

6. Meeting the Natives

Club riding started innocently. One member, a coworker, a grisly bearded dinosaur who trekked a lot, suggested he give it a try, actually tried to convince him to ride 100 miles one Sunday when the most he ever did in a day was 25, his roundtrip commute. “Arrows and maps, and you’re on your own.” Such rides seemed too strenuous. Over big hills and long, long distances, sometimes up to 200 miles. Who can ride that far? Through a club one could organize group rides. This enabled trips beyond what anyone might do without others and some supposed safety in numbers.

Distinguished medical centers like the Centers for Disease Control and Mayo Clinic advised joining an cycling group to build social connections, find moral support, gain motivation, increase fun, receive feedback on progress, and trick yourself into not noticing it’s boring exercise after all. Arthritic, old, paunchy and sick are not excuses but reasons to ride, especially when you don’t feel like it, because that’s when your blood most wants extra oxygen for a health and mood boost. Seemed to make sense. He always enjoyed riding and needed some regular cardiovascular regimen. If recommended by top doctors, how bad could it be?

Explorers making first contact noted varied reactions from natives ranging from warmest welcome to worst repulsion. There’s no logic to initial panic. You can never tell what to expect, although curiosity generally gets the better of man. Savages were always the ones who lost out in these encounters, trading hospitality for diseases and petty trinkets. On Sundays he gradually began trailing behind a motley assemblage: Single spouses babysitting children in custody of the ex, so many self-effacing skinny fitness freaks that you don’t feel like you belong, tandem teams, thin physiques busting out ahead, and ungainly blobs lumbering behind. Clubs seem to attract those who otherwise cannot initiate friendships. Fake sociability, fervent competition, and flashy expenditure underscored blows to egos endured from infancy. These were damaged misfits carrying baggage, freaks and geeks, slightly better than anyone else at something almost anyone can but few want to do only because they did more of it, most of them clambering up a rung on a ladder of self image in their own minds only.

Their geekiness was underscored by lengthy discussions on minutia, such as socks. No, can't wear black. Only mountain riders wore black. Must be white, the true color of racers and a specific crowned bowman who rides a white steed. He wore black out of spite. When he grew up, white socks were number 3 in official geek regalia behind pocket protectors and thick glasses repaired with tape, just ahead of slide rules and talk of chess matches. Pre-Prefontaine, bulky athletic shoes had yet to become a defining characteristic. Some notable geeks and shoemakers are today billionaires, so maybe white socks weren't such a bad idea after all. Left them by themselves on date nights with nothing better to do than crack open textbooks, fabricate complex electronic circuits, pin up centerfolds, and satisfy themselves in other ways. Mapping out rides beforehand was suspect, but complete geeks have a GPS mapping computer strapped onto their handlebars.

No, no matter what, he'd stay a tourist enjoying ride rather than belittling and criticizing others. Did his usual AI thing, dissociated in moot judgement as if an ancient landlord. That didn't mean he couldn't behold, categorize, caricature and satirize them behind their backs on paper to himself. Decided to take notice, describe events and people met as a mental discipline, dodge approaching blindness and dementia, keep sharp, but knew he had to, "...rearrange their faces and give them all another name." Absorbing an experience and trying to share it seemed somehow meaningful. Racing meant little. There was always somebody better out there. Racing produces a few winners and many losers, who end up on bike clubs, always testing themselves against non-racers to regain tattered esteem. Legstrong averaged 35 mph on some Tour stages. Local racers he knew could average 25 mph. The best club members were in the high teens, none elite, not any of the famous 3M's—Maertens, Merckx, or Moser—instead all has-beens or wannabes, mostly recreational weekend warriors who motored to ride starts. Their feeble feedback didn't matter, never encouraged.

Later he learned of a few oddballs who didn't arrive in SUVs, a sub-cult of doggedly determined diehards and high cadence fanatics who actually used their bikes as, incredibly, *a way to get there*. "Riding to the ride" it was called. Why not? "Can't be done!" Yes, it can. Had to map your *own* route. Had merit, got you to plan for yourself, lose dependency that drags on community. Worst part was transiting a metropolis across construction and crime-ridden sections. But he learned ways, quiet routes that worked, where nobody bothered a marginalized simpleton slipping through like a specter. You become strangely immune to urban blight when

nobody bothers you. If he had to walk through some of these sectors he rode, he'd be very afraid; a flat then might be really dangerous. But somehow bicycles, like a charm, make you invisible. Bicyclists were always fourth class citizens, practically disappear despite brilliant colors, like traffic signs motorists see but ignore.

Local ghettos were frightening. All that nightly news of mayhem or murder not a few miles away, but seemingly in another geographically obscure region on a distant continent. Tanks rumbled into Iraqi villages, patrol cars into nearby ghettos; the only difference was intensity, location and scale, hardly any separation anymore. All the World's a war zone, haves subjugating have-nots. They isolate into ghettos those who, in turn and under duress, murder each other, which further serves interests of the haves. However, by themselves, leaders murder more than all the poor collectively.

Ethnically diverse neighborhoods as his seemed better balanced, but he didn't feel he benefited from it personally in any way. Why should he? The uglier the hood, the more the graffiti, as if any of it had any value. Basquiat believed it could be fine art. Anything, he figured, has its remarkable examples, even tagger fingerpainting.

Can blacken a page as well as anyone.
 Not better, no. No boast, just done
 merely as well—maybe this only.
 Words rape virgin sheets, smudges, smears,
 bleeding scribbles stained by tears.
 Why care about art that captures clarity?
 BIG NAME defaces facades 'cross the city.
 What's all this graffiti, anyway?
 It's akin mostly to animal spray,
 leaving scent, marking territory
 with piss, paint. Totally crass,
 yet compelling. Artful swirls beguile,
 mass media vibrates in this hand, even while
 testosterone fueled subhuman rage,
 ushers in anti-enlightenment. Desultory
 drug drenched mindless despair
 dies all over some wall or page.
 Evil uglifies any haunched factory ass,
 old enterprises going nowhere.
 Crunch of crack vials underfoot. Beware!
 Beasts still roam about near here.
 Smells like hell, rotten eggs, toxic waste.
 Frame a picture; depart in haste.

