

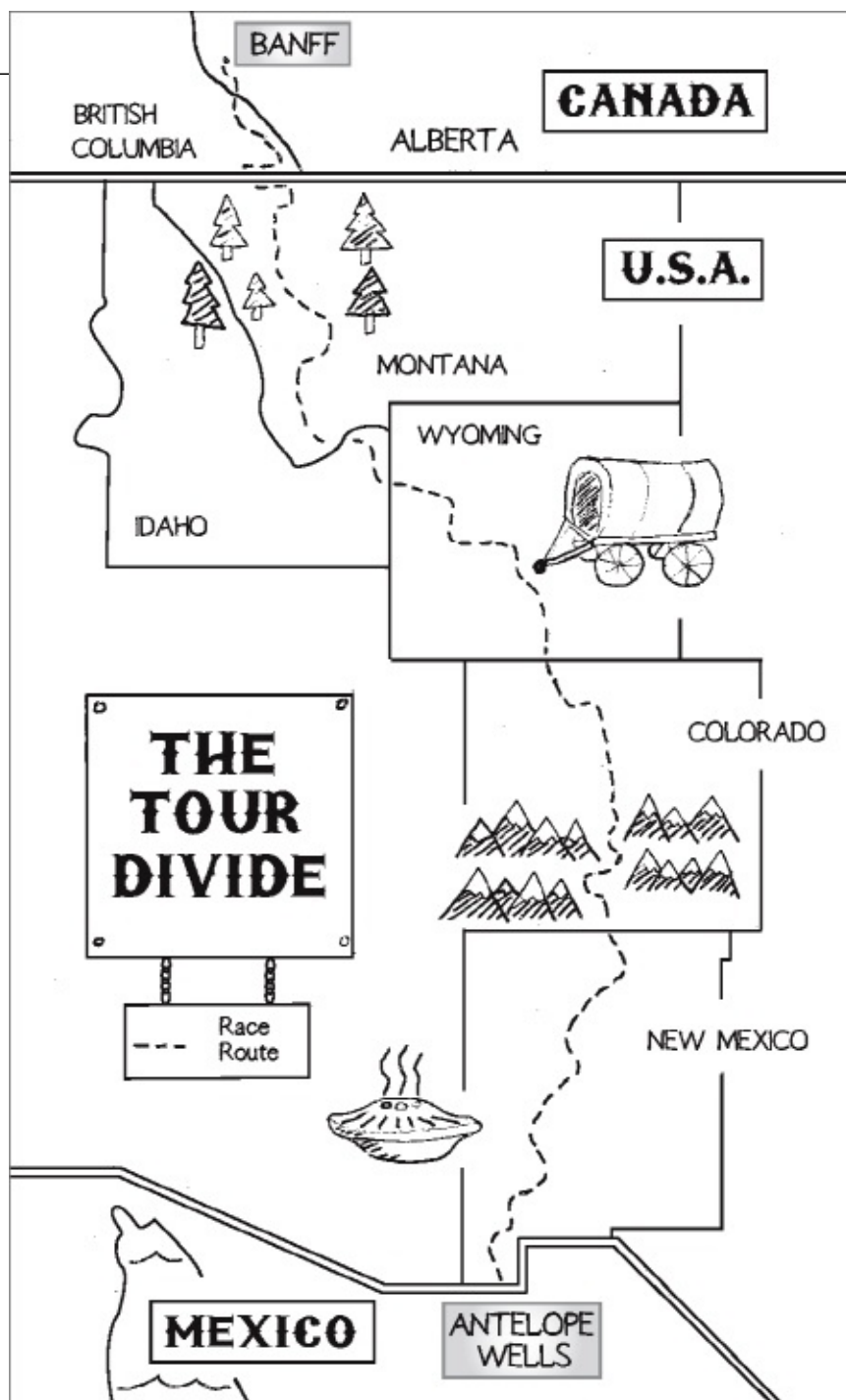


Paul Howard

How I Braved **Bears, Badlands**
and **Big Breakfasts** in My Quest
to Cycle the Tour Divide

**EAT,
SLEEP,
RIDE**

Eat, Sleep, Ride



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GREYSTONE BOOKS

D&M PUBLISHERS INC.

