs in awkward places, bikes you wouldn't cry over if they got nicked.

I love bikes like these - a bike is a bike is a bike after all.

With transport, accommodation and a basic income all sorted it was time to get on with other things. After my time out in the UK I knew what I wanted to do. I went back to University. Someone thought I had enough writing cred to let me do a Postgrad writing course. And, as we know, writing is an easy career and a great way to make a steady living.

To support this ambition I worked for the next three years in arthouse cinemas ripping tickets and scooping ice creams, or 'choctops' as they are known in Aus. I started at the Valhalla, site of the much hated (by staff at least) Blues Brothers and Rocky Horror nights. Then Evan and I both moved on to the equally infamous Lumiere. This was the kind of place where there was no running hot water; the kind of place where a splash of junkie blood on a cubicle wall slowly darkened to black over the years despite being the toilets being 'cleaned' every night; the kind of place where you picked up crisp packets very carefully after screenings of films like Lolita.

It was the kind of place that seems a bit shit at the time but gave you everything you needed in order to do something else. Everyone who worked there was doing something else. Artists, writers, designers, filmophiles. Even the nervy

projectionist was doing something else - he was working on an early demise through alcohol and drugs.

I rode the green bike to work of course. It was about four miles, the same distance I used to ride to high school. I could still do that pretty comfortably in under fifteen minutes. I was in my late twenties - in terms of strength as a cyclist you are peaking about then - so averaging over 20mph, even on that rubbish bike, was easily achievable.

Also, Melbourne. Flat. And you have to ride fast.

The roads are very wide. The traffic is insanely fast. People do fifty up on the big arterials that surround the inner city despite the nominal 30mph limit. A substantial number of the population have V8s and the big-dick attitude to go with them. Going to the front of the line at a set of lights is like extreme surfing - you are waiting for the great rolling wave behind you to smash you into little pieces if you aren't on your game. On those roads the choice is ride fast or die. I rode at maximum heart rate pretty much all the time.

Aside from the occasional run in with aggressive drivers life was pretty good. With a chemical buffer in between me and the catastrophe of day to day life, and with my welcome anonymity, I was beginning to see that everyone wasn't judging me every second of the day, that it was possible to relax and be my multifarious selves without exploding with stress.

My writing course included working on this brand new thing called the internet. Two streams came into one - my love of writing and my fascination with the digital content production studio we call 'a computer'. This was early days for the internet, 1997, when it was all new and interesting. I 'got' the internet quickly and very soon I was making money designing and building websites, and teaching people how to do the same.

What wasn't going so well was The Relationship. I spent a few years living with a painter who was wildly talented but not getting as much airtime as she deserved. Word of advice - don't have two depressive and underachieving creatives in the same relationship, it's hard work.

Without the 'excuse' of anxiety and depression I was finding out just who I was and in the context of a relationship that wasn't a pretty picture - sorry Helen.

Having had zero role-models here, and after making a mess of this part of my life for many years, I was having to relearn how to actually get on with people

'sober'. An ongoing and not entirely comfortable process, but then we all need a challenge in life right?

Two years into Melbourne life I was still riding The Green Bike; from home in Westgarth to uni in Hawthorn to the cinema in town, from the cafe to the gallery to the theatre, from Sunday morning casual soccer to choir to meditation.

The Green Bike was everything I needed in transportation but now I was making a little more money from web design I started buying bits and pieces for the it. It become my first Pokemon bike.

Pokemon is the endless card game built on the idea of power ups and evolutions of cute anime style characters. As every ten year old knows Pichu becomes Pikachu becomes Raichu. By buying or earning power-ups you, as the Pokemon trainer, take an entry-level character and turn it into a warrior.

I was about to start doing the same thing with bikes.

Every now and then I would call into that same shop where I bought the Green Bike and see what they had in their pile of parts. Bike shops often have a bin of discarded parts that might just about work and that aren't worth much.

"Any alloy cranks in at the moment?"

They get to know you pretty quickly.

It started, as it must, with better tyres and brake pads. These are an essential for safety. After that the steel rims have to be replaced with alloy, because then can stop in the rain. And lighter wheels make it easier to get up to speed and stay in front of those V8 drivers. So they were an essential upgrade.

Then the crankset. It's a rotating part so any weight saved here is beneficial - and better cranksets are stiffer, putting more of your ompff into the back wheel. Essential, obviously.

Saddles are very personal, so you need a new one of those, it's essential for comfort. Better brakes are a no-brainer at this point, followed by lighter handlebars, seat pin and stem.

That leaves the final essential upgrade - the frame.

Over a year my green bike slowly evolved into something completely different; the white bike.

A bike is a bike is a bike, sure. But now it's one bike, then another slightly better one, then another even better than that.

Not that the white bike was anything amazing either. It was a proper mix-up; a hybrid frame with cantilever brakes, clearance for the fatter tyres I ran on it - the rest was all road bike. The bike-aware will realise that I had created what would now be called a 'gravel' or 'adventure' bike - a crossover bike with road and mountain bike features. Perfect for the combination of road and river-tracing bike tracks in Melbourne. I had created a bike perfectly adapted to my needs and free of any particular dogma.

At this stage of my life I wasn't riding my bike with other people or competing or doing anything other than getting around town so I only had myself to please. I remember one occasion when, drafting a fancy racer through town, he called back "Get that fucking shit box away from me." It was like he was morally affonted by my bicycle, and fair enough, it was pretty bad. But then no one felt compelled to steal it either.

I got another couple of years out of the white bike, it got me to my new jobs - working for a design agency out in Port Melbourne, then as an associate lecturer in web design. In this time I also had two plays on and was feeling like I might just stay in Melbourne for the rest of my life. It suited me. And then...

All of a sudden, the turn of the century was hours away. I was 34 and I was having a childish, protracted argument with the painter about what we would do at twelve o'clock. We ended up sitting on the sofa, fuming at each other. Stalemate. Something had to change. 34 and going nowhere.

I moved out and went to a one-bed over in Richmond, home of Vietnamese restaurants, mindless junkies prowling for heroin and The Tigers aussie rules team.

And a very nice bike shop frequented by racer types.

On and off the grid

In England cycling used to be huge. Before a car was cheap enough for a family to afford - well after the second world war - your choice was train, bus or bike. For shorter distances a bike let you ride where you liked when you liked, it let you get a job in the next town. A bike opened the door to new jobs and new pastimes. A cycling holiday was not the contradiction in terms many view it as these days. Rattling around as a group through the English countryside wasn't just something that blokes on £5000 mountain bikes and Audis to put them on did.

There were bike shops in every town and most of them sold their own brand of bike. Some built the frames themselves and others slapped stickers on other makers frames to rebrand them, an effective way of spreading their name through a local area.

The rise of the car killed the bike as a form of transport and through the 70s and 80s those shops closed or became something else, most commonly a toy shop. By the time I started cycling there were just enough shops to support the cyclists who were left, the enthusiasts. Enthusiasts were passionate but there were not enough to support much of a local bike industry, specially when Taiwan started to come on tap as a cycling super power.

The shops in England that survived had names that I knew, even in New Zealand - Yates, Geoffrey Butler, Condor, Bob Jackson. These were workshops, retail shops and bike builders combined, the owner often welding bikes, selling them, and organising the Sunday ride out. A lot of these shops had their own clubs as well and a few, a very few, had their own racing teams.

Australia, while having a much smaller population than the UK, still had a few of these shops left at the turn of the millennium and the nearest to me was Mascot cycles in Richmond (1938-2012). The owner made frames and put his name, Blucher, on them.

I wandered into his shop one day, saw a halfway decent second hand Blucher for $400 that was about the right size and walked out with it.

This bike was made of bottom of the rung 501 tubing, still had friction levers on the downtube for shifting and had a mere 14 speeds in the age when 16 and 18

were common. Any serious racer would have turned their noses up at it, but it was a lot faster than the green/white bike.

Despite the popularity of disc-braked adventure bikes these days the design of the steel racing bike barely changed from the end of WWII to the turn of the millennium for a simple reason - it's a great format. A good steel frame, 700c wheels, drop bars and 25c tyres can take on any western road in existence at a good clip.

It was Ray Blucher himself who sold the bike he had made to me and, after I confessed a racing past, he generously invited me to join his Sunday morning shop rides. I never took him up on his offer. I never spent a minute in my six years riding around Melbourne in another cyclists company. There are many racers in Melbourne and many great road routes but I didn't do any of them.

Melbourne now has the standard range of neo-cool cycling activities - a Brompton club, Car Park Hill Climbing, Urban Cyclocross, Alley Cats, City by bike tours, Tweed Run, the lot - but back then you either raced or kept to yourself. Consequently I was either riding to get somewhere or riding solo, doing the kind of rides that I now call 'Cycloflanneuring'; just riding around looking at stuff.

Without The Relationship I had more time to roam, and a real need to do so. I needed to be out and about, not sitting still and wilting into a featureless blob of self doubt and recrimination. Processing is best done indirectly, you are always better off doing something like taking a walk than sitting on a couch chewing your nails.

So I was out riding a lot, with no agenda. I wasn't bothered with anything that looked like training, I looked at maps and explored a series of squiggly lines that circled Melbourne's central grid, light-gravel bike ways, all rideable on a road bike. They were significantly safer than proper roads and a lot more fun.

A bike is the best way to see the totality of a city. You don't just see the centre, dumped there by public transport, you see the suburbs, the outer ring, the semi-industrial edges, the really crap bits.

In Melbourne the fantasy of the colonial city state starts with the concept of the grid. The plan printed on a piece of paper is a pitch, a way to sell the idea of progress to people who had no real freedom in England. The rectangular plot of land was an affordable promise of opportunity, the way to step out from

underneath the crushing domination of the class system. It was the same story in America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand - the city grid was a promise to people who moved there that things would be better.

London is filthy, crooked in all senses, but the colonies - what promise! Everything will be different! Straight lines! A clean slate! Look at this plan folks, see how reliable and clean and rational it is? Come and get your own piece of the dream - buy a ticket!

The only thing that would get in the way were the disorganised and ‘naïve’ natives. But the 'logic' of economics - the saleable plot, the packaging of opportunity - could overcome the messiness of the local oral and social traditions by putting them in an 'outside' that the plots themselves created. Even easier when the indigenous people had no formal way to show ownership beyond, of course, thousands of years of occupation.

The plot of land, the act of creating a saleable item, also created murder. Ownership of the land by an individual in a rectangle is a kind of imported insanity when you confront the nature of a continent like Australia. But it was the insanity of people who had guns and will, and to serve that insanity the hills and water and vegetation and indigenous people are pushed back, or pushed down, or pushed over the edge of a cliff, or shot to oblivion.

In Melbourne urban planning, the bastard love child of Colonialism and Modernism, had long ago ground out a semblance of victory. Planning is meant to manage risk and maximise resource use, but it also erases casual and oral knowledge. When cities are created on an imported model they erase the knowledge of how to live in these environments. The 1m waterfall that kept seawater out of the upper Yarra river was dynamited in the late 1890s and with it complex freshwater marshlands which had sustained the local aboriginal were destroyed.

In valleys prone to flash floods and deadly raging fires indigenous people lived in lightweight transportable dwellings, ready to move at a moment’s notice. Europeans built houses and buildings there and ignored the indigenous place names that indicated where the fire and water would come, and have been caught out, often, since. The indigenous locals knew that risk is not abstract, a flash fire still kills people no matter how statistically unlikely it is. The concept of order imparted by a rectangle is meaningless against a fire that is 40 metres high and moving faster than you can run.

When you have only lived in a city it seems like the city is that by which everything is measured, but this is just learned stupidity. You can only see your stupidity on the ground. You can only start to unlearn it by unwinding the rational skein, by getting off the grid.

Turning off a busy street on a hot day, with drivers stewing to fury in their tin-tops, diving down a track to come alongside a cooling creek surrounded by that pinky-green bush that only Australia has, was always a good moment.
Riding the creek tracks was completely different to being on the grid. You followed the meandering swash of old streams and riverbeds, feeling that you had reached the real body of Melbourne, the curling veins and sinews of the land that the grid was trying to deny. You could ride at a good clip on the six-foot wide paths, white hot in the heat, occasionally dodging snakes, for hours on end without repeating your route.

On the weekend I would take off on an all-day rides on these tracks. I had the time and energy to ask questions like 'What's it like to ride to the airport?' Or 'what happens at the end of this squiggle?' Or 'Can I ride to Heidi?' And more than that, not only where does it take me but 'What's the nature of that journey?'

The modern explorer, the psychogeographer, goes outside to find out more about what is inside, to find out how much they have been constructed, to shake that off and strive to find an uncolonised area in themselves. We know what's there physically but we don't know how we feel about it yet. We try to escape the habitual, we try to swap expectation for direct experience.

Cycling a path that wiggles and dips around a water course shows you how environment works in pulses and cycles, spirals and bursts, not neat abstractions, not projections or squares. As I rode further out into the hinterland of Melbourne I saw more and more of this, more and more of the tatty edge of managed environments, the limits of planning. At the end of industrial parks and under the arterials there is nature curling over the concrete. Riding on the outskirts I saw that the distance between the layer of civilisation and the hot brew of nature underneath is next to nothing.

Sometimes it felt like the city was laid on top of the continent like a giant piece of paper - if you pulled up a corner there was the baking orange earth right there, a palpable presence, daring you to engage with it directly.

I spent a year doing this, riding out of town, avoiding roads, coming home covered in dust. I guess this was all about some kind of yearning for the authentic. Not the authentic of nature in a pure state - we've mostly lost that - but wanting to know what the real story is. What have we done to this place? What's underneath, on the underside, around the next corner? And who am I who is riding on it?

I was, thirty four, unattached, floating across the bike paths, themselves barely anchored to the ancient continent of Australia. I wasn't making a dent in anything much, not leaving any impression. What did I matter? What was I bringing to anyone? Unpicking the logic of false belonging, of colonialism, I had become a stranger in my own life.

At some point in life you start to see that you need more than instant pleasures and cheap thrills. You start to see the cycles that underlie culture, that not everything portrayed as new and exciting is so and what you used to think was boring might hold some reward.

You start to see that you need to invest to get anything back.

Moving to Melbourne I thought I would live there forever. But, having grown up a lot, having finally found a drug-free equilibrium and having unearthed a love of writing and a new career, I found I was done with it.

I was thinking of home again, and the people who lived there. New Zealand seemed like an option. But the next call to action would take me back to a place I had been before and deeply hated. I'd spent a couple of weeks there in '95 and loathed every second of it and swore I would never return.

The great maw, the witty genius, the bully, the mother, the most manic-depressive of cities. I couldn't quite believe it but I was about to throw myself willingly into the great maelstrom again.

London, England.

Rat bike

Mirror lives.

Here I am, seven years later, standing in the same airport I thought I would never see again, this time wanting in rather than fleeing. I am 35. Everything I have in the world is in a suitcase at my side. I have the grand total of £800 in traveller's cheques in my backpack.

It's October, the skies are already grey and will stay that way for six long months. Someone described living here through winter as like living inside a Tupperware box. It's true, but I don't know that yet.

I am an immigrant, but a first-world immigrant, lucky enough to be able to pursue a new country and life purely because I am entitled to, because I have a visa that, ironically, my colonial past grants me. And I am doing that foolhardy thing that you should never do, I am chasing a woman halfway around the world in the hope it might work.

It's not just any woman, it's Steph. She's invited me over, with romantic intent. It's brave of me to cross the world, yes, but even braver of her. She has seen me on the floor with anxiety, shared the stage with me, weathered my worst character traits and somehow still liked me.

We'd bumped together attending mutual friends weddings back in New Zealand, lovely people making good and not so good choices, but making choices and committing to them.

The thing that had galvanised me was that Steph had been ill. So there was no time for my habitual dithering and prevarication, it was now or never, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if it was never.

Now meant London.

Steph was one of exactly two people I knew here. Dave, the other one, I had met as a bike courier, and together we had run NZ's first Rollerblade hire van, way back in 1991. He had just started an online gift company with a couple of mates. He took me under his wing, got me into the company packing boxes out of their garage in Brixton and then let me prove my worth as the go-to web guy. These days it would be called a start-up, back then it was four friends with an idea

willing to not pay themselves for a year in the hope it would get big and they would get rich.

I took the tube for the first week. I thought it was utter insanity. I needed a bike to get to work and I had no money at all. Starting again, again.

The local boys I was working with in the Brixton lock-up knew a few things about life and about London. Over the sounds of packing tape being wrapped around boxes of novelty gifts I got an education about the way that 'Cash London' worked. There are a huge array of loose networks of people in London who generally use cash for everything. Some of these are tradies (cash to escape the VAT) but mostly it's all about that low-level criminal activity that is common enough to barely warrant notice in London – small consumer goods, recreational drugs.

They knew how things worked. Take bike thieves. While it's pretty easy to steal a bike it's clearly wrong and people do sometimes go to prison for it. However it's very hard to get arrested for buying a stolen bike. You could theoretically be charged with handling stolen goods but if you can keep a straight face when you say you thought the bike was the property of the person who sold it to you then you're clear because there is no need for paperwork. And really, do police have the time to be bothered with all this when there are half a million bike thefts a year in the UK - and presumably half a million dodgy sales on the back of that? No.

In various markets, in certain shops (looking at you Cash Convertors) and on Gumtree it was (and remains) easy enough to buy a stolen bike with zero chance of actually getting caught out.

So, on the advice of the London boys, I went to a local hotspot for the trading of hot bikes, the arches at the north end of Brick Lane.

The arches are long gone, the alt-hipster container mall at the new Hoxton Station covers the ground now, but they were the most Dickensian scene of any in London I had seen, then or since.

Ducking inside I stepped back a hundred and fifty years, right into the pages of Mayhew's Victorian 'London Underworld'. There was no electricity, the dark was kept back with candles and torch light. The destitute and desperate had laid blankets on the damp earth and displayed a few meagre goods on them - a beaten pair of shoes, a comb, an exercise book – the kinds of detritus you could

just pick up off the streets in front of people's houses. There were no stalls, I imagined the sellers slept there as well and everyone just jammed their pitches together as their allegiances dictated. It was unaccountably rammed with people looking down at the discards for sale and getting from one end to the other meant pushing your way through a fog of damp woollen coats. What anyone would want to buy from such a place was beyond me - was it the spectacle people came for, the 'thrill' of seeing such desperation?

At the far end of the arches, where the grey light started to bloom again, were the bicycle thieves. You wouldn't know the bikes were for sale if you drove past in a car, they were just leaning against a wall. A group of young men in trackies and caps were standing around smoking and chatting amongst themselves. They stood far enough away from the bikes that they could deny any connection if a copper should swing by. They could just shrug and walk away.