Little escapes a fellow citizen amidst his own ruins. Some higher power threw reminders in your path, manifest in all forms of media—crazy idiosyncrasies, eavesdropped conversations, song lyrics—avoided similarly as bits of glass or gravel on a road. It's all there if you're looking for it, hidden only by lack of curiosity, inattentiveness, plenty of gabbing, and too little listening. Local mills had lost their vitality, no longer hallowed halls to a Puritan work ethic masking class war. Most had become no more than empty shells to desecrate with piss, piles of bricks infested with rats crawling up from rivers. Canny architecture persists on moldering mortar drenched in blood, sweat, and tears, mute testaments to enterprise failure and policy betrayals, like moving commerce South for reconstruction after Union won Civil War. Won what? Americans ridicule low wages, yet jobs lately weren't easy to come by. Work, like motoring, was just another unholy competition, high priests setting themselves above rabble who they hold below contempt but not exploitation. Why can't enterprises gather equals for mutual benefit?

People forever set themselves up in a mental competition with everyone around them. In his health walking club, a trio of small bristly bitches, Macbeth's weird sisters, elbowed everyone out in their way, seemingly as if small stature begot small mindedness, which, of course, is a prejudicial stereotype, although one that fit. Napoleon had big ideas for a runt. There was Skinny Sal who interrogated them once about cheating route to "get ahead", as if that meant something, being first among a group whose gait was obviously crippled with age or neglect, which explains why they were there in the first place, as if rounding out a cast of circus characters, a bearded fat lady, freaks and risk takers. There was Florid Freda who sprinted around red faced and afterwards glared at stragglers in rebuke for not trying harder. He didn't notice Freda in later stages, when distances got progressively longer; had she burnt herself out in shorter walks? Or finally figured out she couldn't "win"? Their behaviors matched how they'd always been treated. If you're going to compete, at least acknowledge differences in abilities, announce it's a race beforehand, arrange age groups, assess handicaps for the doddering lame. Even he at 3 mph, propelling 3 times Sal's weight, could outpace those on crutches. There's someone in Ethiopia who can walk 7 mph and leave Sal gasping far behind. Had logistics allowed he would have invited one to join them just to see Sal's face. It wasn't a race, only a walk. Get over it.

Competition has merit only as a barometer of self-improvement, not as a buttress for inferiority. He won most competitions he tacitly, unilaterally entered by being *the last* to cross finish line. Only by casually strolling and occasionally stopping—known elsewhere as “walking like an Italian”—could you not appear to be a marionette dancing on strings controlled by someone else’s hand or plan. Those who rushed became as detestable as Paul Morand’s 6-day racer Pettimatheu or as loopy as worshipful Leah, thereby deprived their senses, lost out, minimized their enjoyment, and probably made asses of themselves, unless, of course, they walked in gated hamlets where common folk are excluded and many odd behaviors go unobserved.

The same applies for biking. What’s wrong with just riding around? If you can’t be first on a ride, why not occupy your energies on something other than racing: helping those less fortunate, spending time with those in need of company, sweeping behind group for those in trouble? It’s almost comic how many club riders are pulled over in the first 5 miles because of poor preparation. You could also pen panegyrics or plunge feet first into club politics. Apparently a few insiders did exactly that, given up effort of pedaling for control of pedalers. You know the type, compulsives who need to be told everything exhaustively before they’ll let you do anything, then complain bitterly regardless of results. Rules of conduct only function when fair to all parties. Should expect those in charge to calmly answer, have open minds, hug diversity, treat others as equals. He would rather have club improve than let it fall into sloppy dissolution. But not to extent he’d have to garner support, get votes, or serve a term; that’d be too much effort for too little return. Didn’t mean he was above goofing on those who did run by opposing their mock elections. If you’re going to have bylaws, you’ve got to live by them, seek office to right wrongs.

Reggie Fink could go far on mice legs and tiny frame. He and his even smaller witch of a wife, shrewish Veronica, obviously carried over the habit from somewhere in the North of England, Yorkshire or more specifically North Riding, with their impenetrable accents, a drudgery to decipher, almost like translating a European language, deeky Dutch or freaky French, not impossible, but requiring concentration. What strange protocol enabled you deal with these “breakers” and their mood swings? Began to wonder what their devious game or mental illness was. Slighted without malice aforethought, insisted on being kept informed, but who were they to expect respect? They declined offers for help,

doled out maps, ignored email, imposed suck-up-or-begone submission with elitist arrogance. Reggie assaulted anyone outside club's inner clique, belittled postings and surveys, jealously guarded every insider detail, threatened violence, undermined efforts of imagined rivals, warned insiders not to attend their rides. Even got minions to stage competing rides. Reggie had no regard of arrower's safety or time, made rides endlessly longer. What was the point? Rumors surfaced of a scheme for inheriting club's reigns. Rumor's source, a notorious troublemaker, was not to be trusted. But much money invested in fancy woolen togs and schmoozing other members raised eyebrows. Their real investment was mania related to place and power. Like Chuck and Di, having to wait a long time to come into their own, maybe tragically too late, maybe no crown left to wear, regal tapestry already unraveled. After picking at its fabric for 20 years, it's no wonder.