Vancouver/Toronto/Berkeley

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11 12 13 14 15 5 4 3 2 1

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Greystone Books
An imprint of D&M Publishers Inc.
2323 Quebec Street, Suite 201
Vancouver bc Canada v5t 4s7
www.greystonebooks.com

Cataloguing data available from Library and Archives Canada
isbn 978-1-55365-817-7 (pbk.)
isbn 978-1-55365-818-4 (ebook)

First published in 2010 by Mainstream Publishing
Company (Edinburgh) Ltd, Edinburgh, Scotland, as
Two Wheels on My Wagon: A Bicycle Adventure in the Wild West

Front cover photographs by Kyle George/Aurora/Getty Images (top)
and Luigi Stavale/Latin Content/Getty Images (bottom)
Distributed in the U.S. by Publishers Group West

To M, B, T and F

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who helped me participate in and complete the Tour Divide, not least the people I met and rode with on the way, and of whom there are too many to name individually. You know who you are, and I hope this book goes some way to repaying the debt of gratitude I owe.

There are also several people to whom I wish to express particular thanks: to Rod Lambert at Seaford's very own Mr Cycles – for his support, enthusiasm and lessons in bike maintenance; to Edd at Start of Open Spaces in Brighton for his fund of useful advice about life in the wilds and the best kit to take.

Thanks also to Tony Harris at ATB Sales, distributors of Marin Bikes, Ian Young at Zyro as distributors of Camelbak and Altura products, and Dain Zaffke at WTB, manufacturers of Nanoraptor tyres.

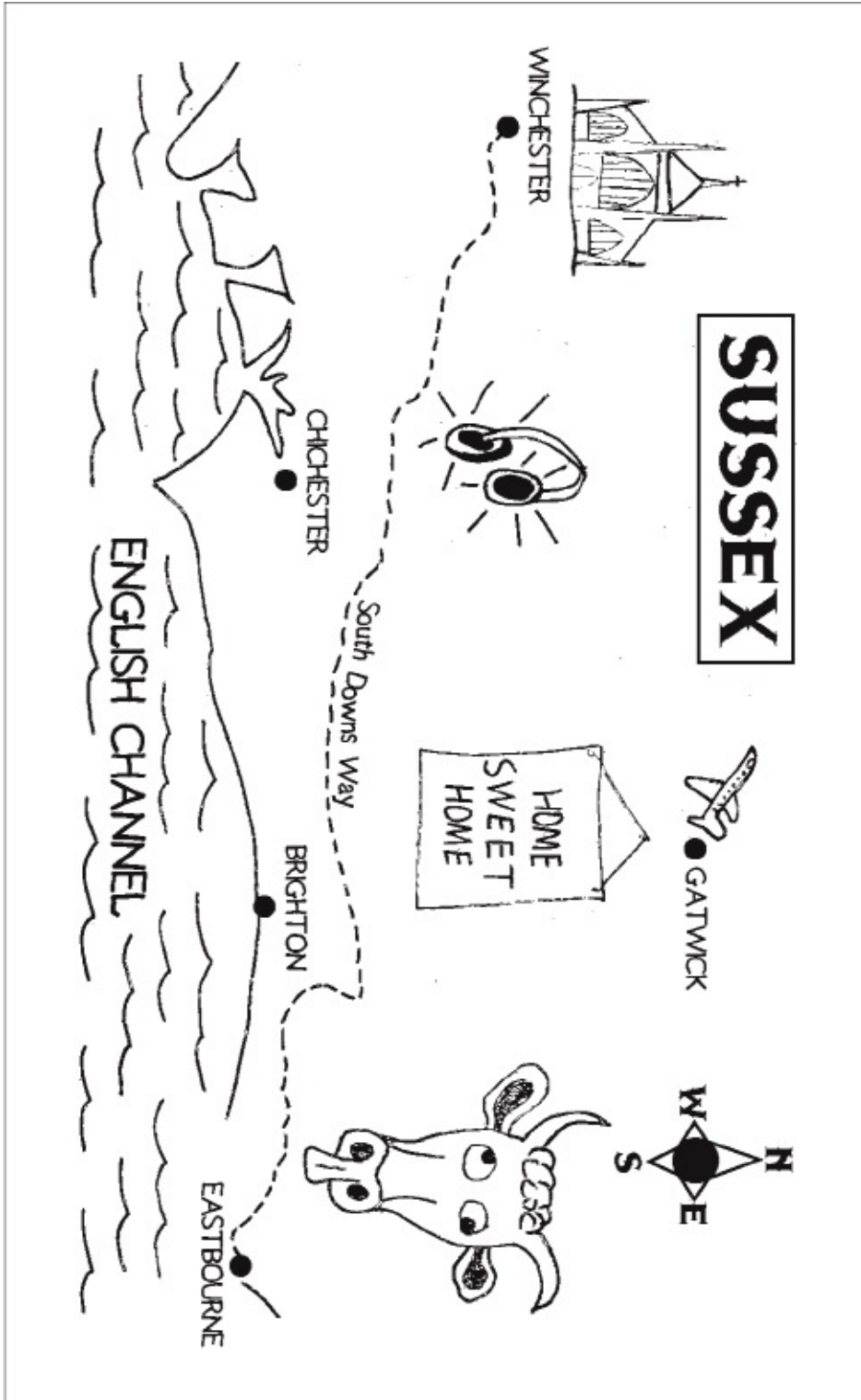
I would neither have trained nor enjoyed all the riding as much as I did without the company of many rides of Ian Craig. I could still be stuck in Silver City were it not for the generosity of the cycling community in general and Barin Beard in particular.