The men would be children of east end natives without much in the way of prospects beyond spraying the edges of their territory and dealing drugs inside them. These were the kind of young men who buzz you on stolen scooters, daring you to say something; the kind of young men you do not want to come across on your ride home across the Hackney Marshes. They were an aeon from the top of the social hierarchy in London, but they were also a long long way from having to spread their wares on blankets.

Most of the two dozen bikes there were pretty awful, and there were a few that were very good bikes, the kind of thing that would have been my pride and joy. I couldn't go near them, that felt too personal. There was just one bike that caught my eye, the kind of bike a courier would use, a rat bike. Just my size.

I went over and touched it. As if by magic one of the men appeared by my side and whispered a price in my ear. Flushed and guilty I agreed and handed over the cash. From memory £80. The young man never touched the bike, just took my money and walked away again. The whole transaction took less than 10 seconds.

A rat bike is something that looks old and abused but is heavily customised for city riding. Couriers have rat bikes, perfect for sprinting across the city. This one had a frame from a rigid and light mountain bike frame by a company called Ribble. The forks were solid, non-suspension, much faster across town. It had V brakes and had had the number of gears reduced from mountain bike standard 24 down to eight. Tough mountain bike wheels with slicks and a low and long

stem topped with a set of narrow low-riser bars. I knew that whoever had done the work on this bike had real taste because the seat was a Flite, a proper racing saddle favoured by racers in the early 90s. The whole thing looked, at first glance, like an utter pile of rubbish but it was actually a fully-tricked out ninja bike.

Riding it back to Finsbury park I knew my eye had been right - I had bought a winner. It was super aggressive, stopped on a dime and was very flickable – a perfect city bike.

And so began the ongoing adventure of commuting by bicycle in London.

For the whole first year I got horribly lost. The sun had always been in the North and now it was in the South, so I would look at a map, know that I was meant to be going one way and then ride the other way because my internal compass was 180 degrees wrong. I was literally wired the wrong way.

That meant I was pulling out of the traffic every five minutes, getting one of the old TFL London cycling maps out of my bag and trying to figure out where the hell I was, where I was meant to be going, only to ride three hundred yards up the street to do the same again. No smart phones yet, no GPSs. It was torture.

And London has nothing like a grid. In Melbourne you could navigate a new route just my memorising left and right turns. In London two left turns can bring you back on yourself and coming into an intersection with five or more possibilities is common, peaking at the infamous seven dials in Covent Garden. London's a circus of angles and curves, a labyrinth made out of ancient alleys, roads built on the course of old riverbeds, droving routes, a melange of crap town planning ideas from across the centuries. Add to that the curves in the mighty Thames and the history of bridges that cross it and you have a beautiful but chaotic and barely navigable cityscape.

It's made even more complicated by the fact that roads are looked after by the boroughs, so road marking and 'bike lanes' (read painted lines that cars ignore anyway) can literally disappear in the middle of a street as you cross the boundary from one council to another.

The final difficulty was the vehicles. There are just too many in not enough space. Unlike Melbourne, where you can comfortably get up to 50mph between lights on suburban streets, the average traffic speed in London was twelve miles per hour when I arrived. Twenty years later it is now eight. So speed isn't a

problem when you are riding – it's proximity and compression that are the challenge. With the constant variety of intersections, roads expanding and tightening, traffic furniture, all the taxis, buses and construction traffic fighting to get to the next lights before they change you just have to be totally onto it all the time.

My first route to work included twisting through ancient Clerkenwell, the cyclist-crushing horror of Blackfriar's Bridge, the death trap of Elephant and Castle and the always chaotic and colourful Camberwell High Street.

One thing I didn't have to contend with back in 2001 were other cyclists. The post London-bombing bike boom had yet to happen. On my twelve mile ride I would see a half a dozen cyclists on a good day in summer.

I rode the rat bike for three years straight, pretty much day in, day out. I made a few simple changes to the bike (a new back wheel when it died) and 'single speeded' it, replacing the chain and tyres when I needed to. I put some clipless pedals on it at some stage. It was an absolute rocket.

I didn't have time for riding other than to work. But I absolutely loved that riding. Once I had my routes down, ripping through the traffic on my rat bike was a total joy. Crossing the Thames twice a day, seeing how the wind and tides were working, passing by the huge variety of shops, learning the streets to the point I could leave the A-Z behind, looking at the people and just being here was often fantastic. Yes it was always dark in winter but it doesn't actually rain that much in London and the winds are generally benign. What started as a navigation nightmare slowly transformed into the daily magic.

Repetition through the seasons, watching road works come go like a tide over the streets, watching new buildings come up in time-lapse, whole new inner-cities like Stratford appear, the gentrification of the canals, the housing rolling out over old industrial land - you see all of that from the saddle as you lay your thread back and forward over the city, taking new routes as you get new jobs. Now to Greenwich, then Regent's Park, Woolich, Highbury, onto Aldgate, then Covent Garden and down to Vauxhall.

Commuting had helped me go from being a skeptic to being a baby Londoner. It had taken a while, and if I hadn't had a reason to push through that first two years I would have been back to NZ in a shot, but three years after arriving I had a mortgage, a life worth living and, most importantly, a healthy partner.

What I didn't have was an existence outside of Zone 3 London, but that was about to change.

Horizons

I left the busy ecommerce job for a series of contract web positions for places like the Greenwich Council and the National Audit Office.

After the pace of the startup world the byzantine environment of UK Government and Local Authorities was startling. Things could go nowhere, despite budget and plans and resources and good intentions, simply because someone couldn't be arsed. Anyone could stall anything by calling in HR and talking about inappropriate changes to their job description.

I hadn't had this kind of work before, work that was not about working, work where it was all about perception and influence and politics - and pensions. I remember being appalled by a young woman, well on the way to being a bitter and horrible boss, telling me how much she loathed her job and detested all her colleagues but was sitting it out because the pension was good. She only had thirty five years to go then.

At the end of six months jobbing around I ended up in the Medical Research Council, the national institution charged with funding scientific medical research, and housed in a beautiful Nash terrace at the bottom of Regent's park. The MRC and its precursors had funded research that had unlocked DNA, proved that smoking was bad for you and had developed those same monoclonal antibodies that had helped Steph so much a year before.

Working at the MRC was my first real contact with an England that saw itself as an eternal elite. Being part of the push to lead innovation in biomedical science is one thing, seeing from the inside how such an organisation believes that is the best in the world simply as a matter of fact is something else. Privilege and self-belief, barely justified, at work. Just the kind of thinking that created the colonial drive in the first place. The real fascination working there was in watching the unconscious status play of people who believe they are still at the centre, who cannot fathom a world that exceeds their world view - things like China and South Korea and their massive resources, ambition and geopolitical gravity.

But what has this got to do with cycling?

Having a decent income meant that I could at least afford a monthly cycling magazine to read and it was around this time that a new one was launched, CyclingPlus aimed not at racers but people like me, people who liked bikes and

rode a lot but had long since stopped pinning a number to their backs. In it there was an article about a ride called the Dunwich Dynamo.

The Dunwich Dynamo's origins are a little hazy but it seems to have started with a couple of cycle couriers having a drink and deciding to see the dawn and ending up on the Suffolk coast about a hundred and ten miles later, riding there via the deserted backroads of Essex and Suffolk.

It became an annual event. The ride is held on the nearest Saturday in July to the full moon. While Southwark Cyclists provide a bus or two that you can book for a ride back to town the ride is pure WOM. There is no entry fee or procedure, the route is a matter of habit and there is no official start or finish, no timing chips, no medals, no bragging rights, no bullshit.

Despite years of cycling I had never ridden that far in one hit. A hundred and ten miles. It seemed like a very very long way, an outrageous adventure. I had to have a go at that.

I booked a seat on the return bus, bought a bunch of batteries for my woefully underpowered commuter lights, pumped up the tyres on my single-speed rat bike and made my way down to the start in London Fields. That year there were a few hundred doing it, a mix of couriers, 'fakengers', tourers, club dudes and people like me, 'just riders'.

I have ridden the Dynamo five times altogether but that first one was the quickest. The impetus of the single speed, coupled with me treating it like a 25 mile ride because I didn't know any better, had me at the coast in around 7 hours - a bit of a surprise. There weren't that many people at the beach when I arrived and I had a long wait for the cafe to open at 7am and then an even longer wait for the bus at 1pm. And I hadn't bought a book.

But charging through the night had been magic. Once you're out of London and over the M25 everything changes. The temperature drops, the roads narrow and empty. The only sounds are the wind in your ears, cyclists around you chatting or the fizz of a group of club riders coming up fast behind you before they all stop for the inevitable puncture and you overtake them again.

You freewheel through towns full of chocolate box tudor houses melting into in the streets, late night drunks hurl abuse at you and then the last third of the ride is done in the very early morning, with the sun slowly animating the low-rolling

fields of Suffolk with the names becoming increasingly exotic as you reach the coast. Yoxford. Bruisyard. Saxstead.

Not so good was the state of my back and hands at the finish. Riding a very rigid aluminium bike with skinny tyres pumped hard and only having one hand position was like riding on solid metal boneshaker - good for town sprints where you wanted every watt to go to the back wheel but not so great when you wanted to be able to walk when you got off the bike after 7 hours riding.

I wanted to do more of this kind of riding, and I needed a new bike for it. One with gears and drop bars with more hand positions.

So I took to gumtree and found something that would that was being sold by someone who was most likely not a thief. A light tourer, a Ridgeback 'World Horizon', fell out of the internet and into my backyard.

World Horizon. The name was evocative, a statement of intent. It was also marketing bollocks - the frame was awful, but it did have lots of gears, 24 of them, and you could change gears from the handlebars. This innovation had been available for a decade but it was new to me. Other than that the bike was a collection of fairly poor parts on a soggy frame.

This was a nothing bike, an also ran, the kind of bike that barely qualified you as cyclist and certainly not as a cyclist with any kind of style. But I was still under 40 and had a good turn of speed and, in the infinitely stupid realm of 'commuter racing', I was still pretty much unpassable. It was nice to be on a road bike again, to be able to put my head down and rocket up the bus lane along Euston Rood, changing gears higher and higher without having to take my hands away from the brakes.

Speed is the most useful thing a commuting cyclist has. If you want to move past that group of teens loitering with intent without giving them time to decide to jump you; if you want to get around that parked truck before the bus behind you makes you a smudge on it's side; if you want to keep pace with cars because you have a right-hander coming up and you need to get across that lane, then being able to hit 25mph quickly is a great asset.

My courier days were long behind me and, while I was never a suicidally stupid commuter, during this period I further moderated some of my riskier riding habits. I had the need to get home safer than before, Steph and I had something more than ourselves to look after.

He was early and a bit of an experiment. We had asked Steph's oncologist whether her radical treatment would have any effect on babies and he said he had absolutely no idea, but probably not. I suspect the vast majority of his clientele were thinking more about survival than procreation.

So, Baxter.

What's in a name? Everything and nothing. James K Baxter was a reprobate Kiwi Catholic poet and alcoholic who left his family, became a hippy, called himself Hemi and died pointlessly young. It seemed a perfect name for a boy would grow up in the socially confined protestant culture of professional London. It gave him a chance to be different from all that if he wanted - a name as an escape plan. Coupled with my so-Irish-it-hurts surname there was no chance for him to be considered properly English, even if that is exactly what he will turn out to be.

As any parent knows the first year of being in charge of your first born is quite a trip. There's no time for anything but work and babies. In such busy times the regular tick-tock of the commute is a blessing. Half an hour each way not being able to think about anything but where to put your front wheel next is as good as meditation.

So I began the series of evening pickups that would last until Baxter got to college, two hundred a year for twelve years straight. It was so much less stressful to ride than take the tube - on the tube you have to endure occasional total blockages which mean you are stuck out of phone coverage looking at your watch, stressing. The beauty of riding was that my ETA to pickup was consistent, the difference between a fast ride and slow one was only a couple of minutes. I was late by ten minutes, once, because of an over-running important meeting.

Every parent also needs a little time out. With some holiday coming up I decided to get out of town. The Dynamo had whet my appetite for a bit of an explore and I was due a couple of days off from daddyhood. I had had the words 'World Horizon' staring at me from the top tube of my bike for a while now, but the farthest I had gone on this bike was a couple more night rides to Dunwich.

World Horizon. A name as an escape plan.

For some reason I chose Yorkshire (why not France?!) and drove up and parked 'twixt moors and wold and set off on a loop - one leg out East over the Yorkshire

Moors, and then another over the Wolds to Whitby, then down the coast before ducking back into the Vale of York - just about all the Yorkshires in one go then.

Having no idea of the area and no cycling contacts to talk to I made the route up by looking at a map and ended stumbling on some classic Yorkshire hills, Tan Hill being the best. Physically the riding was hard but not outrageously so, it rained on and off, it was mostly beautiful and empty and occasionally there were idiots in cars. Best of all it was unknown, something totally new.

I am not one for a lot of touring, I prefer a decent holiday cottage and day rides on an unencumbered bike, but this was a cultural discovery as much as a physical. It was tearooms' with doilies and old biddies staring at you over their Wednesday afternoon cake; B&Bs with couples having breakfast that didn't talk to each other and salesmen in suits on their rounds; it was decimated towns with nothing in them beside sad houses and pubs on the brink of closure; it was beautiful steep hill farms dotted with slag heaps that probably provided zero income; it was a once lovely seaside towns ruined by casinos and tatty shops on the foreshore.

You discover there's barely anything left of whatever was once native in England. Most of the great forests had been decimated to build the Great British Navy, and most of what gets held up as 'beautiful heathland' is a human made miscreation of intensive farming and burn offs. It didn't make it any less lovely to ride through, but the realisation that much of England was a series of ecological disasters covered over by a layer of sentiment and nostalgia foisted on you by The National Trust, was a real shock.

England doesn't have a readily accessible ecological truth in the way that other countries have. In NZ and Australia you can still see undeveloped native bush, you can walk through it and, excusing the slow horror of climate change, know it hasn't changed. There is a baseline that you can experience directly. Look at the difference between National Parks in the UK and the rest of the world. In the rest of the world you are lucky to be able to put a tent down for a night in a National Park, in the UK they contain private farms and whole towns.

England has beauty but it's a fiction, a story inscribed in the land and then accepted as truth. Once you understand that you can start to read the story and see how it has been created and contested. And it is a fascinating story, compelling and ultimately tragic, created from oppression and exploitation, class theft and the technological ambition of land owners who, through the

enclosures, created what we now think of as modern farming. Along the way these great shifts on the land created commodity markets and a massive urban underclass that become the labour pool that was systematically exploited during the industrial revolution.

My ancestors had all left this England, and it was easy to see why - prior to colonising the empire England had already done a pretty good job of ruining itself and the class stratification and attendant prejudice that persists to this day was already baked into society and the way land, labour and capital was managed. Better off out of it.

The other thing I learned by going through the county at bike speed is that London was one thing and England another. This is was 2006 and the unrest that would become UKIP and then Brexit was still ten years away, but it was all there if you wanted to see it. A subtle sense of unease, the hopelessness paraded in the window of every closed local shop, a tangible and enforced gap between the Range Rover owners blasting from one country pile to another and the minions who mutely witnessed their passage. They were as good as peasants watching Lords and Courtiers, and festered with as much resentment. All it would take was a rallying cry and, with a simple vote each, they could take revenge and change the fate of a nation.

The irony of Brexit is that it was created by the children of privilege and the wealthy in the search for individual power and glory and so, by seeking their revenge on 'elites' the people inadvertently fuelled the ongoing tragedy of the many creating wealth and power for the few, a trend that continues to drive us directly into the jaws of an ecological disaster that will once again change the shape of the land.

Of course I'd been into the country before, but mostly in a car or a train, jumping over the scruffy bits. At bike speed you take in the shitty backwater towns and depleted villages, you see the dispossessed youths sitting outside petrol stations drinking out of plastic bags. And of course there are the castles and the roman remains and the epic country houses, but the real fascination is in the future history of the present - seeing potential tomorrows played out in the landscape of today.

Perhaps I was finally interested in all of this because I now had the duty to pilot a small boy through it all. Perhaps I am naturally curious and occasionally

insightful. Mostly it was an accidental discovery made while in pursuit of cycling pleasures.

I still cycle and walk a lot in the countryside in the UK and have great pleasure in it, but this ride cured me of any illusion that there was anything 'natural' about it. And, as well as the kinaesthetic pleasure of riding, that is what touring on a bicycle is all about - it gives you another perspective, a ‘World Horizon’ even if you are only a few hours from home.

Good enough

When I started to look around for something to replace the soggy World Horizon I wanted something that was a lot better. I didn't need a whole bike just a frame; I would just move all the parts from the World Horizon over in Pokemon bike tradition.

It had to be cheap and cheerful and tough enough for the daily fifteen miles in winter. You don't want to be riding an expensive racing bike to work because you might crash it and you want something that can take mudguards. Turning up in the office on a wet day with a 'badger stripe' of filthy London water up your back is not the best look.

I ended up buying something with the not very evocative name of a 'Kinesis 4t'. That's says nothing at all - that's what you get from a no-nonsense British company. Belt and braces.

It was a cyclocross (CX) frame, meant for races where you do laps of muddy fields in winter. The bikes are more like road bikes than mountain bikes but they have a bit more clearance for larger tyres with knobs on them. CX races are an hour long so even if the weather is epically crap, as it often is in the UK, you can just about manage it.

CX races are popular with the crowds as you can bring beer, eat frites, stand on a tricky part of the course and watch the chaos. It's a huge sport in the Netherlands and Belgium where watching cycling with beer and frites a hand in terrible weather is a national pastime.

The format of the CX frame has long been popular with road riders for reasons other than flogging yourself around a muddy field at 9am on a Sunday morning - they have plenty of room for mudguards and bigger, less fragile tyres. CX bikes are more often put into service as commuters and winter trainers than they are as race bikes.

Which is exactly what I did with mine.

From the first turn of the crank on this frame I knew it was good. Where the Horizon went soft when you put your foot down the Kinesis was taut and springy. The size was spot on, it started well, stopped well - it was perfectly suited to the hectic London commute.

It was much better suited to being in London than I was at the time. Having got through the first few years of being here I was now struggling a little with life itself, specifically with being a father.

I was suffering from the malaise that new dads of a generally selfish disposition have - anger. This is not a simple anger, it's not just 'I don't have time to do what I want to do anymore' anger. No, time was easy to give up and I was (and remain) besotted with my son. But as Baxter cleared his first year and a few issues related to his prematurity went away I was left with something deeper.

I am not sure what the trigger was. Maybe I was angry that my earlier ambitions for myself as a writer had not really worked out. Maybe I was struggling to reconcile that image of myself with the day to day reality of working for a large public body. Maybe it had something to do with Baxter being the age I was when my mother first divorced - was there some kind of low-level physic trigger here? Maybe having reached forty I was looking down the barrel of the rest of my life and wondering what the hell to do with it.