Those who grasp for petty power disgust. America despises dictators, waged war recently to depose one. No more So-insanes or Stalins! Heavy is the head that wears the crown, rightly so, yet many would rush foolishly into a millstone and noose. There was no apparent advantage to ascendancy, other than command of a community chest and snappy resume entry wasted on someone retired. Petty glory didn't necessarily require much effort if you shrugged everything off onto underlings, which clarified why it was so coveted: all the credit, none of the work, and a revenue stream to dip into. With such people you can either actively oppose or passively sidestep. Who cares to bother? Everything he said rallied inner circle against him, another sign something was worth investigating, if anyone cared to. Had lack of accountability and suspicious expenditure anything to do with it?

Cultural differences can underlie conflict. Certain aboriginal tribes teased those they admired. Seems disrespectful to Eurocentric sensibilities, but such was their culture, unchanged for millennia. The more they teased, the better they liked you. This somehow rubbed off onto all Americans. Good natured ribbing has come to be expected in most normal circles, ones unsoiled by political correctness. Etiquette is okay, but PC takes it to weird extremes, like forcing sports teams named after native tribes, which actually honors them, to rename themselves as something supposedly less savage. Do they ask tribe's opinion? Club dissension came from imperial attitudes of its inner core, who didn't allow friendliness, preferred distance, and wouldn't permit poking fun at their foibles. Stiff upper lip, you know. No wonder they've

earned a reputation as “mad dogs”, always mad at something. But pretension of a British Riding Club here in egalitarian States was something begging for ridicule. Where were Marx Brothers or Monty Python when you need them? Thank heaven for Leno, Letterman, SNL and Stewart.

Best to forego fractured egos. He received a lot of this treatment over the years, enough to silence him—except during the last few, when he suddenly found a decidedly acid voice, but only with words etched in black on acid free paper. When nothing much matters anymore, people sometimes decide to speak, or suddenly go entirely silent. Was trying hard not to be prejudiced against whites, who, after all, are all the same, busy monsters, aren't they? Instead of exploring Internet—presuming idle hands equal Devil's workshop—they race out and really rape one another, then rationalize it as superior ethics. Huggers are far more ethical, browse and graze apart, make do with whatever nobody else finds or wants. After a brush with death, failed friendships, separation from work, sickness in his family, stint of mortality reevaluating grief, surrounded by ruins with nothing left to defend, honesty appeals. You suddenly savor balance and truth, as interviewer Charlie Rose said after bypass surgery. It was the same gravelly throat as those who recorded annals of civilized life, a world weary monologue taken up when other monologists slip back into the coma of destiny, where writers retire to after being mentally disemboweled by those who lusted for gore in media's arenas amidst untamed beasts. Yeah, seeking truth in writing is an impossible private hell. Capote reintroduced this fact-based narrative in cold blood, and look what happened, never wrote another. Menniger devalued an entire career in psychology and Wittgenstein chucked philosophy for service as a hospital orderly. Truth humbles. Why expose your innermost being and take all the abuse and rejection? If you write a whole book probing reality it becomes a disfiguring facial scar, a reputation terminator, an ugly tattoo you can never get rid of.

Not much has changed since Plutarch anyway. Self expression was nothing more than “truth or dare”, where you either reveal something that can be used against you, or you take a stab at doing something stupid that might equally harm you. Wellbeing depends on the benevolence of other players, whether they can be trusted. You can learn to trust in such games, but they are only games, not death and life. An unknown public can never be trusted. Trust requires personal relationships, a willingness to participate, and consequences when violated. People you see aren't always *really* there, anyway. Crowds are mixed with ghosts, who stand in

although incorporeal, not to communicate or interact with you, snobbishly focused on their own failures, what to do after death other than stand around or flow among the living. Those who ignore you might as well be ghosts. How do you know they're alive?

Club rides were like truth or dare. Rides by design could be pleasant flat jaunts through greenery or become cardiac campaigns pitting you against hilly terrain. He couldn't say which he enjoyed more in retrospect, although strenuous ones weren't much fun while doing, they did increase endurance and strength. Screaming downhill could be an sensory rush or threat against your life. Timing was an issue, when in schedule they fell, neither too early in season nor too close to other like rides. Balance was, as always, important. If newspapers can report facts, he had a right to voice his displeasure or misgivings as long as he didn't destroy reputations or express cruelly. If you don't appreciate oblique scorn, write your own manifesto. Nothing he ever said was actionable, neither libelous nor resulting in loss. Honesty can hardly be found, worth more than gold as personal publicity. In these twisted times, even negative publicity is bankable. Maybe he should've started charging fees for insults and naming names.

Of club's few hundred ride maps, most were based upon the groundwork of a grizzled gnome named Harry Shale. Luckily, not much changes on country roads, except they are sometimes improved, which made riding them all the more doable. Bespectacled and gray bearded, Harry acted as an arbiter of how to have a nice day outside, what was pleasant, where the least traffic interfered. Such data is highly subjective, but it brought a little order to chaos. Having put in countless miles crisscrossing America and poking about the tri-state area, Harry's life seemed geared around riding, right down to living where one could bike to work, and working where they tolerate biking. One supposed Harry chose his mate because she was an agreeable tandem stoker. Funny to read a book, one he used to follow in days before club, then meet author, rumored to be dead, more annoying in person than book seemed to imply. Nice phonies are often annoying. They remind you too much of what you should be doing instead of wallowing in sin, the normal pursuit of those gainfully employed.