I would like to thank all those behind the Tour Divide, especially those who made it possible for my family and friends to follow the race with such enthusiasm (and to those same family and friends for their virtual support, which had very real benefits). Particular mention must also go to Matthew Leach who found time while organising the event and preparing his own ride to guide me from novice mountain biker to Tour Divide finisher. Last but far from least, my thanks to the Adventure Cycling Association and Michael McCoy for the three years spent devising and mapping the Great Divide route, without which there would be no Tour Divide race.

Finally, thank you to Catherine, Molly, Benjamin, Thomas and Freddie. I'll only do it again if one (or more) of you wants to come with me.



SUSSEX



CHAPTER 1

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SEDUCTION

It seemed like a good idea at the time, though the context no doubt had a lot to do with it. Driven to despair by a prolonged stint at a grey job in a grey office in one of London's greyer suburbs, I eventually sought refuge via the virtual distraction of the Internet. After extensive and disconsolate searching through the inevitable chaff, I finally found something to fire my imagination.

That something was a news story on a cycling website about the inaugural edition of the world's longest mountain bike race. The Tour Divide was just about to start in Banff in Canada, and would take those bold or foolish enough to have signed up nearly 2,800 miles down the spine of the Rockies to the Mexico border.

Curiosity quickly became obsession as the race itself unfurled. Although physically still very much trapped in my mundane surroundings, I was transported vicariously to the magnificent Rocky Mountains. The story of sixteen cyclists attempting to ride such a long distance off-road, to a high point of nearly 12,000 feet and with an overall altitude gain the equivalent of scaling Mount Everest seven times, was compelling. The bears, rattlesnakes, tarantulas and mosquitoes all encountered on route merely added to the drama.

It quickly became clear the story was as much one of survival as victory. Unlike the Tour de France there were no entry criteria and no entry fee. Nor was there any prize money. There were also no defined stages to keep racers together. Riders soon became strung out over several US states. Half dropped out, not always those near the back of the field. More notable still, there was no backup or external support allowed, other than that which could be found along the route. Everybody started together in Banff, and everybody had to try and reach the same remote border post in the New Mexican desert by following the same route along the Continental Divide, but apart from that they were on their own, often quite literally.

It had everything life in an office in London didn't. I had emails and deadlines. It had solitude and timelessness. I had crowded commuter trains and a horizon broken only by shopping malls and office blocks. It had cycling and it had mountains, thousands upon thousands of them. It fulfilled all the requirements of the essential equation of Albert Einstein's ground-breaking theory of cycling relativity: $E=(mc)^2$. Enjoyment = (mountains × cycling) squared.

'I thought of it while riding my bike,' the great man had said after his eureka moment.

He also said: 'Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.'

Full of useful tips, that Einstein. Not wanting to contradict such a profound thinker, I decided to take his equation to heart. The Tour Divide had seduced me.

While I had been happy to be tempted when sitting in a London office at a safe distance from the

badlands and the bears, a sense of guilt at having had my head turned was the overwhelming emotion when, six months later, I had bought a plane ticket and registered my intended participation. For start, there was the small matter of not having a mountain bike. Indeed, I'd never owned a mountain bike.