Probably all of those things, at once.

To my credit I had worked out that the first role of a parent is not be 'a perfect parent'. Perfect parents are deadly, they produce neurotic kids. No, the first role of a parent is to be good enough - everything else flows from that. You cannot have a happy child if you are not happy yourself, and happiness comes from accepting that you are good enough as you are.

Simples.

Well it should be. That realisation made me angrier - why couldn't I be happy? Why had the ease of being myself in the world eluded me for so long? Why oh why did I periodically get levelled with anxiety and depression? I'd done the drugs, I'd done the therapy but here I was still prone bouts of anger and its close friend despair.

Around this time I had another rough patch. Or two. Maybe three. Enough that one day I walked myself into Whipps Cross Hospital and said I couldn't really handle things. No I wasn't going to kill myself. Yes I wanted to live, of course, that's why I was here.

I got sent home with some Valium and a promise of an appointment to see a district Psychiatrist. I told her my woes and she said that I would benefit with

some cognitive behavioural therapy but that I was too lucid to qualify for any state assistance for it.

Let me just repeat that: She said I would benefit enormously from help but I was too coherent to qualify for any on the NHS. So there something about being able to articulate my pain that disqualified me from care? Crazy.

So I bought some counselling off a local therapist instead and it made sense but still things were getting worse. I was having to take to my bed for days at a time, and it all started to feel more physical. My stomach would knot up and it felt like food poisoning but it was too regular to be that. Acute stress? I wondered if I was properly ill.

I went to the doctor and she pretty quickly ruled out any life-threatening prognosis. She thought I had irritable bowel syndrome. I decided that was a bad diagnosis, I didn't know why, it just felt incorrect. So I took another tangent and went to a nutritionist. The nutritionist sent bits of my body to somewhere in America. When the results came back she said I had the worst response to wheat (Gluten) that she had even seen and that I should stop eating it immediately. She said I might be able to eat a little in a few years, but don't count on it.

So I stopped eating gluten and within a few days was feeling better. Much better.

After a month I felt fantastic. But the really interesting thing was that my depressive tendencies left at the same time. It took me a while to notice, but I realised that I hadn't had an episode and that the anger had started to subside.

There are some theories about this that revolve around the fact that there are as many serotonin receptors in the gut as there are in the brain, the idea being that a healthy gut is a healthy mind. I am not sure about that, but I can say that 95% of my mental health issues simply vanished when I stopped eating gluten. These days I don't collapse into depression in an instant when something goes wrong, instead I simply do what normal people without depression do - take it in my stride. I react and adjust and learn and move on rather than dissolve into a self-pitying pile of misery.

This raises some interesting questions - how much of depression is out and out physical? How much is emotional or circumstantial? The reality is it varies from person to person but it seems obvious to me, having lived it, that they all

strongly correlated. The physical, emotional and circumstantial all flex together. That's what makes depression a difficult thing to work with, because the contributing factors so closely resemble normal life.

This was a game changer. A life saver. It made me a happier person and a better dad. I became, and remain, good enough.

This new found physical and mental health meant that I had more head room, better physical capability, less crippling worry and anger. I try to remain grateful and not dwell on the loss of twenty years of good mental health and the lost years of practice in building self confidence.

Alongside this being a father had given me a social circle that made life more pleasant. Meeting up with other parents in the down-at-heel local park after nursery and watching lots of children collide with each other while getting to know their parents was fantastic. I finally felt like part of the local community. Being a parent put another leg under the table of adulthood and grounded me in a way that I never expected.

Around this time I also first learned about a style of bike riding called Audax, a year or so after I had put together my Kinesis.

Audax, the Latin root for Audacious, is organised long distance riding.
The only reason I knew about it was from following a couple of old guys on their fixed wheel bicycles in the Dunwich Dynamo sometime around 2008. Slightly insulted by being overtaken by old guys riding bikes with no gears, I decided I would take my revenge by clinging to their back wheel and getting a draft from them. So I hung on for as long as I could, maybe twenty minutes.

As I was struggling to keep pace with them they were chatting away, not a care in the world, looking and sounding like they were perfectly at home riding through the countryside at 3am on a Saturday night on fixed wheel bikes. Insane, but impressive too. One of them had a flappy old gilet with the word 'Audax UK' printed on it.

Later that weekend I looked up 'Audax' online and was astounded. People rode bikes for 200, 300, 600 km at a stretch? Despite having done the 180km Dunwich Dynamo five times by this point, I could not get my head around riding 600 km. It seemed impossible, unhealthy, certainly mad. What was that about?

We will learn a lot more about Audax and the wonderful and strange people who do it in later chapters, so for the time being let me just tell you about my first Audax ride on my Kinesis.

I sent off a form and cheque (yes a cheque) for a couple of pounds and turned up to small room above a rugby club on the outskirts of a town in Derbyshire where I was given a little card with a list of 'controls' in it. For some of those you got a stamp, for others you needed a receipt from a cafe or ATM or a piece of information 'an info' about a place you were passing through, like "At 56km the number on the telephone pole next to the postbox". Maybe thirty riders set off on a variety of bikes, mostly old-school steel lightweights.

The first 100km was straightforward enough. I hitched a lift with a couple of old guys (getting the theme there?) who chatted away, barely drawing breath and taking a very occasional sip from a water bottle, being as frugal with nutrition as I was profligate with gels and energy drink.

At the halfway point, I slumped into a massive lunch, weary and sceptical about my ability to get back. After an hours recovery I got back on the bike and started to chip away at the route by myself, following along on a piece of paper taped to my handlebars that bore strange inscriptions like 'SO mrb' and 'TL @ TRL' (straight over mini roundabout, turn left at traffic lights.)

The second half felt significantly longer than the first. I was getting tired and my hands were sore from the bashing they were getting through the handlebars. And there was a persistent headwind which I was having to grind through, 100km of it. Time slowed, distance elongated in front of me. Each pedal stroke became a chore, then an agony. My thighs were on fire, and not in a good way. By the end I was suffering a major sense of humour failure.

Having finished I can't say I felt any sense of achievement. There was none of the feel-good of the Dunwich Dynamo - the route seemed arbitrary, there was no mythic back-story to the event, it was just a bloody long ride in a big circle for no apparent reason. Physically I felt like I had barely survived. And I still had no idea how people would ride 600 km in one go - the reality of it seemed further away rather than nearer.

I was done with Audax, that was for sure. What a stupid thing to do. So much for long distance riding, maybe I was a domestic creature after all.

The Kinesis was not ideal for distance riding - aluminium is not the most comfortable thing to build a bike out of and the many hours on the bike highlighted all its failings. To be fair it was designed with one hour rides around a muddy field in mind, so an Audax was well beyond the design brief.

I went back to commuting with occasional weekend rides, making sure to keep well under 50 miles, that was plenty long enough.

But my favourite times on this bike were spent just pottering around the East End, exploring the Lee Valley Canal, taking in the lower reaches of the Thames. What I call Cycloflanneuring. Dicking about, sometimes taking photos, often just riding somewhere 'because'.

Because learning about obscure places like Poplar and Ilford, because there is a long straight line called the Greenway that angles down towards London Airport from Hackney, because riding the Lea Canal path from Limehouse to Ware turns out to be a great history lesson.

You look at a map and seeing something called 'Beckton Alp' and riding down to it to find a 15m high slurry pile turned into a dry ski slope, long since abandoned. Drinking coffee, looking at the anarcho-hippy canal boats, finding the traveller camps and allotments that would later be obliterated by the Olympics. Because London.

There is a lot to be said for just riding around without any speed objectives, though it had taken me a long time to find the pleasure in it. What I call 'post anxiety' riding. Actually it's what most people think about when they think about riding a bike - an enjoyable couple of hours mooching around looking at things. It had taken me thirty years of riding to find it.

Cycloflanneuring. Pootling around. Cyclo-pottering. Good for the body and the mind.

For this style of riding you need a bike that is lively and fun, but you also need the kind of bike that you can leave locked up outside a cafe without feeling like you'll be losing a limb if it gets stolen. And the bike that you pootle around on will always win a special place in your heart. It might not be flash, or fast or be a high-status marker of your cycling-cred - a bike like this is an easy friend.

Eventually I got other bikes that replaced the Kinesis functionally and it got retired. I have tried to sell it once or twice, but it has a beaten up paint job and

people want their CX bikes with disc brakes these days, so it sits in the attic, both discarded and kept, like a much loved children's toy.

The Kinesis was a faithful bike, the kind of bike that everyone should have one of.

A bike that's perfect just because it's good enough.

A quiet one

A quiet one is a ride that doesn't need to mean anything else - a ride for its own sake, a twiddle, a gentle spin. Not even a recovery ride, just getting on a bike for a couple of hours and riding without any eye on a schedule.

A quiet one lets you think.

Setting out on the bike, in clothes that are not really cycling clothes but with a nod towards your chosen activity - a cycling cap, a brand tshirt, your clicky shoes. Perhaps you have a nominal goal in mind already, a coffee stop, buying some artisanal roast black garlic, or the ultimate in self-referential metanarrative, a coffee in a bike shop.

Whatever, who cares, it doesn't matter anyhow.

You turn right, down towards the market. Instead of kicking off down the hill like you would on the commute you hold back and let the bike pick up speed itself, letting gravity do its work. You decide to play a child's game, to see how far you can get down the hill without pedalling, and you are delighted make it all the way down to the crossing at Sainsburys before you have to turn the pedals.
Because you are not riding to work you can take the time to look around. You see details you've never seen before, you see the theme and variation of the brick terraces, some pebbled-dashed, some with their Sky receivers, some with highly decorated windows, some with farrow and ball exteriors. The patterned and the restrained side by side, the diversity of a crowded platform at Kings Cross tube but written out over a century not the minute before the next tube.

You head out onto the bike path that meanders down the canal. No cars, just dogs, walkers, other cyclists. A flat outlook but pleasant, a slice of London that is well away from tourists and 'culture'. Locals.

At some point you stop for that coffee, maybe one of those new places down behind the co-working hub at Here East. Cold filter, single-origin beans, coconut flat whites, the kind of place that would give you a latte, yes, but grudgingly, with a sneer. Being a cyclist you have an espresso, because that's what cyclists do.

You glance back at your well locked bike. What do you see? It's not something you normally ask yourself, there isn't the time to reflect in London. A quiet one gives you time.

The thing about a casual glance is that sometimes you see a shift in the light. A reflection tilts, a shadow slides and you see objects and situations afresh. This time you see your bike, not as beloved enabler, but as a dumb object, a collection of cold metal parts. You see a chain, a spoke, some wires. Each of these parts is the endpoint of an industrial system that spans the globe. The history of that system is still in the machine that it made. The roller chain, despite so many advances in bicycle technology over the decades, is still resolutely half an inch between pins. Imperialism baked into the measure.

The longer you look at the bike the stranger it becomes. For instance, what is this thing called 'a crankset'? A collection of smaller parts; arms, ball-bearings, chainrings, chain ring bolts, bushes. When you atomise it you see that there is no one thing that is a crankset.

You can do this to the whole bike, decompose it into its smallest parts and then describe them in terms of the properties of that object: 16 1/8th inch ball bearings made of heat-treated steel, various levers made of alloy, some hollow and swaged to other pieces of metal that are 170mm long and others that have screw threads that are then used by allen-headed bolts to secure a crank to a frame.

There is not a single thing that is 'a bike', the only place it is one thing is in our mind.

Your bike starts to disappear. You are riding an abstraction. Perhaps you will crash at the precise moment you realise that all that is holding you up is a unjustified belief that you are 'riding' a 'bike'?

But that never happens. The bike never disappears. You can see it, right there. It's a shippable item, a marketing object, something you can buy. Seen like this a bike is a convenient label for the continuance of manufacturing and marketing cycles, a way for PLCs to 'realise value' for their investors.

The bike is the perfect capitalist object. The fantasies of Neoliberal capitalism are those of the friction-free intensification of experience. Pure speed, no consequence, the teleological extension of intent. That describes a great deal of the lure of the bicycle too, an accessible embodiment of the experience of flight.

Selling ‘authentic experiences’ is the new commerce in post-industrial society. Authentic experiences are now our mandated reward for work. In the 50s, when the world suddenly gained the machinery of suburban existence, things, sold to you with the promise that they saved you time and labour, were the very things you needed to work so hard to buy. Work to save yourself more time. Now its work more to be more real.

By riding a bicycle am I am dreaming freedom but enacting imprisonment and creating the very trap I am riding to be free of?

You only need to look at the Tour de France as a example of how beholden to money cycling is. Created by a newspaper as a vehicle for sales and preceded by 'The Caravan', a fairground on wheels where sponsors throw free samples into captive crowds, all waiting for riders who are invisible beneath their sponsored cycling gear. Like a website or a billboard, a cycling team is a platform from which to get eyeballs for a brand. And the brands are famously dicky - clip-together flooring, ice-cream makers, banks, mining companies, postal companies, channel TV companies - the full panoply of commodity capitalism and greenwashing.

You realise that you and the bike and the hipster’s Mac and the cafe and the tiny espresso cup are part of the same machine, the hyperobject called capitalism.

Both you and the bike are systems within systems. The difference is that you have agency and the bike doesn’t. Or perhaps the difference is that you have slightly more agency than the bike does - it’s relative when viewed by market forces; the brand and the ‘thingness’ of the machine, the ‘thingness’ elements of yourself - like your credit score, your ‘ad preferences’ - are all tied together.

You take a last sip of your espresso. Shaking your head you realise you need to cast off this way of thinking. It might be true but it is not helpful. You remember the last time you had this feeling, back when you were a courier, a cog in the pre-internet economy, how you ran from it into the arts. You don't have that choice now, life has taken you another way.

But also know in your bones that cycling endures, it is still awesome. You look back out to the bike, wondering what you will see this time.

Yes, it is a series of manufactured smaller things yet it is also more than the sum of its parts. This is both literal - you cannot ride a wheel and a set of handlebars, you need all of it - and figurative. When I say I am going to build a bike I have

something in mind which is 'a bike' but it is not yet an object in the real world. It's not fashionable to say that there is something that endures beyond the object; just try saying that there is something called 'Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice' that is more than the readers experience of it, something that is recognisably itself that endures over decades and see how far you get in your graduate literature tutorial. And yet we know instinctively that this is true. For a certain age of cyclist A Colnago Master is as much an enduring idea as it is an object.

Transcendental mental objects. You know from your basic understanding of philosophy that this is complicated ground and what is useful to believe is different from what is actually so. You remember your Hume and the problem of inductive reasoning; we have good reason to believe the sun will rise tomorrow but we can't prove it will.

And what about emotion - affect - for inanimate objects? How can you like a bike? And what is the kind of like that you have for it? It's not the absolute love you have for family or friends, it's not empathy... what is it? What is an attraction for an object beyond a its tool value?

As a tool a bike is simple - it takes the mechanical effort of walking or running and multiplies it. An easy trot on a bike is 15mph, five times faster than walking speed for the same effort. A bike can easily take three or four times the load a person can carry. The benefits are obvious.

But beyond that a bike is wings.

Cycling, like skiing, surfing and skateboarding, all share this, an urge to hover, to ascend, to swoop through the environment. If we didn't have these experiences we'd have to believe in God and angels.

We have a kind of enhanced betwinglement with the objects that light this up for us. They are machines, but also protheses, phantom limbs, magical talismans. We assemble our tools and then hang hope off them, we daub them in makeup and war paint, we take crazy pointless journeys on them encouraged by an internal cinema, animated by the desire for flight.

Cycling is magic. Cycling as magic. I can't see a difference between a medieval villager seeking out a witch to cast a love spell and a cyclist buying a branded racing jersey hoping for some sympathetic magic to rub off on them.

Objects have both tool value and magic value. And both things elevate us. Excalibur is both an efficient way to kill people and the symbol of a Kingdom. You realise that that's why you're an atheist, you find no need for God. God is too small for us and too large; too large in that we are much better served by the dirty brilliance of the hedge witch and too small in that the universe is way more interesting and deep than anything we can wrap into a God.

Believing in God is trying to put oceans into matchboxes.

You shake your head. How did you get from thinking about a crankset to contemplating the nature of a non existent God?

That was a really good coffee.

A scatter of rain hits the cafe windows and you come back to earth. That front is coming in early. You look back to the bike. It really needs a new set of mudguards.

And when did you last clean the chain?

It's getting cooler now, and you are reminded that you said you'd be home by five. You meant to pack your rain coat but forgot and the canal path is suddenly packed with slow-moving dog-walkers with those lethal stretchy leads. You take a big breath - it's a shared path after all, so you slow down and get a little cold.

By the time you get home you just want a warm shower. You ping the lock on the back gate and do the well-practiced contortion of getting the bike through the narrow passage that goes from gate to garden shed. You move to another key and unlock the garden shed. You have six keys related to locking up bikes.

Inside the shed there are one too many bikes. To get this one in you have to unlock the others, stack and re-stack them, making the best guess on the one you will want next. A wheeled object might be a great object to fly on but it's a total pain the arse to get into a London shed. Finally you relock everything.

Coming through the back door you say hi to your son, who is catching up on some homework on the kitchen table. Well trained, he doesn't bat an eyelid at your various ridiculous cycling outfits, though once he begged you to wear 'normal clothes' on a family ride. There's no place for lycra when you are out with a teen.

Now it's time to cook dinner, time to come back to life. A quiet one is time out so you can be properly in life when you get back to it.

Lost in a forest

London life.

Winter sky grey and horizontal like a battleship. A sweaty banker's armpit on the tube. A Friday night sluice of boozey media folk spilling onto the street from packed pubs in Soho. New blocks of flats gleam like whitened teeth in rotten mouths while across the canal the bright tarpaulin shelters of recent immigrants are scattered like crisp packets in the bare trees.

London is a universe of things. Big things like museums and theatres and congestion zones and small things like crooked bike lanes and broken umbrellas and underground turnstiles and coffee cups you can't recycle. London is as full of shitty, substandard, tiny things as it is of institutions that are wondrous and plentiful. There's lot of everything - good and bad, big and small.

But despite this sweltering profusion of objects and persons and parks London only has one good forest.

Epping forest. 'The peoples forest'. A green swathe balancing on the unglamourous edge of North East London and split neatly down the middle by the busy A104.

Compared to the golden crown of Regent's Park - a stand-out garden with its elaborate inner Circle, its secret garden, its roses - Epping is a ragtag collection of woods, chases, greens, grounds and slades. But what you lose in polish you make up for in access. You don't have the right to enter a Royal Park, the crown allows it. Not all green spaces are equal, specially in England where privilege and access do an awkward dance around each other and have done for centuries.