Equally unique, Archie Undies ran the show with hot contempt, knickers in a twist. Definitely had a plan, if not service to members, to appropriately position himself to shove off without scrutiny. Seemed a scheme to slowly disappear altogether. Would never have been elected without an easy way, but probably tired of

answering the same questions over and over again, year in and out, and had grown crass and cross, and hostilely prejudicial. Like everyone holding small office, Archie was a rabid conservative. Small offices suit the small minded, always ready to shoot down any idea that didn't originate with them, as if any ever did. Gosh, Groucho Marx mocked this attitude in *Horsefeathers* in the 1920's. Almost a century later, people still didn't get it. Undies' time had slipped by. Had it been worth it? With only grouches and nerds buzzing by pursuing their own cravings, was it worth trading a family with Betty for a bunch of belligerents? How was that different than any family, after all? You can walk away from anything these days. He had little respect for Archie; how could you not scorn emotional detachment amidst intense physical activity? Supposed to result in bonding. Should project joy. Got disdain in return, an ego slap. Either you click with people or not, makes little difference. If you don't intend to be fast friends and finally coconspirators, there need not be any chemistry. But don't make enemies unnecessarily, either, he worried, while questionable opinions pulsed from mind to fingertips and spurting into black stains on paper.

Compact, stocky Dan Gorson, a volunteer organizer, personified disrespect. Hard to say whether Dan was just pissing you off on purpose or was just woefully incompetent. Wondered why this dullard didn't write something down after being asked the same question 80 times. Or was it the role's uncertainty, volunteers flitting in and out? This had the effect of dowsing any flame for helping. Dan was an elementary teacher by day, a responsible member of the community, you'd think. Affable in person, he guessed Dan genuinely liked people but had trouble coping. Teachers succumb to an occupational syndrome, an inability to deal with other adults. Spending many of their waking hours intimidating children, they find compromising with adults too challenging. For people with personality disorders, you try to be patient and understanding. But it doesn't mean you can never be annoyed. This was supposed to be a leisure activity. Many who had been through the Gorson drill didn't repeat. Peers are so readily disenfranchised, one must be careful to make them feel good about what they are doing, just as in the business realm. This was not his style, stroking the needy, nor was it Dan's, so they had a bit in common.

Oh, yes, he needed to put aside a misconception. The words *ours*, *us* and *we* are used against readers to make them think they are somehow included in something important. It's a trick to sell stuff and stroke egos. They intentionally did not appear anywhere else in this book, except in quotes. The only pronouns *he* used were *she*,

you, they and *them* and their possessives. Thereby, he didn't assume anyone shared his opinions, distribute liability for any of his ideas onto someone else, or try to convince at all. By "you", he meant to indict everyone collectively, not you, the reader, personally. One can show water to a horse, but it only drinks if it's thirsty. It's more than enough to provide a reservoir, spigot or trough. Take whatever you want, then leave rest to next reader. You need not feel coerced, convinced or persuaded.

Wouldn't it be revealing to be able to listen in on what people say about you behind your back? Be amused, maybe alarmed, offended, perhaps. Honest criticism is far better than sparing one's feelings. He'd rather be confronted to his face than falsely testified against within cliques, a basic human right, as they did against Dan, judging in absentia his various screw-ups as if wrongs against humanity. Copy an outdated map? Forget a can of paint? "Boil him in oil!" When others rose to replace Dan, they did no better, made it even harder to contribute, interact, satisfy any impulse to do good. He decided never again to offer to volunteer among this group, given the likelihood its inner core wouldn't soon change.

As a general rule, he didn't make himself too available, but not completely inaccessible either. This see-saw of going along and shunning contact sat on a bedrock of defenses, which disaffiliates from belonging as well as buffers one from lunatics. One must be careful whom one befriends, imposes upon, or opens up to, as Archie and the rest had obviously learned from much experience, and he, in turn, had learned by observing their maliciousness. The abyss of *self* is a deep well, and its bucket is tiny on a long thin rope. Gathering for rides invited contact with strangers who were narrowly drawn and thus impossible to relate to, as unnerving as a vision he'd sometimes get of descending along a long tunnel without cues or thought of a destination.

Why were some people harder to bond with than others? Shouldn't people appreciate others for being themselves, not whatever image they curried for themselves? Some people are such phonies. Brock Batty, who lived among bicycles, working at shops to assemble them, thought teaching people better riding techniques would get more people racing, all a ruse to collect admirers and raise level of self importance. Brock was unlikable, the spitting image of Deiter of SNL "Sprockets" fame. "Touch the monkey." Put on some Bodestandig 2000, and rave on doing the robot. Some insane people do succeed, which only increases their arrogance.

He and Rollie, a impish enthusiast with a goatee, had discussed riding in pacelines, which Brock often urged riders to try. Pacing was fine if you wanted to go far fast and look at nothing more than the wheel in front of you, which was dull and likely to spit grit in your eye. No, riding in front, charging up hills, or pulling a line, only these built confidence and strength, although a tow into wind was totally welcome when you were tired. But he, like most riders, didn't want some idiot hanging on his wheel, a neophyte who might decide to suddenly swerve and take him out. Paceline lessons seemed a credible public service in this light.

Gearing a life around the sport, Brock latched onto the Finks, growing alike, increasingly arrogant. Could have been nicer to those less fortunate or well connected. But some can't see beyond their own skinny noses, don't actually care about anyone else. He checked this shortcoming in himself, so was quick to recognize it in others. Brock once admitted to narcissism, only willing to read the insignificant, self-serving writings of Brock, as if Aristotle, Darwin, Descartes, Einstein, Erasmus, the Evangelists, Freud, Galileo, Lao Tzu, Leonardo, Newton, Plato, St. Thomas, Socrates, and Twain, for starters, didn't matter. Even he, who seldom had a chance to read for pleasure, had at least studied these greatest minds of all time. Didn't need a college program for that, just time away from TV-land. Those who actively read and write get increasingly out of step with those who passively view television. Active textual hunters diagnose passive gatherers as sufferers of Attentive Deficit Disorder, who, conversely, mistrust those analyzing them as dangerous predators. Both are wrong. You can't pen anything authentic without melding new media based on physical experiences into the mix. Balance is found between the two, blending analytical linearity with filmic sense and suitable sound. All Brock's listserv posts were rehashes of online sites gathered with automatic pointers, while academic ties were to a university which Brock never attended. Talk about a poser! Rereading his own scribblings was obligatory work, terrible in comparison, an practice of humility avoided at all costs by everyone but narcissists.

Brock represented what was worst about people he'd met, islands unto themselves, smug little islanders without resources or skills to build bridges and invite others across the gulf between. Why bother trying? Grab what you can for yourself. Be absorbed by ego feeding fancy vehicles, flashy attire and friends in high places. Do what everyone else does: promote themselves and silence rivals. Maybe there was once a bridge, like the one between

Island Park and mainland waterfront, but it was twice destroyed in hurricanes, and not worth rebuilding, or, at least, so residents believe, as if it would take parting of the Red Sea by divine hands, something routinely accomplished elsewhere these days by caissons. Idiotic islanders routinely mistreat mainlanders out of knee jerk suspicion. Words don't build bridges, but nothing's ever sold without exchanging some. Businesses are built on words. Cooperation isn't possible without communication.

His interest in club riding was for identifying new routes. He assumed more experienced members would know better ways to go, a surprising overestimation, since most knew less than he did or weren't telling. While he attended rides off and on, didn't join for a few years, then proceeded to cover almost all tri-state roads. He planned rides to pick up those last few roads he never did on state map. Didn't know why he continued this puerile quest, except because it was almost done, as his invitations to inform others of his results had gone unanswered. Nobody cared. Quests, as with the Grail, are about personal redemption, not satisfaction. Completed his first statute century, 100 miles, after only 2 years; started a couple and bailed before acquiring a new road bike. Better technology let him conclude several rides of 62 miles, 100 kilometers, a metric century, in good weather. Suiting up began to mean nothing less than 30 miles, about 2 hours. Eventually, he knew as much about local roads as anyone in area.

Cyclists generally buy a roadie with all measurements and specifications suited to them. He built his from a cast off Italian steel frame and gruppo he purchased on-line at a discount. Always one to recycle whenever possible, he asked a racer what he was going to do with rusted steelie hanging in cellar rafters, the same pal he'd done small favors for when in need. Reciprocity is wonderful. Freely given, it needed to be repaired, sand blasted, skillfully prepped, then a shiny black finish, all this for a small fraction of the cost of new. All his bikes, except first red Schwinn, had been black as his heart, as is the center of DeRosa's logo, as barren and scarce as this undertaking would become. Historically, only new machinery could be painted black, gray reserved for used. A rider on black must balance, new versus old attitudes. Don't you notice when omens align? Wheelset came from his pair of used Dura-Ace hubs that local bike shop built around. Pal efficiently did entire build in a few hours with all the right tools on hand. Together they

put finishing touches, serenaded by Page and Plant, soldering cable ends and attaching clear plastic wear strips on chainstay and wherever cables might touch frame, even twisting cyclometer cable neatly around shift cable sheath. Tearfully grateful, he couldn't bear to actually put this beautiful sculpture to use, this "rideable art". Propped it in his parlor to be admired for weeks while he continued to ride his ordinary clunker, more than someone as unworthy as he deserved. DeRosa was gorgeous, a symbol of selfless cooperation, a finer day than most, but, like a Christmas tree, eventually it had to be taken out. Why couldn't all exchanges be so gratifying? Didn't know how to react to such an unfamiliar experience.

After joining, he went every Sunday, as if on a mission to support club. Seemed a shame when nobody showed. Some weeks only he and someone distributing maps did, and he was the only one riding. Wondered why club didn't publicize better. Probably because cunning cadre who ran things contemptuously upheld, "Why attract needy strangers or mess with status quo?" With 700 members, why didn't more than a couple dozen congregate on any given sunny Sunday? Wasn't an inviting lot. If riders showed up and someone acted glad to see them, they tended to show again. People are social creatures, easily disinterested when others appear indifferent. Anyway, he didn't join to meet people. They thought Winter biking was idiotic. Their *thought police* ran down his enthusiasm, insulted him for legitimate views, questioned his factual and political correctness. So what he raised issues—to encourage participation and enhance safety—such a horrible offense? Challenged others to think, always a bad move. Many routinely dwelt on past, rudely passed inside jokes, snubbed new members, "Wasn't it swell back in the 70's?" He cared little for old guard, pecking orders, sycophants, toadies. Arrived as a peer whether or not they acknowledged him as one. Back stabbing and exclusivity were the day's order, as with any high school clique. Made him all the more argumentative, cantankerous, driven to annoy, whiny. Unshared pain, emotional and physical, was all he felt. Who needs that? What did the Mayo Clinic know? Must not have a psychological wing.

Riding alone was fine—no hassles, no worries. He had several close calls when boxed against curbs or run into obstacles, once by a nurse while scolding him for violating motor vehicle rules. Bikes aren't cars, Ms Peril Patrol! If a bicycle were a vehicle:

- Cyclists could accelerate from 0 to 60 mph in less than 10 seconds, so stopping wouldn't chew up much time
- Motorists would give them the right of way
- Roads would nicely accommodate, see a bigger share of that half trillion they spend on motoring
- Roll-over traffic controls would trigger for them

Therefore, a bicycle is not a vehicle, although it *most definitely is* a form of transportation. If you unquestionably obey traffic rules, you'll soon be dead. He quickly learned to let everyone on bicycles or foot, or riding in busses, cars and trucks, simply pass; get off pavement, if necessary, something you can't do while motoring. Adapt and improvise, as they train rangers to do. Why stop for stop signs unless you must? Going so slowly, he was practically stopped anyway. Ditto for red lights. He generally traveled as specified, on the right. But where road was designed decidedly anti-bike, might ride against travel flow or on sidewalk. He rode as cautiously as conditions allowed, passed on left or shadowed turning cars, took advantage of red lights to sneak half or fully through. This may set off motorists, but what about bicyclists? Why shouldn't they be angered by planner neglect pinching them off roads? By lack of consideration and insufficient alternatives? No, riding badly might send a positive signal to law enforcers and transportation engineers, especially if a few people get killed and spotlight gets focused. Nah! They don't care about transportation deaths, acceptable sacrifices to the god of almighty commerce. On a bike, being either too arrogant or too timid will get you killed.