Unlike the Royal Parks Epping Forest hasn't suffered a rash of new monument building or insertions of architectural follies or monetising cafes that look like birch-clad icebergs. The monuments in Epping Forest are not highfalutin. Out here things are local and old, the history of the place spanning an improbably range, from King's in hiding, to a house (now gone) that TE Lawrence used to live in with 'a friend', to Gipsy Rodney Smith who grew up in a Romany encampment, preached for the Salvation Army and went on to receive an MBE.

But Epping is known mostly as a site of crime, of East End 'disposals', of the hunting down of highwaymen, as the hiding place of mad poets. It has dogging spots and cruising grounds and a Hangman's Hill. Academics of a certain type would call it a liminal zone, a place where rules warp and break, home of a certain inbetweeness - not quite the real city, not quite the real country, a place of witches and wizards, or their modern equivalents, wiccans and stoners and the oddly religious. Locals will know the over-round and generous Vicar of Holy Innocents church and her bakeoff worthy weekly cake stall, luring the faithless to a sugary end.

I'd first spotted the forest on a map when we moved to Walthamstow. It's an odd shape, a kind of sausagey-balloon. The top 'fat' bit is around 6 miles long and 2 wide, but a narrow tail of it runs for another 8 miles almost to the Thames. And that tail slips by, about half a mile from my house.

Worth exploring, I thought. I jumped on the Kinesis and headed up the road. I didn't have the map with me but thought it would be pretty obvious which way to go. Well kinda. It was obvious where the forest was, but once you got into it there was the small problem of knowing where you were.

The forest has a gradual rise, but it's hard to see once you are submerged in foliage that looks exactly the same from one path to the next. The English light in autumn didn't help - often the sun is just a distant light source for the diffuse grey cloth that calls itself the sky. Add in the disorientation of the many winding paths and you could be lost in a minute. Great for crooks burying the body and evading capture, not so brilliant for finding your way back home at twilight.

In my early forays into the forest I would be riding along a path that turned and twisted on itself, seemingly laid down by rabbits on acid, and come out onto a broad bridleway and have absolutely no idea which way to turn. It was an odd feeling. I knew there were roads less than a mile all around, but often I had no idea how they were oriented or where the road went. It's a very English navigational sensation this, being in the middle of things but having no reference points. Compared to NZ the south of England is flat as a pancake. I suspect it's why church spires are so important in England, more used for terrestrial orientation than spiritual.

The upside was that, once you were off the main tracks, you could be alone for as long as you wanted. This was as much a function of the foliage as anything - dense and green in summer, in winter the bare trees are like stage screens, like

the row of fences that march along the back of the terrace that I live on, keeping everyone safe from the terror of talking to their neighbours.

On my Kinesis I could explore the bridleways and larger paths but there were endless tracks that ducked off the main path, calling me to explore. These smaller tracks quickly overwhelmed the Kinesis and I realised I needed that thing I hadn't had since I left NZ in 1995, since I had had my spectacular breakdown: A mountain bike.

I found a frame and forks on a bike-geek site and then a friend of a friend donated me a bike that was too small for him (and me) and I swapped the parts from it on onto the frame to create something of a franken bike. In terms of mountain bikes this was pretty tame, but then the forest wasn't really 'the mountains' either and a big burly bike would have been overkill. For the twisty forest paths you wanted something lithe and supple.

The bike was was called, inexplicably, a Rock Lobster. A lovely steel frame from one of the first ever MTB brands, designed and named in Santa Cruz back in the 80s. So I had a frame designed in America with Italian shocks and Japanese running gear being ridden in England by a Kiwi.

Come the weekend I would look at that map for some rough guidance and then just head off to see what was there. Initially I thought it was all pretty much the same, but once you started hunting down every small track to see where it went things really opened up. Soon enough I figured out that different parts of the forest had different characters. My favourite was the steeper, less frequented northern reaches higher on the Loughton ridge. I called this part of the forest, in ironic homage to the real hills of Derbyshire, Dark Peak.

It was great to be back on a Mountain Bike. All the old feelings were there - the lovely feeling of weighting and unweighting the bike over bumps, looking for traction up a short climb, picking a line down a muddy slippery track. And being in the green shower of the forest was wonderful, a tonic after a week in the city, after the adrenaline surges, the dodge and sprint reality, of commuting.

The thing that I struggled to believe was that you could ride anywhere, without restriction. A bit of a life-saver for folk like me, a place to roam. And remember when I said that England didn't have much in the way of unspoiled native countryside? Turns out there is quite a lot it in Epping Forest. Real ancient forest.

And here we come back to the layers of politics and the history. The Forest is common land owned by a strange body that seems to be more druid cult than official body - The City of London Corporation. Don't confuse this with the Greater London Assembly, no the City of London Corporation 'owns' the oldest part of the London, the bit called 'The City'. Two mayors, two systems.

Despite the new buildings that are springing up all over it The City is an arcane part of the world. It's the bit of London that the Romans built on, though it was old even then. I used to work on a corner of it, on a street called 'Old Jewry St' which apparently was a Jewish Ghetto before the Jews were expelled from England in 1290, after having been made to wear badges since the early part of that century. Yes, you read that right, badges.

The City of London is a powerhouse of anti-royal commercial wealth. It functions as a local council but behaves more like a cult of male privilege and 'the professions'. It's so old there is no record of its incorporation - it is legally assumed to be a company as it was mentioned as such in the Magna Carta.

Sheriffs are elected on Midsummer's day. Everyone dresses up in old costumes. Bells get rung. If the Queen represents royalty and the Church of England the English God then The City is money and paganism wound together.

Why The City manages a Forest is a complex and odd story tied up with The City giving the finger to the Crown, who sold off a huge run of Royal Forests in the mid 19th Century. The City decided to flex its muscle and stop the commercial exploitation of the Forest by the landed gentry and used some obscure laws and the ownership of a cemetery in the forest to stop the sales in their tracks. That's why the forest is such an odd shape - greed forestalled on the instant.

In the ultimate irony the new City of London Epping Forest was opened by Queen Victoria. Presumably she paid a visit to the hunting lodge of Queen Elizabeth the first which sits on the land and sighed - everything she could see across the Chingford plain used to belong to The Crown, now it belonged to everyone.

So Epping Forest is the people's forest because anyone can use it, it is proper common land as understood by the Victorians. You don't have to stay on the paths, you don't have to behave well, you can ride your bike all over it if you wish. It's the polar opposite to the royal parks.

In a few months I had sketched out the basics and could leave the map at home. I could ride for four hours only crossing a couple of roads and seeing a handful of people. After a year I had ferreted out the hardest technical pieces of riding. There was nothing too challenging, if the forest were a ski run it would be intermediate at best, but even intermediate runs could be fun if you went hell for leather on them.

Come winter I got to experience the famous London mud - leafy mulch combined with clay in a sticky slop. Wellington mud had been liquid, like warm blood, but London mud sticks to you with the tenacity of plaster.

I even tried riding with a few groups over the years but they stopped too often for me. Too much chatter, not enough riding. To be fair this happens here on club rides on the road here too - ride for an hour, stop at a cafe for an half, ride an hour home. This drives me mental and, as much as I enjoyed learning about 'the real England' by listening to my English fellows most of the time I wanted to spend my three hours of riding by riding for three hours.

This is an regular thing with me, as you will have noticed, riding alone. I can't say it troubles me anymore. I have been meaning to join the local cycling club for about ten years now but whenever I go out on a ride with them I really enjoy it, but taking five hours to ride 60 miles with stops and cake is, ultimately, time away from my family or writing.

Maybe I was just turning into a cranky, socially fussy middle aged man. A walrus on a rock lobster pretending to be a lone wolf.

Did I say middle aged?

There are forests of metaphors about forests; losing one's way, finding it again, liminal zones of reinvention and acting out, of playing at being witches and wolves, of being alone in moonlight, of confusion and enchantment.

Dante is the reference point for middle age ennui;

> *Midway upon the journey of our life*
> *I found myself within a forest dark,*
> *For the straightforward pathway had been lost.*

For him it is divine love expressed through the unattainable Beatrice that transforms and saves him from the confusion of the forest. What I had found in the forest was the opposite; I found pleasure in descending into the body,

sinking consciousness into gravity and motion, reveling even in the slapping stings of nettle on my shins.

The wisdom gained in my forest was different - I embraced the issue not knowing where I was and accepted the problem as the gift. At a certain stage of life even being lost is a welcome feeling. Our lives are too demanding, there are too many things to do in them - there is too much path, not enough wild. Everything is so certain and scoped and planned and bullet-pointed that to be riding without actually knowing where you is a tangible, cleansing joy.

Perhaps that is why I love Epping Forest so much. You haven't got a snowball's chance in hell of getting lost in a Royal Park. You will be battered by lunch offers and a heritage point of interest every twenty yards. What really makes Epping 'the People's Forest' is that it leaves you to get on with being yourself, without the megaton dose of aspiration and experiences that plague the better parks.

Sometimes worse is better. Sometimes less is more and sometimes more is more. Less bullshit, more actual forest, more places to get lost, more corkscrew trails and more uncertainty.

Lost in a forest atop a rock lobster, the very picture of middle-aged absurdity?

Yes please.

The Worst

I am not going to waste time complaining about drivers. Yes, a lot of them are terrible, but often it's been me, on a bike, who has done the wrong thing, deliberately.

As a courier I flouted rules all the time. As a commuter in London I have reacted badly when provoked, like the time I kicked a taxi door when he turned out in front of me from a side street. Bastard knew what he was doing, he just didn't care. He did after I scraped a cleat down the side of his door as he passed. And I've often slapped sides of cars to let them know I am there when they overtake too close.

But I have stopped all that. I don't shout, I don't slap, I don't chase down idiots in cars (or bikes) and I certainly don't put my boot into the sides of taxis anymore. I do swear, but they don't hear me, so it's only for my benefit.

And it's not because I am a good person who has ascended to a higher plane of humanity. I wish. And it's not even that I have realised that it makes not a jot of difference to the driver if you try and educate them - shit drivers remain shit drivers no matter what you say to them. It's because of two incidents that happened within a few weeks of each other on an innocuous back road in Walthamstow.

It started with me getting a bit nostalgic and buying a cheap old 80s Raleigh steel racing frame for £25. I turned it into an easy-going single speed city bike. It was interesting going back in time; the frame, despite being a decent racing frame of the period, was not a patch on the Kinesis for speed or weight, though it did have that special steel 'spring' that steel purists love.

But let's cut to the chase, to Pretoria Avenue, a narrow local road in Walthamstow that I rode along to get to Baxter's nursery for the pickup. When I started using it it was a classic 'duck and dive' two-way London street. There are thousands of these in London, streets too narrow for two cars to pass but still two-way, usually lined with cars on both sides. Old streets, designed for footfall and the occasional horse and cart. The way to approach them as a driver is to tuck into gaps between parked cars and wait for the other driver to pass - narrowly - to one side. After a few years it becomes second nature, but for the first couple of years driving in London it feels bonkers.

Then around 2010 Pretoria Avenue was made one-way. However the new one-way signage was profoundly inadequate. So there were bound to be a couple of people who got it wrong and, through force of habit, turned left into the now one-way street and merrily drive up it.

Can you see where this starts?

Incident one begins with a scooter coming the wrong way down the now one-way street.

To have a scooter rider hurtle at you at 30mph is unnerving to say the least - I thought he was going to ride straight through me. I started to wave my right arm to make my presence known and he moved to the side just in time, a maneuver that would have been dangerous even had the road been two-way. So I shouted at him as he passed - a few crisp Anglo Saxon expletives that colonials revert to in such circumstances.

I rode on, shaking my head. So far this had been a fairly average road incident, the kind of narrow escape that you would expect to have once or twice a year. After I exited the one-way and came to a stop to turn at the next intersection I heard the rattle of a scooter behind me. Turning, I saw it was the guy who had just missed me.

Riding in London you soon learn to read the sound of scooters. If they are being ridden like they are F1 motorbikes, with throttles being gunned, then it's a safe bet that it's a stolen scooter being ridden for fun by some small time crim or underage teen, and you avoid them as best you can.

This scooter rider didn't sound dangerous, he was riding steadily if a little quickly, so I wasn't too worried about being jumped by a 'yoof'. I pulled over to a stop and said something along the lines of 'what the hell do you think you were doing you idiot that is a one way street.' though with more linguistic colour.

At which point he reached over, punched me in the face, turned, and rode away.

A bit of an overreaction I would have thought, considering he was in the wrong. There's a little something that I do to amuse myself, a habit since courier days, and that is memorising number plates very quickly. It's quite handy to be able to quote a number plate back at someone who has just wronged you, it puts them on notice that they will be accountable.

So I immediately put the guys plate details in my phone.

Shaken, but not too badly spooked, I continued to nursery, picked Baxter up then phoned the assault report in. Amazingly an actual policeman came around (those were the days), took my statement and the license plate. I wasn't hoping for a conviction as there were no reliable witnesses, but at least a cop turning up his door and asking questions would be something.

Turns out the plate was fake. The police went to the registered address of the bike and there was not even a house there. Ghost plates. A stolen bike, untaxed and uninsured, completely untraceable. So much for remembering plate numbers.
One to chalk up to experience.

The second incident, just two weeks later, was very different, though it started exactly the same. Same road, same time of day, same problem.

This time a blue car, something like a Honda Accord, came blasting up the road towards me, again going the wrong way, this time way over 30mph. I started waving, though it became clear that the driver was not going to be swerving - something to do with the metallic paint and darkened windows. Having less than no time to react, I flicked up onto the left footpath. It was very close, outrageously close, so close I was able to reach out and slap his car on the roof as it passed. A gentle reminder there was a person out here. Flesh and blood.

I continued on my way, shaking my head, turned right onto main road after waiting an age for the pedestrian lights to change, then rode up the main road for a couple of hundred metres before ducking left onto a quieter back street.

Just as I turned I heard something whiz past, just behind me. I turned and saw the blue car. There was a guy hanging out the back window holding a heavy chain. I had turned the instant he had swung the chain at my back. I was a moment from serious damage.

First of all - fuck!

Secondly the realisation I was in the sights of the kind of guys who carried chain around with them, presumably with the express purpose of causing serious damage.

I continued down the road, struggling to take in the scale of threat. This was serious. These guys weren't mucking about, they were prepared to hunt me down for sport.

Following that incident I have often wondered why. Why bother with an old white dude on a bike? Easy target, sure, but really why - there's no money in it, nothing to be gained. Of course it's simpler than that, by touching his car I had caused offence, some kind of slight that had to be paid back to preserve face. Because that's what being a man is all about. Respect for the car.

Unluckily for me the traffic was very light. Usually the blue car would have been jammed up indefinitely and I would be half a mile way before they made the next light, but not today. And unfortunately I was so shocked by what had just about happened that I couldn't do anything but continue on my habitual route. I turned right again, onto a road parallel to the main road, though by now I was riding as fast as my single-speed could go. I had to keep moving, keep turning and not stop, that was my only chance of not getting caught.

I could hear the car now, turning a road up and knew that I couldn't go that way, but as I stared to turn away from the sound my chain fell off.

You don't have derailleurs on a single speed. No way of getting the chain back on. No way of getting away. And I was rolling towards the sound of the car coming down a side street towards me.

Just as the car nudged around the corner I saw a couple of builders walking along the street. I had just enough momentum to jump up onto the footpath and catch them up, dropping my bike in front of them just as the blue car stopped about fifteen metres away and the driver got out.

I quickly told the builders that this guy was about to beat me up. I really thought the three men in the car were going to get out, get that chain, and give me a proper going over. Something that would have ended with me in hospital, properly damaged. The builders looked at me as if they hadn't heard me, then said something to each other.

Polish.

At least they were there. Perhaps if things got really bad they would step in. At least they would be coherent witnesses.

The driver reached me. Pathetically I said 'It's a one way street mate…' as if there was a chance that some education was going to get me off the hook.

The driver punched me in the face, quite a lot harder than the scooter rider, turned, got back into his car and drove off, honour satisfied.

It was, considering the circumstances, a lucky escape, though it didn't feel like it.

The punch hurt, of course, but it was the amount of effort they had gone too to track me down and the chain that had put the fear in me. That level of threat was huge and way more upsetting than the punch. If the builders hadn't been there I am sure it would have been a lot worse.

And I didn't have the slightest chance of remembering the number plate.

I managed to fix the chain and ride to pick up Baxter but I was in streams of tears. Shock I guess. It was, all in all, the worst five minutes I have ever had on a bike. Actually it was the worst five minutes I have had in London.

I have played the event in my mind many times over the years. I have good body memory and can remember the feelings and sensations of road incidents decades old very clearly. The main problem was slipping the chain. If I could have kept moving then I would have been in a better place.

Now I have a protocol in place for similar events, a system which involves exploiting the natural advantages of a bike in the city.

It goes something like this: Assume everyone in a car is a killer, accidental or otherwise. Don't stop, ever - they don't care, they don't have a valid point to make via intelligent dialogue, they just want to hurt you. If someone comes for you treat it immediately like they are going to kill you - get onto the pavement and stay there. Then keep riding away.

In extremis ride into the busiest knot of traffic you can find and get in someone's way - cause a fuss, get noticed. Or ride straight into a shop. Know every single side road on your regular route, all the alleys and bollards, every car-stopping kerb. Have a plan for every fifty metres of your route.

That might seem crazy to people who don't commute by bike, but you really do have to be this prepared if you want to ride safely over many years in a big city.

Finally buy a camera. It's a real phaff to keep it charged but it's an essential. Some drivers will hate you for so much as daring to own one. Some people will

even try to tell you that you need their permission to film them. They're wrong. In a public place you can film and record whatever the hell you want.

Paranoid?

It's one thing to have car lurch at you because they didn't see you. At an adrenal, primitive level cars are like out of control rhinos heading at you and they invoke the same primal reaction - fear, adrenaline, anger. But it's another whole level of fear to have someone riding that rhino, carrying a spear, intent on hurting you.

So I'm calling that prepared.

After that last assault I simply stopped all forms of confrontation on the road. The first rule of commuting is to reach the end alive. A minute here or there waiting for a situation to pass, or the seconds of delay caused by being cautious, are worth it. I continue to ride assertively but I am never abusive and I never lash out. In fact now I am unfailingly polite to motorists. I wave and thank and thumbs-up even the most pathetic attempt to accommodate me on the road. Anything to diffuse the us and them mentality.

And I got rid of that frame as soon as I could. I had ridden that bike for about 20 days. I swore off floppy retro-chic single speeds - I wanted a proper bike again. Something fast. Something nippy. I suddenly saw these qualities as essential safety features. Had I been on the Kinesis I would have had much better chance of not getting hit.

As it was I got on the Kinesis the morning after the incident and felt a lot safer. There is a place for retro bikes - it's called a museum.

Salsa

Somewhere around the time I was riding my mountain bike in the forest I crossed the great Rubicon of forty. It meant nothing, not until I got to around 45 and then I felt it. Middle age proper, grey hair and all.

Ok, greyer hair.

Did I go out and buy a mega expensive Italian carbon superbike? Did I go out and buy all the bikes I had as a boy racer to hang on my wall in homage to my racing glories? Did I start collecting coloured vinyl or begin to create EDM on my macbook? Did I start booking tickets to bands that I really liked in the 80s?

You'll be pleased to know I did none of those things. But I did kinda start having a few bikes at one time, mainly because I had a steady job for longer than a minute and could afford to indulge myself a little.

I could have justified an expensive Italian bike but I'll let you into a secret. Cheap and mid range bikes of today are way better than the high end bikes I used to ride in the 80s. It's possible to step into a Halfords and buy a bike for well under a thousand pounds that is better than anything produced before the year 1995. Relative to income good bikes are cheap as chips. Second hand frames and parts, often given up after a couple of years use, are even cheaper.

So there was no reason why I had to have just one bike. After all I was doing more than one kind of riding.

I was working my way into a position where I had (ahem) four or five bikes on the go at the same time and parts for a few more in the attic. None of them were worth anything like a thousand pounds. I ended up with so many bikes and parts that I had to create a spreadsheet to keep track of it all. A spreadsheet of shame, a register of time wasted on online forums and ebay looking for parts, of endless searching for a perfect frame, prowling nervously like some Victorian opium-soaked addict forever wandering the chemists along the Holloway Road. LTB, the acronym of the addicted.

And why was I even prowling? What was wrong with the Kinesis I was riding that made another bike aside from the Kinesis and the Rock Lobster essential?

I wanted something that was a proper road bike. I wanted something that you might want to take out onto the beautiful lanes of Essex just for fun.

And there it was. Sometime in 2011 on a forum. A Salsa La Raza frame for £90, about 5 years old. A classic road bike shape and design. Classic geometry, about as close to the doric ideal of a road bike as it is possible to get: 73 degrees parallel, with a flat top tube. And mudguard clearance. Worth a punt right?

The minute I scooted this one down the road I really liked it. It felt like a good, updated version of the old steel race bikes I used to ride. It was my default bike for a good few years and I did everything from commuting to fun rides on summer holidays in France on it. But the most important riding I started doing on it was exactly that thing I swore I would never do again. Audax.

Audax, from the Latin word for audacious, but closely aligned to the Anglo-Saxon for stupid.

Middle age is pretty cruel on people with athletic pretensions. After 35 your muscular power drops and as you drift on through your forties you realise that, while it feels like you are riding as hard you used to, you are just not as fast as you were. You simply don't have the ability to sustain top-end power - you no longer have that edge you arrogantly took for granted in your twenties.

But your endurance, the ability to ride at about 50-70% effort, that stays about the same right into your sixties. Throw in some painfully acquired experience and it becomes conceivable that you might challenge yourself, if not to ride faster, at least to ride further.

Which is the basic idea of Audax. Non competitive long distance riding. If you crossbred endurance riding from the 19th century with The Scouts, added modern bikes, rolled the riders around in a surplus store of day-glo lycra and then took away sleep and reason you'd end up somewhere near Audax.

The basic idea is that you get a fixed amount of time to ride a fixed distance. That time includes stops, so you can ride fast and have lots of coffee stops or slug away with no rests - the rules don't care about how you do it.

The standard distances are 200km, 300km, 400km and 600km. To assure the official body that you have completed that distance the organiser of the ride gets you to collect receipts from 'controls' and 'infos'. The irony is that Audax is a set of totally arbitrary minor rules that people willingly submit to for the purpose of escaping their rule-heavy normal lives.

At first the whole thing seems completely bonkers. At first it's enough to just get through the mental and physical hurdle of riding a single 200km. Yes it was

hard, very hard, but a week later you forget how much everything ached and it feels like an achievement. And you wonder if you might be able to ride 300. And it just goes on from there until finally you ride a 600km and it's not quite as terrible as you thought it might be and you wonder if you could do it a bit better next time.

After a few years of working out that you really can ride that far - then further - geeky joys await. There are series awards and plenty of badges and points and patches, just like Scouts. The classic Audax qualification is a Super Randonneur for which you have to ride a 200km, 300km, 400km and 600km in one year. I am on my sixth Super Randonneur, only another four years I will be an Ultra Randonneur. That's got to be better than being a middle-age middle-manager right?

The experience of riding an Audax is more varied than it first appears. It ranges from a long but pleasant spin along summery country lanes to sleepless epics where the only thing that gets you through is bloody-mindedness. Often you start in the one state and end up in the latter.

My first 400 in 2012 was like that. I was deeply skeptical of my ability to ride it. I was on my Salsa but I hadn't ridden it anything like this far before so I didn't know how comfortable it would be.

The tricky thing about riding 400km or longer is whether and where to sleep. As this was my first 400 I thought it was obvious that you needed a sleep. The organisers of this ride had hired a hall about two-thirds of the way around and I decided that I would try and sleep there.

By the time I got there after midnight the 'beds' (piles of blankets) were all taken and the room was full of riders in various states of Goya: Heads collapsed on tables, leaning back like corpses in chairs and snoring, splayed out on the floor. I lay down on the wooden floor in pursuit of the sleep I desperately needed.

And could I sleep? Of course not. I spent an hour on the cold floor. An hour of shivering. An hour wondering what the hell I was doing. An hour looking at the variety of aging cyclists dotted around me, all of whom seemed utterly miserable. Even the 'hale fellow well met' types seemed to me just to be pretending to be happy. It was categorically not possible to experience any feeling of enjoyment in that situation.

Giving up hope of any sleep, I set off on the road again around 4am. Into a brisk head wind. I wasn't carrying enough food and there were no shops open (doh) and I kept bonking. My hands were numb and tingling from the constant buzz of the road through the handlebars. I was willing myself from village to village, then from tree to tree and finally from one push on the pedals to the next.

But I finished and I was by no means last, which was a surprise. One of the things about Audax is that it teaches you not to make assumptions about people, least of all yourself. You learn not to write off old folk or big guys or tiny women or people on old bikes or even new bikes. Those big guys can roll on the flat like bombers, the tiny women overtake you up steep hills with a cheery hello, barely seeming to sweat. They all teach you a lesson - anyone attempting to ride 200km or more deserves your respect.

I had seen a guy at the start of that 400 who I assumed must have been one of the organisers. He was wearing a striped business shirt, trousers and hard black shoes. His hair was tied back in a ponytail giving him the look of a math savant, or someone who had worked in the local council for a very long time. He had no specific cycling gear on at all (helmets are not compulsory in the UK). Not thinking anymore about him I went slack-jawed when, taking a rest around 350km into the ride, he passed by riding an old Dawes, still in shirt, trousers tucked into his socks and street shoes.

That was my first view of a proper Audax eccentric. I have met many more since and grown very fond of them. I am self-aware enough to concede that anyone who rides 600km for 'fun' could be labelled eccentric, so let's revise that and say I have grown very fond of all of us.

There's the one who rides very long distances indeed, between 25,000 and 30,000 km a year, who had a bike accident many years ago that means he tends to forget things, like how long he's been riding for. That's quite a useful quality in a long distance athlete.

There's the rider who has trouble recalling what to do next. He needs to be chaperoned around courses as he often just forgets where he is meant to turn and shoots off in the wrong direction. People have had to chase him over many kilometers when he has missed a turn.

There's the unpleasant man who no one wants to ride with because he shouts and swears at you for not riding 'the right way' whatever that is. I hope he has a back story that explains his outbursts, otherwise he is just a horrible person.

I have chatted with people who are disgruntled and bitter and I have chatted to eternal optimists and to people who are obviously a little socially challenged - Audax is a good place for people who need a bit of social scaffolding - the Scouting aspect again. And while one's job is not referred to much I have spoken to writers and artists and researchers and people in pest control and gadget creators and builders and retired accountants and people who work in warehouses. And an awful lot of IT project managers.

The common denominator is enjoying the challenge of riding an unfeasibly long way on bicycles. That's how cycle sport started of course, the 19th century obsession with applying machines to the limitations of speed and distance. Indeed the Audax 'Blue Riband' event, the 1200km Paris-Brest-Paris has been ridden in one form or another since 1891.

As for the right bikes to ride Audax on, there's no simple answer. I've seen people start a 400km Audax on a full TT bike 'for training' for longer events. There are plenty on carbon racing bikes with all manner of small bags strapped to them, some ride ratty old Dawes tourers. There are a surprising number of Audax riders who ride fixed-wheel (we'll come back to that), a good few on hybrids. Some people set off with enough gear to go camping for the weekend, some look like they are going around the block. There are a few recumbents and tandems, plenty of high-end titanium road bikes and lots of people on the kind of steel bike that the Salsa was, the kind of bike that wouldn't pass a second glance at a Sportive: Fast enough, comfortable enough, very well used.

When I bought the Salsa I was enthralled by it but I wasn't then thinking about long distance cycling and it has a single fatal flaw that has meant that it's been sidelined over the years - not enough mudguard clearance. In the UK mudguards are pretty much essential for long rides. It's not so much about the rain it's about not kicking streams of farm slurry into the face of your ride companions and putting your soggy arse onto the seats of the cafe that has agreed to host dozens of riders on the day. I have tried four sets of mudguards on the Salsa over the years but none of them has given quite enough clearance and they have all driven me slightly mad with tyre rub. I spent more money on mudguards than I did on the frame itself.

So, based on that alone, it got retired.

I still have the frame in the attic, it's another one I can't quite bring myself to move on. The Salsa, a £90 purchase, had given me probably the greatest amount

of pleasure per pound of any bike I have ever owned. With the sole exception of the mudguard clearance this bike is the one of the few I have owned where I thought it would last me decades rather than years. I have even thought about handing it to a bike maker and telling them to make one exactly like it but with mudguard clearance - I would be content with that.

Fast enough, comfortable enough, well used.

Perhaps that is what I should have engraved on my tombstone.

Guilt trip

The biggest change to bikes in the decades since I stopped racing has been the rise of carbon fibre as a frame material. Exotic at the beginning of the century it is now the default choice for the racing cyclist.

A carbon fibre frame is made of floppy woven sheets of very light strands of carbony stuff that you lay into shapes - usually in a mold - that is coated with resin and set with heat. A bike frame can be made from hundreds of pieces of cloth, all of different sizes. You alter the feel of the bike by changing the amount of carbon and the direction of the 'weft' of the sheet. It's a completely different way of making a bike. Carbon frame design and manufacture has more in common with the drapery of haute couture and the design of sails than it does with metallurgy and the welding torch.

Carbon frames are lighter, so much lighter, than a steel frame. I remember picking up a carbon frame at a bike show many years ago and being astonished at the weight - it seemed a bit like voodoo. And even at half the weight of a steel frame they are stiffer and more efficient. There doesn't seem to be a down side.

At this point I had yet to ride a carbon bike, and not from any Luddite sensibility. I had often looked over one in a bike shop and read plenty of reviews but didn't have any particular need to justify the expense. But when a reasonably priced second-hand carbon race frame came up in one of those forums sometime around 2011 I bought it. An Orbea Onix; a middle of the range nominally Spanish frame that was no doubt made in the best place in the world to build a good carbon frame - Taiwan. And it was white, always the wrong colour for a bike.

I was dying to know; how fast was a carbon bike? And by extension, how fast am I?

I hadn't thought about objective speed for decades. I always liked riding fast but only for the way it made me feel. I had left racing behind. If I am honest this bike was my very moderate version of the midlife crisis bike. White and Spanish, not red and Italian, but drifting in that direction.

The short answer was that the bike was very fast. It reached the magic 25mph markedly easier than the Salsa. I found I could reel off shorter rides a good 1-

2mph faster overall with about the same effort. In racing terms that's a country mile.

I took it out one day early on, around a ten mile loop. I used to be able to do 10 miles in under 24 minutes as a fifteen year old on a soggy old steel bike. So now?
Well I got around in under 30 minutes and I had to kill myself to do it. To put that in context the record for 10 miles on a penny farthing from the 1870s was 34 minutes, and there are plenty of riders my age who can knock out 10 miles in under 22 minutes, so I was a slow old git in racing terms.

Still that half hour hurt, properly hurt, in that wonderful cleansing way that only exercise can. Despite not going very fast I still loved the speed. I even contemplated whether I should train properly again and maybe do a race or, less humiliatingly, a time trial.

And then I got real and got on with being a parent and full time worker and got back to riding Audax and mostly rode the Salsa because it was comfortable enough and quick enough and had mudguards.

I rode the Onix on a few commutes and day rides every now and then, maybe 12 times in the first year I had it. I even tried a couple of Audaxes on it - I did my first 300 on it and even a 600. But even a 'comfortable' race bike is not something you want to sit on for the 30 plus hours a 600km takes.

Come Autumn I stripped it down and put it in the attic. No mudguard capability, so not a winter bike.

Next spring, feeling frisky, I wondered if I should start training properly (again). I went for a couple of quick rides on the Onix (again), but mainly used the Salsa (again) until Autumn when I put the Onix back in the attic (again).

I did that for four years running. Sometime in 2015 I realised what I was doing and, the next spring I left it in the attic where it has remained ever since. I suspect I rode it less than 50 times in the 4 years I bothered to put it together.

The reality is that I am about as likely to take up racing again as I am to sit in a hide with a camera covered in camo and take photos of birds.

So now what I have in the attic is a fine but underused piece of the carbon bike builders art. Which is to say a bike-shaped piece of rubbish. Worse than that it's a bike-shaped piece of climate-damage guilt.

About ten years ago I faced up properly to the fact that we have fucked the earth beyond redemption. It is, of course, a depressing thing to fully comprehend.

There are no ‘sustainable options’, we are blindly careening into a future of chaotic weather and human misery. It’s the kind of realisation that makes you want to go back to the complacent 80s and start again. Even that would be a couple of hundred years too late. The very least you can do is make the change as slow as possible by eating less meat and diary and bringing less pollutants into the world - pollutants in the shape of plastic bags and cars and large houses. And carbon-fibre bike frames.

It’s hard to think about climate damage at the individual level. One person deciding to recycle properly or eat less meat has vanishingly close to zero effect on the global outcome of climate damage. And yet all those zeros could stack up to a mountain. Climate change is a huge concept but it’s made of an astronomically large number of very small acts. It’s hard to get your head around - because it doesn't happen on a human scale we struggle to think about it in the right way - it’s both too big and too small.

But there is one thing you can rely on and that is you are not throwing anything ‘away’ anymore. We know that ‘away’ means into the stratosphere or into the ocean or into the ground and that a year or two of use of something is not balanced by sticking it in the ground for a few millennia to leech whatever pollutants were used to create it back into the earth. There is no away left.

Carbon sheet is basically oily stuff. Resin is glue. You can’t burn it, and when you hit it with a hammer it shatters into a mess of small razor-sharp blades. And then surely all that glue and fumes and pre-processing of strange pellets to make carbon is about as toxic as it gets right? In short when you know what climate change is then carbon fibre seems to be an insult to logic.

But then I realised I wasn’t being logical about it at all. I automatically thought of steel as a more ‘climate friendly’ material for a bike frame. But really, is this right?

I spent a day trying to pull together figures for the manufacturing costs in energy and emissions of the materials used to make bike frames - carbon, aluminium, steel and titanium. I even went past the first ten pages of google results. It is hard to find figures and everyone tends to use different measures, so the conclusions I ended up with are probably a bit crap, but this is what I found.

Counter-intuitive finding one: Making a bike frame out of carbon is significantly more energy efficient and has one-third of the emissions of making one from steel. That did surprise me, carbon is way better than all the steel and alloy frames for that. And you can make 10 frames out of carbon for the climate cost of one titanium frame.

Counter-intuitive finding two: A carbon frame will last longer than a steel frame. Steel, aluminum and titanium all flex a little and as such have a failure point. Steel's failure point may be many decades hence, but nevertheless the inert nature of carbon means it will last many times longer than that - theoretically you could ride a carbon bike for a few centuries rather than a few decades.

What carbon doesn't have is resilience. It's brittle. When you hit it hard it tends to shatter. Steel bends, which makes it a little safer in an accident - it will fold beneath you rather than snap in two.

I was right about the recycling and carbon, though. Not a chance. Not that it's impossible, it's just not a thing that is economic for bikes yet. There are precisely two places in the whole of Europe who do carbon recycling and neither of them will take a bike frame off the street. That's not really good enough - if I were king of the world you wouldn't be able to manufacture something unless you took responsibility for its recycling.

So this carbon frame in my attic will last forever in its current form. Unlike tyres left in the attic for a decade it will not rot. It won't oxidise in the rain. You can't re-weld it into a lampstand.

The same thing has happened in the sailing world - there are thousands of early fibreglass yachts that have been left to decay - but they will not rot, they just settle deeper and deeper into the mud, waiting to be found in perfect condition tens of thousands of years hence. Wooden boats have the good grace to decompose. A steel frame will at least rust and become an oxidised pile of flakes in a century or two.

My final conclusions on frame material are:

1. If you are really concerned about emissions and energy at point of manufacture don't buy Aluminium or Titanium frames.
2. Steel is a reasonable balance between climate damage and resilience, at least for the clumsy.

3. If you buy a carbon bike don't crash it.

4. Whatever bike you buy keep using it as long as possible.

And it's the last of those points that really makes the difference. Whatever you have, keep it until it breaks. This does mean ignoring the marketing bullshit and the percentage improvements and not getting too excited about the latest review of the latest kit, which for some of us is, errr, challenging. Buy less. Stay with a bike for ten or twenty years not two to five. Buy second hand where you can.

Having put my climate-guilt into perspective I now have three clear choices on what to do with that carbon frame in the attic: Build it back into a bike and use the hell out of it. Give it to someone who needs it. Wait until carbon recycling becomes a thing.

The very last thing I should do is buy a new carbon bicycle while that one sits in the attic.

That. is. the. very. last. thing. I. should. do.

Steel versus carbon

Astute readers who know their bikes will have realised that I skillfully avoided the one dynamic that really drives the carbon versus steel versus aluminum versus titanium debate among cyclists. It is not the relative merits of frame materials as climate damage objects that make us want one thing over another, it is what they feel like to ride.

There is an eternal debate in cycling circles about the relative merits of carbon and steel bikes. On the one side you have the carbon crew who argue that carbon is light and aero and stiff and on the other side you have the people who say that steel has a feel that can't be beaten, lasts longer and looks better.

Most points here are settled: Carbon frames can be made lighter and stiffer and more aero and therefore they are objectively faster. As above, carbon also lasts longer than steel, is less environmentally damaging to make frames from, but it's impossible to recycle and relatively fragile, so there are pros and cons on that front.

Then there is the maker-aesthetic, the view that with steel bikes you can see what's going on, you can see the metal and the method of manufacture. That's a point about authenticity and visual appeal that I will make in the next chapter about hipsters, so I am going to park that one for the time being.