Seemed an angry crowd, for the most part, an annoying waste of time. Wondered why this was. After years of feeling good about self-propulsion, was surprised at their petty jealousies, like one big dysfunctional family. Grew up dysfunctionally, more scars than values. Had to bask in it; felt familiar. Bad behaviors, hang-ups, substance abuse, this one dating that one on the sly, this one not speaking to that one. Rollie tied all participation to alcoholic contexts, pub visits for dark brewed beers. Not like cyclists are pure; cocaine killed a pro recently; common to hear of anabolic steroid use, drunken shenanigans on Tour, hemocrit scandals, local champions being accused of doping. Like too much alcohol, bicycling brings out whatever's already in you. A club ride was similar to sitting in bleachers among rabid, sophomoric fans; mindless chatter, derision and whoops make games more engaging. Some attend

hockey games just for fights on ice and out in stands. Putting humans into any boring landscape brings it to life, intensifies danger, like bears at a waterfall. At least none of them seemed to be chain smokers, something he couldn't abide.

Often heard you never see anyone unhappy riding a bicycle. What's a lot of bull! Bicycling forces you to confront your frailties, sets you on a self improvement track, turns all who try into social critics or wide-eyed activists. Hard to imagine anyone more miserable, except golfers, who obviously hate themselves to submit to as futile an enterprise as hitting a small ball far away, sometimes, then slowly dragging a bunch of heavy equipment sheepishly to find it, only to repeat dutifully over and over in a park saturated in toxic chemicals likely to cause cancer. A lot of obese asses and bellies bowl and golf, getting there in gas guzzling SUVs and going about in propane powered carts, ever consuming, corporate approved activities. Once in a while there's some redemption, a little instance of ball going where intended, but this for him was infrequent and never consecutive. Naughty novelist Nabokov avowed, "The only happiness in this world is to observe, to spy, to watch, to scrutinize oneself and others, to be nothing but a big slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye." At least bicycling flowed endorphins into your bloodstream and lifted your mood moderately, like Morand's pale Delphine, temporarily tonic and vulgar cycling along the Loire. Always quietly alert, he learned a lot about people on golf courses, how patient or proud they are, and more, but it only depressed him.

Invited to an exclusive course, a lady foursome walked off front 9 with honors in front of his twosome in a cart headed to the 10th tee. Instantly, he assumed, "This will be our longest outing ever, waiting for women on foot." They teed off strongly from the back, no less, briskly walked to their short approach shots, and all stuck them close to pin. "Wow! Better than we do," he thought. After briskly putting out, some with birdies, he never saw them again. Later he learned they were all members of the LPGA, professionals. Golfers who were that good had some internal psychological switch that turned on confidence and shut off doubt altogether, but, outwardly, each looked just like any flabby housewife. Veteran golfers have bad backs, funky feet, no sense of exploration, and yet expect regal treatment. They get paid to hike where they seldom run into ferocious beasts or other people, for that matter, generally keeping their foursomes 250 yards apart.

At least bicycling is consistent, forces you into people, and results in something good, if only a better understanding of the surrounding countryside. You don't rub elbows with executives, who won't go anywhere inaccessible by motor, as if you might bump into one who'd do something for you at the first tee. What did Archie say, "Shared pain." Not only commiserating biking impressions, but moaning about them, urging more, like a sadomasochist's dream, amusing to watch as well as indulge in. Too bad real cyclists build up their tolerance and suffer increasingly less, unless they take Winters off, a chance to become soft and suffer more next Spring. Golfers lose their short game, the finesse part. Bicyclists lose interpersonal artfulness.

He struck up conversations with newcomers. Always some sad story: baggage to carry, bereavement, collapsed marriages, conclusions to deal with, cycling as therapy, cycling to make new contacts. "A 40 something spree is/My bicycle and me," croons Livingston Taylor, a major witness to this health haunted trend, no relation to bicycle racer Major Taylor, who became America's first widely known black athlete and sports personality. Price of equipment today keeps minority youth off podiums and from easily taking away trophies from white weenies. Nowhere but here did all he met seem so exclusive. Held some lively discussions that mutually amused. Came to look forward to something in his inbox, yet dreaded hellish reprisals from another flamer as computer loaded from server.

Eventually spent more time doing this than viewing films, as passive and sedentary an activity as anyone could latch onto. After many thousands of movies viewed, and several hundred rounds of golf, all he had to show for it was nearly 100 excess pounds and a perverted view of the World. Viewing films is an ideal pastime for the morbidly obese who despise themselves, don't want to change, and wish to die whether or not they realize it. An explosion is an explosion. A well trained killer can take out many more before sacrificing self. Generals don't lead a charge, but mop up afterwards and utter obscenities about how they love war. Devil help them. You cannot love anyone/anything incapable of returning love. Comedies weren't funny; horror, ho-hum. Martial arts extravaganzas were ridiculously fake and too frenetic. War flicks and westerns were twisted morality plays. After meeting tens of thousands of actual people, none that he knew of were serial killers. Why movies focus on fringe fanatics is that they *are* so unusual. But doesn't this

breed more mayhem? What's Hollywood's agenda? Corpulent viewers don't even have the energy to copy a poor example. Began to prefer quiet films with lots of scenery, imagining gliding along the same terrain. Some indoor spinners watch videotapes of races to alleviate boredom, readily dispelled by simply riding outdoors.