Which leaves only one argument to have, and that's 'road feel'. This is about riding bikes, not looking at them. So let's start by asking why people love riding their steel bikes.

Over a hundred years of development and understanding steel as a frame material counts for something. A good steel bike is a thing of beauty to ride and it's because of the very thing that most carbon bikes don't have, and that is flex.

Push a steel bike with your foot at the bottom bracket and you can see it flex and then spring back to shape. Being steel it doesn't flex far and it snaps back reliably for many millions of times before it will give way.

It's that very flex that some people think is detracting from performance. That's part of what carbon is about, making a frame stiff enough to resist that flex because, surely, that flex means that some of the rider's precious energy is going into making the bike frame go sideways and not forward.

There is a counter argument that the stiffness of a carbon bike actually damages your muscles - your muscles 'slap' against the rigidity of the bike where on a steel bike the muscles progressively bend the frame in a less damaging way. Jury's out on that one, but could that be the cause of the that 'beaten up' feeling you get from a carbon bike?

Stiffness at all costs is probably worth pursuing if you are an elite racer, don't get me wrong, but it's worth remembering that such athletes are producing three to five times more power than us mortals, so what feels soft for a pro probably feels overly rigid to me.

Where things are not clear on stiffness they are very clear on 'aero'. The ability to shape a carbon frame into an aerofoil shape in order to cheat the wind is definitely worth doing if you want to be going as fast as possible - an aero tube can have ten times less drag than a round tube. Even so, because the vast majority of drag is created by the rider and not the bike the difference in your speed when riding very fast is around 5%. That can win races but for most of us it's a bit pointless worrying about it.

It's also worth noting that the average speed of cycle racers is much more affected by what drugs they can get away with taking than what their frame is made of. The record times on Alpe de Huez were made in the EPO era on the kinds of bikes you can now buy at Evans for a weeks gross salary. Todays clean(er) riders don't get near those times on their light, stiff, aero bikes and wheels.
So, assuming you are riding clean, the faster you go the more carbon counts.

And you do have to stand back and admire the engineering. Carbon as a material really is amazing and is the perfect material to create the fastest possible bikes out of. Using CAD you can design and vary - and even breed with algorithms - frame designs and carbon layups to get pretty much any set of behaviours you want. Think of how round the world racing yachts are designed - they put typical weather systems and the expected course into very fast computers and then model what the fastest hull shape would be for that event; then they build it in carbon.

You could easily do the same with bikes - you could model the Tour de France and then create bikes that are, on average, better for that particular route. And you could optimise for the biometrics of a particular rider too. I think such a model of bike manufacture will be common inside ten years - custom carbon

designed by computational fluid dynamics to suit your aims and the relative length of your femur.

But, and it's a big but, what you throw away in the relentless pursuit of performance is 'feel'. What a bike feels like is a complex brew of things like geometry matching your own, how heavy you are, what type of wheels you have, what the tubes are made of, how the tubes themselves are shaped, what sizes they are.

And here's the thing with steel. Putting a bunch of lightweight steel tubes into the classic double diamond configuration creates a kinesthetic signature. The frame twists as you ride. As you pull up on one arm and push down with the other leg the frame twists from the rear axle up along the tubes and into the head tube, deflecting ever so slightly. And then 1/90th of a second later it twists the other way.

That twisting back and forth creates a resonant wave. Good steel frames feel like they are humming, like a tuning fork.

And flex is useful in other ways. I changed the forks on my Salsa from carbon to steel and the whole thing rode much better - there was more flex but it was helpful, I could feel what the front wheel was doing better, like I had better whiskers. I noticed the improvement in ride quality more than I noticed the extra weight.

Carbon bikes can mimic this. In the last few years the phrase 'vertically compliant and horizontally stiff' is used endlessly to describe carbon bikes. And you can make carbon compliant but that is subtly different to flex.

If you were buying a bike only with your head, or you are actually racing there is no argument, carbon wins. If you are buying a bike with a body attached to that head then the choice is less clear. If you add a beating heart and a passion for something that sings into the mix, then steel starts to come out on top.

When people write about carbon bikes they tend to write about how fast or good they are, when people write about steel bikes they often talk about the bikes more like you would talk about a pet. The difference is, I think, telling.

Here's my old mate and bike mechanic supremo Oli on his experience of carbon versus steel. He is well known for having a collection of steel Bianchi's and you will not find a single gram of Shimano product on any of them.

One day someone gave him a top level carbon Trek frame, he built it up and this is what happened:

> *Talking of road bikes, before Christmas I took 1h 45m to build myself a Trek - well on the 6th of January after only three rides it took me exactly 1h 11m to reverse the process! Two shortish rides on the flat started to tell me what I already knew, and a third hilly test loop confirmed, for me at least, the truism that steel is real.*
>
> *Now, I'm not blaming the Trek - it's a fine bike, and way better than I require - but to me the Bianchi sings where the Trek hums. The final straw was taking the OCLV up a climb we used to call the Alpe d'Huez - I know that climb like the back of my hand, and it's a favourite test ride. I could definitely feel the kilogram I'd saved when seated climbing, but when I stood up to give it some welly the Trek felt stiff and light and good, but for some deeply inherent tactile reasons I really missed the springy flex of Columbus steel.*

In the quest for better and faster marketing cycles the cycling industry loves carbon because it gives it a better material to innovate with. And what some would consider an advantage in a custom steel frame - infinite possibilities of design and choice - can put off those who want someone to tell them what they need. Not to mention that the very best steel frames will set you back over £3,500 - and you'll have to wait six months to a year or more to have one built for you.

No, Steel has a small but important place in cycling. A custom steel frame is still close to the pinnacle of cycling pleasure. Steel can be personal in a way it's hard to imagine with carbon just yet. Custom steel bikes are collaborations between individual riders and the makers, the result of a process that doesn't reduce the rider to a marketing point or a position on a bell curve.

Here's Oli on his latest frame, a lovely custom classic steel number from a local maker in NZ, Benson:

> *There's nothing like riding a bicycle that has been crafted specifically for you by a talented artisan, an artisan who also happens to be a friend with the sort of direct insight into my riding preferences that not many frame builders could, or would, have. I've already clocked up quite a few massively enjoyable kilometres in the saddle of this fine steed, and I plan to clock up many, many more.*

Like me Oli's not going to win the 'Wednesday Night World Championships' any time soon. So the benefit of the Benson is not performance, the benefit is that it will get him out on his bike more because he will enjoy the ride more.

For most of the riding I do the friendliness the Salsa counted for more than the performance gain from the Onix. For beating other people I would take the Onix, for winning the game of life I would take the Salsa.

The London Hipster Fixie Thing

London.

Big place with lots of people in it, some of them even from England. I live here but am not from here. Sometimes I even belong.

Hipster.

These days it's a market segment filled with people with tattoos and/or lumbersexual beards who might be a lawyer or user experience designer as much as a wood turner or brewer. Hipster is now a look where it used to be a way of looking at the world. Such is the way of all alternative cultures, they become categories and labels in order to be marketed to by the kind of people who call themselves 'creatives', who have those same tattoos or lumbersexual beards, but are essentially sell-outs.

Ten years ago, even five, having that big bushy beard and a flannel shirt meant something. Around that time a whole generation, for whom austerity is the norm, realised that the capitalist dream of home ownership was effectively beyond them.

Their grandparents - the boomers - had their free education and then rinsed the value out of the real estate market before taking apart the left-leaning infrastructure that had made them, mistaking their luck on the housing market for good judgement and personal merit.

My generation, X, have done as bad a job but through disengagement. Cool and cynical doesn't change institutions. We play *Fear of a Black Planet* on vinyl as if it were a form of political action and decry gentrification while watching our property values rise - the only bulwark we have against poverty in old age now that the state is using the 'logic' of austerity to pull out of providing actual services to its citizens.

What do you do when there is no upside left? If you can't build - literally or figuratively - on the shoulders of the previous generations what do you do? What do you do when you can't play the game?

You rewrite the rules.

Having looked at the ‘macro’ and found it wanting they reinvented the ‘micro’. They shunned aspirational, debt-levered ‘success’ as their guiding light and came to look at the value of things as things, not as objects with exploitable brand value. Instead of buying another bike to make themselves feel better like I do, they turned their backs on expensive carbon bikes, lycra and the commercialised world of racing and instead they took to the old steel bikes that used to fall out of the internet like confetti. They bought the bikes no one else wanted anymore.

Soon the hipsters realised that track bikes, with their one gear, were perfect for around town and cheap to run. And, bonus, they looked cool too.

That’s when the full collision took place; hipster met bike courier chic and, magnified by proclivities of the East End ‘it’ crowd in London and their analogs elsewhere, multiplied again by social media, exploded into a febrile scene where fakengers with beards’n’tatts started making their own cheap fun, by just riding around and generally having a great time on bikes.

So the hipsterfied-city-cum-track bike became a sub-cult for a few years. People bought these great looking old steel frames that were meant for riding on butt-cheek smooth tracks with razor-blade handling, that had no concessions to comfort, and started riding them on the road. There must have been some spectacular late-night crashes as smashed hipsters tried to pedal a straight line on the bike path through London Fields and got their boots caught in the front wheels of their italian track bikes.

It was right in the middle of that revival that I bought a fixed gear bike.

Bored at lunchtime I was looking through the tatty old stuff in a pawn shop on the shitty bit of Holloway Road for no particular reason, looking for a story maybe. Between a tired drum kit, some unfeasibly large speakers and a strimmer I spotted a bike. It was covered in old tyre tubes and black gaffer tape and it took a bit of digging with a fingernail to expose the bike underneath - a battered but fundamentally sound Lemond fixie. It had all the appeal of a rescue dog. I haggled the price down from £160 to £90 and rode it home.

Fixie.

Fixed-wheel. Single speed, no freewheel - when the back wheel turns the crank turns.

Fixies only have one gear, which means you end are riding in one of three pedaling states:

Gear is too hard - going uphill, or into a wind, or when feeling tired.
Gear perfect - feeling great!
Gear is too easy - going downhill or in a tailwind, pedalling like a lunatic.

There is a steep learning curve to riding fixed. If you forget that you can't freewheel and stop try to stop pedalling then they have a tendency to throw you over the bars. A classic fixie injury is caused by pedalling around a corner and hitting the inside pedal on the road as it comes down. That ends very poorly too, usually with the collar bone deciding it is not strong enough.

So riding fixed is dangerous, difficult, somewhat anachronistic and, in 2011, try-hard fashionable - why would you bother?

Aside from being cheap as chips to run, it's all about the feeling. Because the momentum of the bike carries your foot over the top of the pedal stroke and through the dead spot, pedalling a fixed feels absolutely brilliant. On a fixie you glide through the complete pedal stroke. And you have fine control over the speed of the bike - sometimes you can ride for hours and not use the brakes.

Finally there are no clicks and whirrs from the drivetrain, they are as silent as a bike can be.

It's a little difficult to sum up how delicious riding fixed feels. There is no better feeling on a bike than hitting the sweet spot on a fixie. If you then take your bike to a wooden track the experience is so smooth that you feel like you are floating just off the ground. It is a perfect riding experience. When you have it all mastered - which takes a while - then you feel like the class A drug user of the cycling world.

My Lemond was exactly the same size as my Salsa to the millimetre - I suspect they were made in the same factory in Taiwan - and so fit me perfectly. I got on so well with it that, after failing to ride Paris-Brest-Paris on my Tripster (next chapter) I decided I would do the next years Audax rides on it. I put mudguards on it and dynamo lights and generally turned it into a fixie that you could ride a very long way on rather than a fixie you rode to a secret cinema gig on.

I rode 200, 300, 400 and finally 600km on it. I had become one of those old dudes I had seen on the Dunwich Dynamo ten years before, riding fixed through the night and chatting away like an old biddy having a nice cuppa with friends.

Turns out not having gears is relaxing, that having one gear means that you just get on with it. And, at the finish, you know you've really earned those kilometres. I can tell you that for my longest fixed ride of 600km my legs went full circle 106531 times.

While my fixie riding had taken me out into the lanes of East Anglia, back in London the brands woke up to fixie culture and started to exploit it.

Sports drink and gaming brands took up the hipster value of the fixie and invented a whole raft of new formats that involved a great deal of crashing; from the figure of 8 minidrome to the Red Hook criteriums right through to fixed gear fake fox hunting - yes really, #fixundfoxi. All of these were very much in the tradition of early bike racing - half circus, half race, all entertainment. One sports drink manufacturer sponsored rider recreated the first ever stage from the 1903 Tour de France on his fixie, bringing the whole cycling thing full circle.

Early long distance road races were all done on fixed gear bikes. The Tour de France was ridden on fixed gear bicycles for its first editions and then on single-speed freewheels into the 1930s, decades after the invention of gearing. The despotic director of the Tour in those years thought that the single gear was the authentic cycling experience. The majority of riders disagreed but were obliged to comply.

Perhaps that is part of the appeal - there is nothing on my fixie that is not merely a refinement of kit available well before 1903. My fixie, all fixies, are something of the time machine: roller-chain and sprocket (1880), wheels with wire spokes (1808), the 'safety' bicycle format (1885), pneumatic tyres (1845). Ok, the aluminium rim wasn't really standard until the 1980s, but those riders in the 1903 Tour, while being astounded at the weight of a modern fixie, would not have been surprised at all by the format of it.

After doing my Super Randonneur on fixie I had a few knee issues and realised I had to drop my saddle a bit. I hadn't changed the seat height on the bike since the day I bought it and (mechanics will wince) I could not for the life of me get the post to come out of the frame. I tried heating and cooling and yanking and pushing and oiling and twisting but after a few months of trying off and on realised I was not going to get anywhere.

But it's steel, so it can be recycled. And I had given it a full six years of absolute thrashing, so it certainly didn't owe anyone anything. It ended up in the metals bin at the local recycling centre, off to be melted into a crash barrier for the side

of a motorway. I was happy with that, it was second hand when I got it, I rode it many thousands of kilometers, commuted hundreds and hundreds of times on it and then recycled it.

I still remember that bike very fondly. More fondly than bikes costing many many times more. Partly because of the beauty of fixed, partly because it fitted so well and partly because it was steel. Not even expensive or exotic steel, just basic bike steel, the kind that gets rolled out of steel mills by the mile, every day.

And I think this is where the hipster connection with steel bikes comes from. It's not that steel is any less industrial than carbon as a base material, but with a steel frame you can see the logic of the build in the frame itself. Carbon is all strips of stuff hidden under resin but steel is right there, on the surface. You can see the lugs and the brazing, you can tap a tube with your finger and hear it ring.

You can imagine making one yourself and in certain beardy parts of Bristol and Brighton and East London you can do a week-long course and come out the other end with a custom frame.

So was that it for fixed? Time to move on?

Well no, I ended up with a like for like replacement within a month, a Genesis Flyer. With sale pricing and the ride to work scheme and then selling off parts and swapping old Lemond parts on it I ended up with a 'new' bike that cost me £250. It's made from the same grade of tubing as the Lemond and the geometry is about the same, though I am a little sad it doesn't have a classic flat top tube.

I suspect my white, new, Flyer is too generic to rouse anything but disgust in the London fixie scene. It wasn't hand-made by a moustachioed frame builder and no craft beers were drunk during its creation. I do not stop and hang out with the Friday night fixie crew that gather at the top of Brick Lane outside Brick Lane Bicycles as I pass by on my way home. Any bike that is bought new from the high-street retailer Evans is, by definition, not cool. I could have spent four times as much on a custom frame made out of the same grade of steel, or bought an overpriced retro, but I went for the cheap mass-produced item from Taiwan. I think almost all of my bikes, no matter what they said on the top tube, have been made in within a few miles of each other in Taiwan.

It looks like we have passed 'peak beard' in London and I suspect the hipster generation will be ditching the fixies for strollers now. They will be trading the

head-down-arse-up retro-fixie for a town bike, something with a few gears, something you can put a baby seat on. Let's just hope they can keep their idealism alive now that their style and mode of living has been relentlessly mined by every brand looking to be 'authentic'.

The hipster fixie riders that are left are now part of the true fixie tribe. They might not acknowledge me but I am too old to care, I just like to look at their bikes and their attitude and keep my distance without ever being too far away. Perhaps they think that I am aping them, but the truth is I was riding fixed 35 years ago, back when a racer would do a few weeks every season fixed to develop souplese - liquid pedalling style.

And I know that London and the fixie have been a pair long before hipsters joined the party: From the first ever six-day race run on a temporary track at what is now the Islington Business Centre in 1878 to the post war heyday of the Herne Hill Velodrome and right through to the 2012 Olympics on the new Velodrome.

The fixie might have neared extinction in the 80s, the flame being kept alive by the faithful at Herne Hill and messengers, but it has survived, and now thrived, because it is really is an authentic riding experience, whether there are hipsters there to recognise that or not.

I am not a hipster, but I do count myself as fixie faithful, and I live in London - and two out of three is ok by me.

Magical Mystery Tripster

Let us start with misery.

Let us start halfway through one of the great epic cycling adventures, the 1240km Paris-Brest-Paris. PBP as it's known.

I am halfway, in Brest, handing my card back into the controller and making hand signs to say 'done, finished'.

After that moment of capitulation, I go outside, sit on the long grass in the late afternoon sun and, unexpectedly, sob my eyes out. I had no idea how much I had wanted to do this ride until I couldn't do any more of it.

So what happened? I had run out of motivation. That, and food. The French controls had little or no Gluten free options other than yoghurt and rice. No grains, not enough carbs. I felt like I was metabolising my bones, getting slower and slower as my residual energy leaked away like air out of a cheap sleeping mat.

Or that was my excuse at the time. The less convenient truth I could only admit months later. I just wasn't ready. I had qualified by doing rides I would normally do anyway and thought I would 'have a go' and 'see how far I got'. That kind of attitude does not drag an aging body through 1200km and 10,000m of climbing in 90 hours. I hadn't decided I wanted to do it, decided at a cellular level.

There was one thing that wasn't an illusion though, and that was the rock solid performance of the bike I was riding. I had no discomfort, my hands were tired but not destroyed, my bum wasn't sore, my back was good. 600km done with barely an ache.

In Audax circles a proper long ride is 400kms or over, and a 200km ride is normal. A mate of mine calls that 'Audax bonkers normal', but the truth is you can ride just about any bike 200km: A race bike, a fixie, a tourer, a hybrid, whatever you've got.

For a proper long ride though not just any setup will do. 300, 400, 600, 1200km and beyond. At those kind of distances any minor niggle becomes properly epic and potentially ride ending. A saddle which is a little uncomfortable for 200km becomes a device of torture; slightly sore hands become dead nerves that make it difficult to change gear; a stiff back becomes the dreaded Schermer's neck

where you literally cannot hold your head up. And after two nights on the road without proper sleep, you enter the strange world of sleep deprivation and hallucinations and in that alternative universe a twitchy racy bike is the opposite of safe.

While there are plenty of people who ride unsuitable bikes too far because they are young and fit, the perfect bike for my long distance rides is comfortable and steady. I want a bike that's going to get you around a sketchy gravel corner on an unknown hill in Wales at 3am on no sleep without issue. I want a Range Rover not a Ferrari.

Enter the Tripster ATR. It had disc brakes and was made of Titanium. Nuclear subs are clad in titanium. 90% of titanium goes into aerospace, into things with operating lives of many decades and that are kinda important, things like wings. Titanium is expensive, hard to work and environmentally dirty but it is a great frame material for a properly comfortable bike. It's also meant to last a lifetime.

The full retail price for the Tripster frame alone is £1800. Which is why I am still rather chuffed at having got one for £250.

Someone had had the misfortune of dropping his cycle-rack off the roof of his car with the Tripster attached. The clamp on the cycle-rack had left two largish indents on the down tube of the bike. Consequently he had 'lost faith' in the bike. He'd also already made an insurance claim and gone and bought something else, so he was open to offers for the brave. I offered him £250 no questions asked. I had ridden plenty of steel bikes with bumps and dings in tubes with no drama at all and thought it was worth a punt.

That was a couple of months before PBP. I was settling to ride the Salsa but after one ride around the block I knew this was 'the one' for long distance.

Comfortable, yes, but also light and stable. It's not a racy bike and you don't feel like attacking hills on it but that's not the Audax remit. The longer you ride it the more comfort negates the very slight speed advantage of a race bike. For a long ride you need to be able to get back on a bike day after day and ride it for fifteen hours plus. You need a bike that you can keep riding no matter how dreadful you feel, a bike that looks after you a bit.

After my PBP failure I had two years to sort out the bike properly and get it ready to ride the other European Blue Riband Audax event, the London-Edinburgh-London. Yes, that abbreviates to LEL. LEL is a ride which does what

it says on the tin; 1450km with a 116 hour limit. A big adventure, very well organised - there were dorms and hot meals laid on every 60 to 80 miles.

Still, 1450km - how did I think I was going to manage that? My longest ride to date was 'just' 600km. What would make the difference this time?

All my riding since I gave up racing has been casual. I was just someone who rode a bike. Sometimes to make some money, sometimes to go exploring, sometimes to relax, mostly to get to work. I had never really trained for anything, I had never built up to any rides over six months. Even as a boy racer back in the 80s I didn't do much other than ride around Wellington as fast as I could. There were no real training plans back then, no forums to obsess over functional power thresholds, no heart rate monitors, no speedos, no strava, no zwift. No supporting infrastructure.

This time I chose it. I decided I wanted to finish LEL and I put in the training hours and smaller challenge rides on the way. I targeted the event and prepared properly.

And having decided that I would finish LEL that's exactly what I did.

It was an adventure and it had it's ups and downs that's for sure. Physically it's demanding and the weather was often harsh. There was an epic headwind all the way back from Edinburgh and climbing and then descending Yad Moss in a horrible storm was challenging verging on outright dangerous. Food and hygiene was an issue too - fatigue and exertion make digestion more delicate even as you are trying to eat over 5000 calories a day.

But it's sleep that is the most challenging, or rather the lack of it.

On PBP back in 2015, having not slept for 53 hours, things got a little wonky. The road seemed to lurch every now and then and the night took on an alien strangeness, like everything had it's skin removed. The hedges and grass seemed lethally pointed. Around me riders sleeping beside the road in tinfoil space blankets looked like pupae dropped in from Area 51. I knew I really needed sleep when I saw a luminous twelve foot high white rabbit beside the road. It was a collection of white signs reflecting my headlight back at me.

But LEL was worse, much worse. Even after a two hour sleep on night three I was beginning to blank out. In the early dawn, before sunlight hits your body, you want to sleep, even if you are riding a bike up a hill. There are couple of moments I can't account for, half-conscious hazes where I am pedalling but only

looking at the inside of my eyelids. Then snapping back and finding myself riding up a hill in Scotland at 4am. There is no traffic that early in Scotland on the Eskdalemuir road, so there was a reasonable safety margin, but I now understood how people could ride to the point of falling asleep on the bike - and wake up in a ditch.

The next night was stranger. Now back in Yorkshire, I remember looking up at the stars and seeing that they were connected with each other and, somehow, with me - a blanket of belonging and unity. It was a hyper-real moment of almost religious significance.

Then a back-road that lazily threaded through fields became a warm ribbon that started to lift and sway beneath me, like I was riding on a mobius strip. It was magical if somewhat disconcerting. I did take the warning this time though and fell over in a patch of long wet grass for a ten minutes while someone fixed a puncture, which did the trick.

Even that paled next to the epic weirdness of night four. Extreme fatigue, brought on by the never-ending headwind and a total of three and half hours sleep in the last two days, tipped me into a very odd place indeed.

Normally when a car comes at you at night you make a split second unconscious rationalisation and convince yourself that this noisy machine coming at you with lights blazing, with nothing but a white line as a marker of convention between you and certain death, is going to stay on the other side of the road. You know that the tin box with a motor contains something like a semi-conscious being who doesn't want to be bothered with killing you because not having a driving license would make their lives a little more difficult.

I'd lost that perspective. Each approaching vehicle seemed like an evil tear in the veil of night, the road noise of the approach like a knife cutting into a heavy piece of canvas being held right next to my ear by a taunting metaphysical psychopath - first the fabric of the universe, then I'm coming for you. The headlights came at me like massive sheets of thick white glass. Only at the very last moment did a bike rider sized hole materialise and I was able to slip inside the alien spaceship for a moment, glimpse at the multiple other dimensions held there, and then slide back out into the Lincolnshire night.

There's an hour and half there where all I inhabited was a series of abstractions like this; the feeling of light brushing against tired brain cells, the weight of sound. My only other mental activity was the application of will to the pedals.

By then I couldn't really tell if I had a body or not, it seemed as if I was sending my mental resolve straight to the back wheel without any bodily intersession. I would have been hard-pressed to define where the boundaries between the bike and road and me and the night were.

Later on I have a momentary vision of horror: The road is a conveyor belt linked to a flock of mechanical twelve foot birds at the side of the road who take turns to slash their beaks at me. To halt the danger I have to stop riding but to finish I have to face The Birds. It's only later I realise I had the vision just after I'd left a small town called Crowland.

There is pretty much no way to avoid these epic tricks of the mind on such a ride. Some people, a minority, are able to ride a lot faster and have more sleep. The rest of us deduct sleep from the riding time required to make the end in time and suffer. That's why my sleep pattern for LEL was no sleep on night one, then 4hrs, then 2 and 2 again and then a grim 90 minutes on the last night.

Over my years of riding Audax my mental resilience has gone up more than my physical abilities have gone down with age. Maybe that resilience boost comes from cycling and my post gluten-free state, or from getting older and being a parent. Wherever it comes from I am certainly proud of my long distance riding but not because of the distances; it's the playing and winning of the mental game that counts.

While I am happy to get as geeky as you like about frame geometry and materials, when you begin an epic ride all that disappears in an instant. The bike, no matter how good, it's meant to disappear too. The irony of good bikes is that the better the bike is and fits the more it vanishes.

Which brings me back to the Tripster. Through all the mental nonsense on PBP and LEL the Tripster was solid as a rock, totally ridable, utterly reliable. I kept pedalling, stayed upright and on the road, was very comfortable. It's pretty much the perfect recipe for a very long distance bike.

And I would have tried my come-back PBP on the Tripster again like a shot. It really was a bike for life. And that should mean I never need another bike again - at least not for long distance rides.

But I am sad to say and it grieves me to relate...

Just as I was writing this chapter in praise of the Tripster, I took it out for a ride. A lovely easy meander up the Lea Valley and then across the canals towards

Stanstead before coming back on the road. When I started the ride there was a funny creaking. It disappeared pretty soon, but when I got home I took a look at the dents in the frame.

You know where this is going don't you?

At the top of one of those dents there was a small tear in the tubing - the creaking sound was coming from the sides of the tear rubbing against each other and getting larger. This is nothing to do with the company and the construction of the frame, it's all to do with it falling off the other guys car.

The Tripster was better than good enough, it was fabulous and the bike I had had my biggest ride ever on. And it might have been the nicest bike I ever own. It's a little unlikely I will be finding £2k for a new frame anytime soon and if I was going to spend that money full retail I would consider other options, like custom steel.

And so, 10,000km later, the magical mystery tripster had come to an end. Was I gutted?

No, it's just a bike, it was cheap and I knew there was a chance this would happen. And yes, because now I had to get something ready and comfortable for the return to PBP, which takes a surprisingly long time.

The Last Bike

A Datum is a baseline, a line from which dimensions are drawn on engineering drawings.

As a name for a bike I think it's meant to invoke a spirit of adventure, it's meant to be the tool with which you create the journey, a baseline for adventure. Also the company who makes the Datum, Genesis, had already used the better Longitude and Latitude labels for previous models.

I bought my Datum very quickly at the back end of 2016. The bottom of the range model was usually £1800 and I saw it on sale for £1300. I knew, as an avid reader of bike news, that in a few months the prices for all bikes was going to jump then the frame only price was going to be £1500. So I took the last one in the country in my size out for a spin at lunchtime.

It's not like I knew nothing about the bike. I'd read reviews and it had the thumbs-up from my favourite websites, and I had already done that thing I do with new bikes; I had gone to the manufacturers website and, like an old astrologer, stroked my lengthy grey beard as I looked at the geometry chart and asked the question - are these numbers favourable?

They were and it rode well, so I slapped down the debit card. Remarkably this was the first complete new road bike I had ever bought. But I already had a carbon bike, the Orbea racing bike that was accumulating guilt in the attic, so why another?

This one was one of the first carbon bikes that was fast and yet had disc brakes and mudguard mounts. And why was that important? Back in the middle of my torturous failure at PBP I had got heartily sick of European riders on carbon racing bikes looking like they were going on a short training ride overtaking me at pace as I plodded along.

Being tired at the time all I saw were the bikes. I ignored the fact that these riders were super fit Germans and Italians who had camper vans to collapse artfully into at regular intervals, full meals laid on and had their spare kit ferried around for them. I was carrying everything I needed, from a spare gear cable up to two extra pairs of shorts to toothpaste. Oh yeah, they were also half my age. I didn't see any of that I fixated on the fact they were riding Carbon bikes.

I thought I too had to have a suitable carbon bike. There is some degree of logic there; if you can be just 1km per hour faster over the 60-70 hours of riding PBP that gives you 3 hours less time elapsed, an additional 5% of time to play around with. That's three extra hours sleep.

I wanted something that could take mudguards and sat halfway between the Tripster (supremely comfortable) and the Orbea (quick as hell) and, on paper, it looked like the Datum could be that bike.

So I've had this bike for three years but is only in the last six weeks that I would say I really liked it. Before that I knew lots about it, but not enough to say whether it was the right bike to buy or not. In the three years since I bought it I have found it to be an absurdly good commuter because I have ridden it to work a few days a week. The combination of carbon frame, big tyres and disc brakes make it quick and comfortable and, most importantly, safe in all weathers.

I have learned it's a very good bike for blasting around the lanes on for a couple of hours in poor weather. Where I ride there is lots of standing water and mud on the roads in winter, and it is great fun to fang around on the Datum, sprinting from one corner to the next and slicing around dodgy corners in a way that would be impossible on the Orbea. This is the kind of ride the Tripster was excellent for, but the Datum is sharper and wants to get up and go in a way the Tripster never did.

But until a few weeks ago I hadn't ridden it over 600km in one go, so I didn't know if it was comfortable enough for very long rides. Not many bike testers ride their bikes over 600km in one hit so they can't really tell you if it is comfortable for epics or not. It's just not something a lot of riders consider when buying a bike - will this be comfortable for 36 or 72 or 96 hours at a time?

When London-Edinburgh-London came around, all 1450km of it, I still had the Tripster which made the choice a no-brainer, and the Tripster was excellent. But since the demise of that fine bike I found myself left with the Datum for just about everything. Almost back to one bike. Well, ok, three bikes. The fixie, a mountain bike and the Datum. So, given I wasn't going to find the £2000 needed for a good Ti frame, I just got on with riding it all the time.

I got used to the fact it was less flexy and 'friendly' than a steel or Ti bike. I found good tyres for it, I shifted to proper hydraulic brakes, I changed the gearing around a bit to suit. By the time my nemesis ride, Paris-Brest-Paris, came along I had a solid six months on it. I also discovered that if I put my

ancient Brooks leather seat on it it was just about comfortable enough, while still being quicker than the Tripster, particularly uphill.

This time for PBP I planned my attack. I decided to finish and committed in my head to success. I had read a lot about sports psychology and mentally rehearsed scenarios good and bad, did the visualisations, wrote notes in journals and generally upped my mental game.

And I did the training over winter - not the long soggy miles that many do but sessions on the power bike at the gym, long intervals, pyramid intervals. I knew what PBP roads were like, an endless series of three to five minute shallow climbs with a couple of larger, but still shallow, climbs that would take an hour. Then through the year I tried to hold the speed and power while lengthening the rides. This is the exact opposite of what racers do, but it's a valid training method called reverse periodisation.

Even that decision, to avoid the worst of winter and instead do some training that I really like - power training - was about me taking control of the event. People can give you lots of advice, they can tell you what worked for them, but you have to take the effort to sort things out for yourself.

And in the end I aced it. Not fast but fast enough. 1220km in 86 and a half hours, less than eight hours sleep and the craziest, most wonderful experience I have yet had on a bike.

PBP is the oldest cycling event that still runs. Started in 1891 as a way to prove the reliability of the pneumatic tyre, every four years upwards of 6000 amateur cyclists ride from Paris to the Atlantic coast and back. It's not meant to be a race but many people take their time very seriously - the modern record is just over 42 hours. The vast majority however, like me, ride in the 90hr 'cyclo touriste' group.

That makes it sound benign, but it is anything but. You ride four nights and three days, I slept for less than eight hours, you cope with the accumulation of fatigue as best you can. Despite eating as much as I could stomach I lost over three kilos.

What makes it special is that is a cultural as much as a sporting event. Whole towns come out to watch, cheering and clapping people on, even the old hacks at the back like me. People wait by the road for days on end serving free coffee and water. I took a late night nap on a bit of foam laid out in a tent by the side of

the road by someone who stayed up all night, watching bikes, serving coffee, trading only in smiles and thanks.

By the same token it is bonkers. People from all over the world turn up. Japanese women in three-layer mini skirts with coloured foam spikes coming out of their helmets. There are athletic Germans en masse, cyclists from India wearing full winter gear when I was in shorts and a shirt, Americans hooting and hollering to each other, legions of quiet grumpy Brits - and even more nice ones.

Nights three and four got sketchy on the perception front, I started to see cyclists spontaneously appear and disappear in front of me in a matter of seconds and for a while I couldn't have told you where I was or what I was doing. But this time around I was expecting it, I was more used to it, I could cope with the choice of riding or having an identity that extreme fatigue gives you. I was happy not really knowing who I was beyond being a strange hybrid, part bike, part animal, a carbohydrate processing factory, a little bit GPS, a little bit Allen.

And the bikes -people on retro bikes and fixies, tandems and triplets, recumbents and lots of titanium bikes. Mostly though people on carbon race bikes because the roads in France are smooth and nice. So the Datum turned out to be perfect and the kind of mega-comfy bikes that a lot of long distance riders use in the UK to cope with our shit roads are simply not needed.

The second event that finally made me a true believer in the Datum happened just two weeks after PBP. Still caked in French dirt, I took the mudguards off, swapped out the tyres for something with some knobs on them, oiled the chain and took off on North London Dirt.

This was a hip 'gravel' event, a 70m mile loop out into Essex on a mix of roads and off-road sections. The off-road included single track, greenways, bridle ways, grassy parks, forest, obscure urban footpaths, around cemeteries, along unmarked river banks, and a good dose of the paths in Epping Forest that I would normally do on my mountain bike.

I had a ball - hammering across a field in a cloud of dust, trying to keep up with the fast guys, ducking and diving through twisty paths, it was a glorious combination of warp speed and the kind of MTB thrills that had hooked me way back in the last eighties.

And the Datum was perfect for that too. Hmmm.... I think I am really understanding this bike now, after a couple of years of it being not wanted I wanted it to be (the Tripster) I am now seeing it's true capabilities, and they are very good.

Am I in danger of going back on myself when I wrote previously that carbon is for the head and steel is for the heart? A little... ultimately I think there are good reasons to have bikes of multiple materials depending on what you are planning to do and where you are going to ride.

So yes, I do want it all ways.

The third thing also happened not long ago. A few days before I was due in France for PBP I was riding the Datum to work. A driver mistook a left-turning green arrow for a straight ahead and accelerated away from the lights just as I was entering the corner at some pace, clearly on my green, from the side of the intersection.

It all happens very fast. I knew I was going to hit the car. Somewhere deep in the lizard brain I knew the things I had to do - avoid slamming into the side of it and get onto the bonnet if you can, don't put your hands out you'll break your wrist, roll and take the blow on the largest area of your body - most definitely not the head.

And it all worked. Those many hours on a MTB falling off in multiple ways into grass and foliage paid off. I walked away with a couple of small grazes. The driver got a tasty crumple in her bonnet and a big surprise.

The first thing I did when I got to the pavement was to check the bike. The brunt of the fall's impact had gone onto the handle bars and they were lunched, and I expected to look down on a shattered mess of carbon. I hit the car with a hell of a wallop, enough that I am sure I would have bent a steel frame. No, no sign of damage. This is exactly the kind of accident that places steel frames under most pressure of deformation and results in the same 'kink in the downtube' look that my first ever ten speed road bike had.

Later at home I took the forks out and checked for surface damage or delamination. Nothing. I hummed and wondered if I should not use the Datum for PBP - I was leaving in two days. I decided to chance it and had no issues with it then or since.

My uncle, an aircraft engineer of many decades experience, who was staying with me at the time, wasn't surprised. Carbon can be a lot stronger than steel if the design and layup are right he says.

It's taken years but I now really like the Datum. Given the type of riding I do it's not perfect but it is certainly more than good enough and better than I am, by which I mean a rider of my relatively poor power output is never going to find the limits of it's stiffness, nor am I going to get better braking or shifting performance without spending a ton of money. And given it's made of carbon and going to last a very long time I guess I will just have to ride it into the ground.

So it has become the centre of my bike collection. A very capable training and endurance bike. That leaves me with the thought of the bike that I want to ride for out and out speed, a summer bike, and that will be the Orbea that's waiting to be built up in the attic.