There are a lot of bikes in movies, once you've retrained your eye to see them. Not just those specifically about bicycling, *Beijing Bicycle*, *Breaking Away* or *The Bicycle Thief*, but there are also gratifying natural references, like *A Beautiful Mind* with a figure-8 obsessed theorist, or *Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid* with sex and tricks on a one speed, or *Il Postino* with a biking postman. In *Back to the Future*, McFly's dad is a bicycling, "bird" watching pervert. In Dogma film *Dancer in the Dark*, tragic heroine Selma commutes everywhere by bike until blindness befalls her, as if a Scandinavian homage to Lena Nyman's performance in *I am Curious (Yellow)*. In *Mr. Deeds*, comedian Sandler sweetly bikes down park stairs to U2's "The Sweetest Thing". For G rated, how about *Chicken Run*, a Claymation masterpiece. The clucking heroine builds a giant bicycle birdplane so all her flock can escape their potpie fate. The hero saves them in the final reel by riding a tricycle over mean farmer. Rooster pilot says, "You have to pedal to live," and they evade death's axe through self-propulsion and teamwork. Despite its childish trappings, its parable is pretty enlightened, unlike *The Triplets of Belleville*, a much admired but positively loopy animated pantomime. Neither was a big hit among chicken farmers or motorists. Obviously, all these filmmakers are avid cyclists. More often a bicycle is just a matter of fact, something upon which a buxom Kate Winslip might arrive to her home front workplace or Sean Conjury slip out of another Bond entanglement. This list is very long, since so many share a similar affliction with these ubiquitous machines. Films and songs all have veiled references to the very things you think yourself, and, since you've been exposed to or mulled over bike issues, you tend to catch these references, which you'd otherwise miss, like heinous computer HAL's last hymn in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, "A Bicycle Built For Two". The more you ride, the more you notice, [as evidenced by this book's 118 page appendix] but the less you spend with passive activities. When you hear lyrics and see films with bicycling themes, you don't feel so much like a solitary idiot trying to save the world from itself. Not everyone is a cowardly cager.

Reading literary criticism then answering its questions is to engage in a tertiary argument alone by yourself. One article wondered whether for teens there's any value playing video games, which its author had discovered to expand minds in ways hitherto unknown, as do movies and television. All gaming had some social value: developing so called socialization skills, identifying nervous tells and ticks, learning to react appropriately. Reading books is far more passive, with readers shut off from each other, stuck on a linear path of plot which encourages no heuristics, exerts control, and forces submissiveness. Takes no courage to enjoy isolation or regimentation. Lately, those who score tests have to recalibrate their basis, since the typical American IQ was actually steadily climbing by about 3 points per decade. This refutes those who claim education is failing, everyone is dumbing down, and television makes people stupid. Causes might be better access to data, better diet, or eugenics, but pop culture seems to play just as much a role. Technocrat Steve Johnson notes, "Reading books chronically understimulates the senses... are tragically isolating... instilling a general passivity in our children." Patriot Thomas Paine might agree if resurrected a couple hundred years later amidst today's vibrant video playground. But Johnson makes a good point. People have begun to shrug off classic, passive learning for active participation in all its forms, and that's bound to acquaint them with logistics, improve their problem solving, and reinforce reason.

Psychologists define intelligence as an ability to adapt one's behavior given the situation. Constant variance accelerates progress, one might think, works out kinks. Experience is the best teacher, isn't it said? But this argument overlooks a distinct possibility: People may not be achieving higher heights but becoming more alike, conforming to a slightly higher norm. Otherwise, test questions may just be getting easier. Is an average IQ of 100 enough, especially in a complex world? Isn't it enough that you accomplish something useful? Does it have to be reinforced by making you do it with you hands tied, or increasingly quicker without error? Must you achieve computer-like efficiency? Only if the powers that be are in a hurry. Life's already too perplexing to deal with and survive. You have to become a simpleton and let others take charge of your wellbeing, which means you suffer most of the time from deprivation and neglect.

Ideas don't excite. In 1986 he reproduced Giotto's "Adoration of the Magi" in miniature as a Christmas card, on index stock,

hand colored, and sent to 50 familiars. Not one of them noticed its significance. Of course, this was the year Halley's Comet had returned, both for real and as recorded in Giotto's original painting half a millennium earlier. He took his daughter to see actual Halley's Comet at a rural observatory, not spectacular, but oddly worrisome. Each appearance was always a harbinger of major anomaly. Christianity began in the original scene, Enlightenment in Giotto's time, and Internet in his. Perhaps this meant some great sociological leap forward so stuffed into people's faces as to defy current observation, just as it had been back then in both instances. One should possess historic perspective. He had foresight to record impressions from his teens, through adulthood into middle age. What was totally remarkable was their consistency. He independently reconceived the very same notions 35 years later. Did this represent truth or was it only terribly persistent indoctrination?

Better to be a lightning strike than a rainy night. People ignore sputtering darkness, but all eyes are drawn to spot struck. Action excites; reflection repels. Drawing attention to himself, he was becoming aware of how he touched people's lives. Usually it was to present a statement that raised a question, which forced a need to choose. He hoped those he touched were cured afterwards, but this only works when stimulus is repeated at reasonably short intervals, like church sermons or electroshock treatments. So any effect was probably minimal, maybe sometimes negative. Doesn't mean one should give up. If everyone just tried to be a little more caring, how much better would World be? Better to be a good example of cooperation, of magnanimity, instead of making people feel crappy and hopeless. But you can't ignore bad behavior, either, lest miscreants get away with it and harm even more later. Really bad people go freely out there. If only serial killers were opposed as bullies when they were young, many an innocent victim would still be alive. Balances and checks keep trains on track. It's not enough not to be bad, you must not look away and let evil succeed. He had heard something like this, but what could he do about it? That is, other than not add to it? Can't assume someone's being harmed simply from furious action, loud arguments, or unconventional exchanges. Might be having the time of their life, for all you know.