That leaves me with two carbon bikes, a steel fixie and an aluminium mountain bike. Four is more than enough to be getting on with. Particularly if I don't think of any of them being special and just ride them as much and as hard as I can. What's the point of buying a bike and 'saving' it for best?

So the Datum is the last bike I bought and it is the last bike for a while at least. That won't stop me looking at bikes but, short of suddenly deciding I want to do a world tour, take up time trialling or track, I am covered for all eventualities.

And while I do have a hankering for something more classic, in steel or titanium, that's a bit of an affectation. The truth is that the racing bikes I used to ride have been slowly and steadily improved to the point where a bike like the Datum, which still has mechanical gears like my early race bikes, is faster, safer, more comfortable and much more capable.

Are 22 gears better than 10? Yep. Are hydraulic disc brakes really better than calliper brakes? Yep. Is carbon better than steel? Most of the time, yes. Are modern gear trains better than old? Many times yes. What about wheels? Yes, faster and easier to look after. Tyres? Many many times better.

This last bike is, without a doubt, the best bike I have owned.

If I could time travel and inhabit my sixteen year old racing self, clad in wooden soled shoes and real chamois leather shorts with a 'hairnet' helmet and riding a classic steel frame and sew-up tyres, everything would feel crude, soggy and

vague. I would wonder how on earth I ever propelled such a rig to the speeds that I did.

The one thing that was better about my sixteen year old self was simply being sixteen. I was much faster then, though I was not capable of riding anything like the distances I regularly do now. Bodies evolve too, as does the life that cycling is part of. Age tempers strength and speed, yes, but experience counts and my Audax adventures are richer and more satisfying in their way than the cut and thrust of racing, though that was grand too.

The bike is always part of the experience but it is never whole of it. The bicycle is part of cycling - you can't ride without a bike - but it is also nothing like the whole of it.

Stations of the wheel

So lets not talk about bikes any more, let's talk about riding, what it's really about. I've been thinking a lot about riding as I have written my way through all these bikes and I have come to a way of thinking about it.

Let's call them the stations of the wheel. We've talked about Suffering, but let's look at other aspects. Let's call them The Freedom, The Perfection, The Passion, The Transcendence and The Point.

The Freedom

There are plenty of people who will understand this passage from the bike-adventurer Mike Hall's (RIP) girlfriend about Mike's motivations to get on a bike and ride stupidly long distances:

> *"Mike struggled to conform to corporate life and the constrictions of a social structure he felt alien to. He seemed to wade hesitantly into humanity until he reached saturation point and couldn't handle any more, then he would disappear... Riding a bicycle was his way of escaping from a world he did not walk through comfortably. On two wheels he was strong, he was more than human, he was his best self.*
>
> *"After a race he would come back chilled and calm, contained, happy, relaxed for a few months. Then the need to do another would build and build till it reached a kind of fever pitch. Then he would become moody and difficult. Pushing himself out on the road was not an option. It was a basic human need, like air."*
> As retold by Juliana Buhring

I don't have the need to break the record for riding around the world solo anytime soon, but the feeling of being out of sorts with the corporate world and the scratchiness is easy to relate too. It's why even a club ride can feel a bit organised and over-determined to me.

I've been riding so long and internalised this need so much that I barely see it, but there are reminders of it everywhere online. This is from a film maker called Annaleena who discovered cycling at the age of 26 so she could avoid public transport and then got the bug, badly:

"Forget about planning and just go do it. My most memorable jaunts have been completely on the spur of the moment: like riding to Brussels one Friday eve after work, just because the road was calling.

About four years ago I got an itch for longer journeys. I had just found out about Alfonsina Strada and was so inspired that I immediately signed up for Vätternrundan (a legendary 300km race in Sweden). What followed was an even bigger itch: not for races but for long multi-day solo adventures. For example, I've done a solo Paris-Roubaix on Christmas Day, ridden the routes of Tour of Flanders, Paris-Brest-Paris, Bordeaux-Paris and other legendary races – very much in the spirit of Marie Marving who was told she couldn't take part in Tour de France 1908 because she wasn't a man [eye roll] but went and rode it anyway on her own. That's exactly the spirit of my adventures and what drives me to them is without a doubt the sheer sense of freedom and wanderlust you feel on the road."
From the Mason Progressive Cycles Blog

Just riding for the intrinsic reward. Who needs to see you do it? Why do you need points or badges? Sure it's great to do the big rides like the Ride London or the PBP or the Transcontinental, but what about just picking a challenge and riding it out? What about riding through the night on Friday with a few mates? That's how the Dunwich Dynamo started.

You don't need much. The unsupported ultra riders have taught us how little you need to take with you. Modern gear is so good that you can ride with next to nothing and strike out a long way without much planning.

This makes it seem like The Freedom is about running away. I have often tried to run away on a bike, but there is only one thing in the world you can't ride away from and that is yourself. No, the The Freedom is about taking yourself somewhere new. And what that means changes with your time of life; That freedom to ride 4000km when you want as a twenty five year old is not something that is reasonable as a person with a family. When you have a newborn The Freedom might just be riding your bike to work. It took me many years to learn, but freedom to ride is not freedom from life, it's freedom to embrace life.

An older, more parochial, version of the same urge from a cycling champion of the 1950s, Jacques Anquetil:

> *"I only have to feel that a wall is keeping me prisoner to want to jump over it. It's a reflex. If cigarettes are banned, I smoke. If we're not to go out at night, I go out. If flirting is outlawed, I flirt."*

The Perfection

Often people start to ride because they want The Freedom. Then they find they are hunger for The Perfection, perfection of form.

And oh, what a feeling is form, for having the legs.

I had it as a teenager without knowing what it was. I found it again as a courier, where the sheer number of miles makes you smooth and unstoppable. In the last couple of years I have had it a couple of times for a month here and there.

Having form. The body moves so well it's almost scary. It can feel slightly mechanistic, like you are oiled in the hinges. It's those rides where the training comes together and you are totally alive to what you are doing. It's not that it doesn't hurt - it always hurts - but the hurt becomes the way you can tell you are doing well.

Anquetil again:

> *"While they're slowing down, I go flat out from start to finish. I am a machine, an escaped robot. I attack. I have fork-arms, connecting-rod thighs. I'm free."*

It's not just that the body is in peak condition, it's that you make the right decisions; you know exactly what's happening between you and the road, you take corners like a pro. If you are racing you take the right moment to attack and the attack sticks. If you are riding a long distance you get the pace just right, you barely seem to breathe but you are gliding along without effort.

Everything comes together.

Which is brilliant but…. for us mortals it only happens once or twice every year or two. You can't rely on it and you can't wait for it. If form is all you seek on a bike you are going to be giving up soon. Perfection can be prepared for and asked for but it can not be demanded.

So then, after a few more years riding, we realise The Perfection is not why we ride a bike anyway. We ride because we have The Passion.

The Passion

I've covered the twisted and perverse world of suffering before and noted that The Passion is a mix of agony and ecstasy. Luckily anyone can own this bit of cycling, even an old bloke like me.

Just last week I was on a power bike at the gym pushing into hard territory. Hard for me at least. Sweating buckets in a crappy gym in Walthamstow surrounded by people 25 years younger than me with their matching gear and their beats-certified bluetooth buds doing carefully regulated sets on the weights and running easy miles on machines tied to apps. I am in my old cycling shorts with my hairy legs and tatty cycling shoes. I have alt-rock from the 90s on my uncool Chinese phone and, as I am coming to the end of a nasty hour of under/over intervals without rest, I am sweating buckets. A distasteful pool of dad-sweat gathers around the feet of the exercise bike. I imagine I look a bit mad, a bit disgusting.

Everything hurts, my thighs are burning, my breath is short, I want to stop and maybe throw up. But just as things are getting really challenging I experience a shiver of delight. From out of nowhere, with my old body rocking and breath coming out of me in unattractive grunts, my whole being lights up with outright pleasure and joy. It's bizarre, it feels like a minor insanity, but wherever the feeling comes from I don't care, I just wanted to ride harder and harder. I am loving it.

That's The Passion. Willingly putting yourself on the knife edge of pain and collapse in search of brilliance. You are not going to get that every time you ride a bike. But that moment of transcending your suffering is there and you take it. If the church of the cyclist is suffering then the The Passion is the moment of transubstantiation.

You see this all the time in racing - riders slamming themselves for no really good reason, chasing some arbitrary prize, looking like death as they cross the line and then, five minutes later, saying they had a great day on the bike.

The ratio of pleasure to pain shifts all the time; sometimes a ride is great because you possessed the grim determination to drag yourself out into some horrible weather. Sometimes a ride is great because you are somewhere new and the road is smooth. Sometimes there is nothing good about a ride whatsoever but a few days later you can feel the benefit of it. Most of the time

you just never know what you will find, how the suffering and the passion will interact. And you have to feel relaxed and happy about the weirdness of that.

The Passion is what gets you out onto the bike, it's what makes you a cyclist. Despite all the benefits of marginal gains, power meters, aero bikes and all the rest of it you have to want to go out there and ride; you have to take it as read that the pleasure and the pain are wrapped in each other, and you have to accept it can be very difficult to separate them.

And once you have found peace with that you can experience...

The Transcendence

A rider I know a little who is really getting on now (mid 70s) still 'comes out of retirement' to do Paris-Brest-Paris. He's a good bit quicker than me overall because he just doesn't stop. He told me once over a drink that he thought endurance cycling changed you at a cellular level. I think he meant that metaphorically but I am not so sure. I think the pursuit of endurance is a base-level human urge.

I think the body is built for endurance. It knows what to do when you place it under endurance stress. If you are looking for a reason you could find some evolutionary justification; Sure cheetahs and antelopes are faster than humans, but they have poor endurance. Hunters didn't out sprint them, they kept going and caught up with them, again and again, until they wore the antelopes out. Persistence, application. One set of animal traits against another. Endurance versus speed.

There's more than that though, deeper still, further back in time.

When I was sitting on the power bike last night I had that feeling again, halfway through the sixth hard zone 4 interval. That strange, electric feeling of aliveness. It felt primitive, like I had climbed down through my brains. From the rational down to the emotional to the limbic. From human to monkey to lizard.

Being a lizard feels luminous and hot. I am basking on a rock to warm my blood, then skittering off on instinct alone, a facet of pure being flashing for a moment in the light. Off to find food and, always, more light, more heat.

For a moment this feeling elongates in time and space, right back to the beginning of everything and I inhabit the naked, simple joy of being. As I sweat and grunt I have this wonderful feeling that I belong to a universe that created

all of us. These weird gym-beings, the drunks on the streets, the middle classes scuttling home to condemn the working classes on Love Island - I feel that we are all made of the big bang, from atoms and an emptiness older, even, than an iphone 3.

Sometimes it is much simpler and easier to find - at 4am as the light first comes into the sky and you are rolling up and down a hill somewhere out in the middle of wherevershire and you simply stop noticing single things, when the fullness of life and the landscape and the sky all smooch into one fat envelope of grand experience. When all the boundaries simply drop away.

That's the Transcendence.

The Point

When I started the blog that became this book I thought of myself as someone who had had a lot of bikes and enjoyed riding. Now I see, and openly confess, my true nature. Seen in one light I am the worst of all creatures; an enthusiast.

Which is to say someone who is cut from the same cloth as a stamp collector or a season ticket holder. In another light I am a long time member of the outcast road cult whom the majority call *Fucking Cyclists*.

But in the best light, in the middle of interval six or at 3am in Wales, I am an explorer, a devotee, a guru and an athlete; Cycling is simply my medium. I am a proper cyclist.

It's a definition I have arrived at rather than sought. I hesitate to define too much of myself this way because I am not particularly brilliant at it. In my current Audax circles I am one of the faster slow people. Back in the day I was always good for third to sixth but that's all. Such is the genetic lottery.

But I am definitely part of the brethren who seek Freedom though the Passion and gratefully accept the moments of Perfection and Transcendence that fall my way. All cyclists of any ability or type have access to the five stations of the wheel. It's not exclusive and it doesn't matter what you wear or ride.

All of this richness is there for anyone who cares to get out and ride - and that's the point.

Balance (Afterword)

It started with an arbitrary idea, to blog about every bike I have ever owned. I like an artificial prod to action, cycling is full of them after all. I had just come off the back of trying to write novels and wasn't having a lot of fun with that, and I had a couple of plays and film scripts go nowhere before that so the appeal of blogging was simply that I could do something and get it out there quickly. And writing about myself and something I knew well meant no research.

I started putting posts up, I didn't have many readers but that didn't matter, they were liking it and it motivated me to keep going, to finding variations on the simple act of writing a couple of thousand words about a bike. With a full time job on the go and an Audax addiction to nurture I thought it would take a year - of course it took two.

At the start I made a list of my bikes - I counted 33 at that stage. By the time I finished I had two more. I have managed to write about 27 of them. The others were bikes that I have owned since being in London but were quickly discarded or stolen: A crap old GT mountain bike, a better Giant Anthem X, a Pinnacle ridden once, A hybrid that became Steph's, another bad mountain bike that became the Rock Lobster and a cheap aluminium race bike that got nicked from the back shed the forth time after I rode it.

Aside from the challenge-to-self of writing something interesting about just about every bike I have owned, part of my original intention was to set down some of my life before the benevolent fog of middle age smoothed some over some of its sharper, less pleasant, aspects.

I also wanted to write something for my son. At the moment I am not a rounded person to him, I am just Dad, and that's fine by me. But one day perhaps he might want to know where that Dad came from and why he dresses up in embarrassing silly gear and disappears for the weekend on occasion, returning fatigued and more than a little self satisfied.

But what do I want him to see when he looks at Dad? Has this just been a very long-winded way to say ‘look, I was young once too’? If so, it's a bit pathetic, there has to be more to it than that.

In the very least I would like it if he read all this and thought blimey, being clever is no good unless you can apply it to something - look at all that time Dad

wasted getting nowhere much. And while I think there is value in working in digital inside a large cancer charity I can tell you it's both a million miles from where I started out and not as much fun. Due to my delayed entry to the corporate world I also have to sit out the bullshit that comes from people who have less experience and skill but a sit a few pay grades above me. Worst of both worlds - not enough achievement in my creative life and rewards that are less than stellar in the corporate one. Of course the corporate life has come with the need to create a home, and I regret that not at all. That's a dad's first duty. But there's a lesson there in for sticking with the things that make you feel alive.

I am not one of those who has a plan and ticks off achievements like items on shopping list. Just imagine, my interior life-coach says, just imagine what you could do if you really got your shit together! But, for whatever reasons, I am a complexifier with a bit of a confidence problem and carrying out a plan requires both clarity and confidence.

When I started writing this I wasn't expecting a lot in the way of insight into self, but as I have been writing I have become aware that I've used riding in many ways, some healthy, some not so much. For transport, as an escape from bad situations, as a crutch, as a way to make money, as a medium for adventure, as a pressure-valve and simply as a way to get to work without having to get on a bus or a tube or sit in a car in traffic.

I've also made the case that cycling is wrapped tightly with suffering and pain, but the role of pain in my riding has changed from that of punishment of self and others to pure feedback. Pain is just one part of the overall experience rather than the governing principle. It tells me when to slow down, when I can go further, how fit I am.

That transition only came after I lost the depression and anxiety that dogged me for 20 years. Inside that larger journey the role of cycling in my life has shifted from being a pursuit of escape bordering on self harm into one of adventure and joy. Having written it out I see that transition clearly now, and I am thankful for it.

With a more robust mental outlook over the last decade, partly forged on the anvil of Audax, I do finally accept that there is a way to get where you want to go: you model your behaviour and you don't wait for motivation. By modelling you look to what you want to do, map the behaviours that get you there, write them out. Then you commit - and never wait for motivation. The winter training

ride is a case in point - the main effort is not the ride it's putting all that gear on and stepping out the door and you are seldom going to feel motivation to do that.

I also have come to accept that I have been at times overly obsessed with cycling and need to pull it back a bit. Interests that tip into obsessions tend to be covering neurosis. I can spend hours on websites just looking at cranksets without blinking. When an interest becomes like eating a king-size block of chocolate in one sitting then you know you have to change your behaviour in some way.

While I haven't written any plays or novels while I've been writing this, to be honest I haven't missed them. Perhaps this is my style of writing then, the personal, the very close. Perhaps I have been a victim of my own desire to 'be a writer' when all I really needed to do was shut up, put an ear to my experience, and transcribe.

And in listening I have discovered an affection for myself and the blown-by-the-wind nature of my life. Writing this has been a great escape from the linear, boxy life that we are obliged to lead by the school calendar and work: The London nine to five, the parental peak-hour lifestyle where every queue is long, every beach is full and every holiday is expensive. It's not just the running around, it's the dulling of the mind to make it 'useful' to the organisation, the hardening of feeling, the shouting needed to cut through.

So many of us live entirely within boxes; one box to live in, one to work in, one more to get you to work and one more to exercise in. Then there's the boxes we put in a microwave box and deliver into our square mouths while we watch funny people on a glowing rectangle, chatting to friends about it on another glowing rectangle.

Too many squares, boxes and lines. Too many borders and pointless categories that serve only as marketing segments. Over fifty. Father. My 'Ad choices' are now full of life insurance and, so partronising, offers from Age UK to help me learn how to use a smartphone or 'surf' the internet. I am now old and useless and only concerned about retiring, it's official.

Bikes get you outside, put you in the environment and make your heart work, sure. But the greatest benefit in cycling is that you move in arcs and curves. You are always turning on a bike even when you are riding in a straight line.

That is simple and obvious, but there is a world of benefit in it. We could be crude and say that cycling is great for your mental health, but that doesn't come close to summing up how good riding is for you; it combines the aerobic hit of running and the joy of dancing with the benefits of mindfulness.

Our bodies and souls are not good at straight lines. Things with straight lines like buildings and project management solutions and careers and life plans are fantasies of rationality, spartan appeals to self control. They are not life itself. The plan is not the ground. You can't do a ride from an easy chair. You can't get anywhere without selecting a challenge and putting your rubber to the road. Then, when you are on the way, it's all about continual small adjustments with occasional massive turns and lurches.

Life and cycling both look like neat lines from above but as we ride we are making continual adjustments as we go. You cannot move and be in a state of rest, you can't change and remain the same. Balance, a jingle-jangle of minute corrections laid over the magic of self propulsion, helps you stand up and move forward. It's a dynamic, made of circles and curves and motion, not lines and boxes and stasis.

I guess that's the big one for you Baxter; we all have our issues and our journeys and the message is that, when things get tough, you can get better, you can endure and learn and change to the good. If you set out bold and are sensitive enough to adjust on the fly you can get to the end - and if the end turns out to be the beginning of something completely different, that's to be expected.

In the end my wishes for you are simple. That you outlive me, that you have more good than bad stress, that you find your own balance and that, maybe, all these words help you find it.