People idolize entertainers who've somehow found a way of imposing humor and interest. They are akin to success sellers, selling an image of themselves as people you'd like to know. Everyone just wants to feel better about their daily plight, whether it's

difficulties at home, a heavy head, mundane chores, or repetitive boredom. Felt he couldn't allow himself to be so seduced. Let someone else show the other side of the curtain, how the magic was done. Didn't want to understand dull machinations. Preferred to be a jaundiced eye, on the outside, an independent thinker. If you get close to exposing them, they shut you out, anyway, and that speaks volumes. He'd been an insider, and all that was was profiteering and spin. Better to speak through your own prejudice and suspicion than mindlessly parrot what's spun. Facts don't mean much in a cloud of omissions. You can only judge accurately based on all viewpoints and complete disclosure. But who has the time outside of court? There miscarriages are the rule rather than exception. Too exhausting to consider every single viewpoint, to make accommodations for every need. People have to fend for themselves, somewhat, get smart about what nourishes or pleases them personally, learn how to attract who's right or avoid who's wrong.

What did he have in common with them? Maybe nothing? He had a loving family, a nice home, and upstanding friends from all walks of life. He accumulated friends by doing favors, not being so judgmental, and showing respect. Your only penalty with him was his ignoring you, and how many cared about that? He liked music: classical, driven beats, fiery jazz, and particular tunes from the '60s and '70s he grew up on or saw performed live—the Band, Dylan, Frank Zappa, Grace Slick, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Neil Young, Pink Floyd—before coke and speed influenced music—disco, metal, punk or rap—frenetic expressions not repeatable, a hateful darkness that persisted until the mid-90's, when it gradually became acceptable to show optimism again, artists having gone through rehab and survived to try to engage and please instead of simply shock fans.

Can't overlook musical nourishment in any stage of your life. His earliest memories were from spinning old 78s. Spike Jones added a fantastic dimension of comic vocal percussion and sounds derived from common objects. Had to keep exploring, trying different things. Contemporary classical and jazz lacked melodies, and weren't as popular, although they do create spaces in which to muse, especially experimental forms and jazz fusion; they created textures instead of plots, just like postmodern literature. Some reactionaries are so entrenched they only listen to orthodox orchestral music from the 17th Century. One he knew would only listen to Mozart, Vivaldi, and wretched relics of dead Catholic composers. Such people can't deal with the choices and demands of

self actualization that Romanticism brought, and disorderly expressions brought by rapidly expanding 20th populations were just too horrifying to consider. No single individual, organization or reader's manifesto can control chaos of seven billion terrestrial inhabitants flying off in all directions to do their thing. There are contemporary, orthodox, religious classical composers, Part and Tavener among others, but reactionaries can't paint a rosy picture around them based on some socioeconomic superiority they think once existed. Rewriting an irrevocable past will always be preferred to doing your duty to facilitate present and plan ahead.

Some pop music at least made an attempt to reach out, right wrongs, and, if you looked hard enough through discount bins, you could find something that wasn't hate based: Braino's ambient airport music, Filcher's baby murmurings, Inja's modal mindscapes. To him this mattered more than form, this sense of sharing, sounding echoes to locate boundaries of your psychological cave and maybe finding an exit. Takes courage to be still and listen. Nesting birds bravely sit while mates flee to draw predators away from eggs. But neither fast nor still match moving slowly, sacrificing yourself to preserve next generation, the very thought of which is violently repugnant to many.

Club members he met, not all but too many, seemed to be self-centered nazis into the fascism of physical perfection, to be better than you: above it all, aloof, great abs but empty heads, never graduated beyond being fawned over by high school phys-ed coaches and other pedophiles. Many of them were unattached, whether through fault of their own, loss or selfishness. Or was it bicycling itself, a lonely pursuit misunderstood by those who don't participate? It creates arguments, friction and jealousies with non-riding spouses. He knew of at least a few who ended marriages over cycling obsessions. Come to think of it, he believed he was just as vulnerable. Such behavior led to an ominous blizzard of hard to read words, more texture than plot, unloved letters that sat collectively as if torn from traffic regulations and warning signs to restrict more rights. But, face it, commuter traffic is hardly different from commerce in slaves, the original "traffik", except today's slaves have to buy their own chains and transport themselves.

Brits have a word, *trainspotter*, originally some nosy busybody who liked to check up on the punctuality of rail service. Now it seems to include anyone with an obsession, afflicted with a compulsion to collect musical recordings, or any unhealthy preoccupation with minutia. Bicycling collects trainspotters with its complex

realm of paraphernalia, players and peccadilloes, a Dungeons and Dragons cult emerging as a Doctrine. Did society need another brutal Dogma for film or life? Chainlike trains, connected and working together, are not the same as queues of trucks, formed to temporarily benefit from drafting then separating. Train cars also separate, but not readily. Their bonds are stronger, more like human loyalties. What was really needed are protocols that allow gentle interaction, permission to reveal your core without getting bashed and bloodied or diminished by lawsuits every time you greet and help.

Meeting the natives, after all, implies bringing yourself, no? Nobody wants you around unless you add something new to their resume mix. Taking something home with you makes meeting them worth your precious time. There's never any enjoyment to be had anywhere unless you bring it with you. All mirth begins inside. Fun often starts with care enough to ask a question, say, "How did you get such great abs?" and leads to the very secret of life, communicating with others on their own terms. There is nothing more to a community than this, being willing to meet people half way, escaping a shell of self safekeeping to a middle state where successful exchanges can occur. But that's how normal people think, not the insane or insatiably ambitious, who, like cannibal space aliens, will just as soon kill you for fun of it, minerals they can amass, or slivers of silver solder in your teeth.