The fact they had two wheels and two pedals like the road bikes I was used to was some reassurance. Yet this carried little weight in the face of my previously ambiguous experience of actually riding off-road, which amounted, as far as I could recall, to two fairly disturbing misadventures. The first came in the form of somehow becoming trapped in a bone-dry canyon in France. An hour-long lunchtime ride turned into a seven-hour survival epic as I ran out of water under a Provençal sun and ended up climbing first down and then up two twenty-foot rock walls – with my bike. The second was slightly less alarming – it was in Sussex on the South Downs – and largely involved lots of cursing at the discomfort induced by such an inefficient means of progress over bumpy ground. Nevertheless, it culminated in a silent vow never to become a mountain biker. Neither had whetted my appetite for more.

Then there were the not insubstantial reservations expressed by family and friends. Most involved questioning my sanity, which was not a particularly unusual activity. Novelty came in the form of encouragement – of a sort – from Chris Boardman.

‘I really hope the adventure goes well for you. You are, of course, raving mad.’

To be considered mad by friends and family was one thing. To be considered mad by an Olympic gold medallist and Tour de France yellow jersey wearer was another level of compliment entirely.

Thus reassured, I made tentative steps towards securing a bike. A good bike, if possible. With the rider – me – possessing uncertain psychological and physical competence, an effective pedalling machine was clearly a prerequisite for success. But how would I recognise a bike good enough to cycle 2,800 miles in less than a month?

The answer came from Mr Cycles. Although strictly speaking this was the name of a shop in Seaford, rather than its proprietor, Rod, the two quickly became interchangeable. After much discussion, most of which I could only pretend to understand, I was provided with a Marin Nail Trail 29er. Marin, I was told, was the manufacturer, and Nail Trail was the name of the bike. ‘29er’, however, had me lost.

‘It means it’s got bigger wheels,’ Mr Cycles explained.

I must have looked even blanker than usual.

‘They’ll make you go faster.’

It seemed unlikely, but it was a straw I was happy to clutch at, especially when confronted with the opaque vocabulary of my few mountain biking acquaintances.

‘If you want me to school you bro’ we’ll go out, throw down a few shapes off a booter and see if we can’t stick some sick lines,’ said Dom, a friend from the office in which I had discovered the Tor Divide. He meant well, I was sure, though exactly what he meant I had no idea. By way of reassurance Cool Dom then said something about ‘berms’. This succeeded not in enlightening me but in making me think of Inspector Clouseau’s attempts to single-handedly destroy the established tenets of English pronunciation.

‘Not now, Kato, I ’ave fallen onto my berm . . .’

This might not be an accurate interpretation of the mountain biking vernacular, but it was certainly an accurate description of the occasionally unbalanced start to my career as an off-road rider. In fact

my first few rides involved a very convincing, if unwitting, impression of the hapless Clouseau who he to have been transferred from his 2CV to two wheels and a rocky path. Several potential humiliating tumbles were only not humiliating because of the absence of an audience. Lying inelegantly in a clump of nettles, however, was humiliating whether the incident became a public affair or not. Still, seduction is a mysterious business. In spite of all the perfectly good reasons for not participating, not least of which were the nettles, Einstein and the Tour Divide had won me over. Whether it was a good idea or not, I had decided to give it a go.

CHAPTER 2

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A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

Even once I had come to some sort of accord with my bike to try and avoid our causing each other mutual harm, misadventures in training were numerous.

Shortly after Easter, I decided that an attempt should be made to ride the South Downs Way in one day. Such a ride was locally perceived as the very acme of achievement, but a comparison between the South Downs and the Rockies quickly demonstrated the apparent futility of this gesture.

In purely geographical terms the difference was clear enough. The Rockies measure 3,000 miles length; the South Downs 100 miles. The high point of the Rockies is 14,440 feet, on the imposing Mount Elbert in Colorado. In contrast, Butser Hill measures just 891 feet, a mere one sixteenth of the size. I could find no records of anyone having suffered from altitude sickness on Butser Hill.

The differences in climate are equally stark. The average minimum temperature in January at Steamboat Springs, roughly halfway along the route, is -17°C . The average high in July is $+28^{\circ}\text{C}$. In Brighton in Sussex, the figures are $+3^{\circ}\text{C}$ and $+16^{\circ}\text{C}$ respectively. Steamboat averages 183 inches of snow per year. Brighton has no records. The extremes regularly recorded at each end of my intended ride were even more marked.

Then came wildlife. The list of dangerous creatures that inhabit the mountains of North America is long enough to send shivers down even David Attenborough's spine: bears (black and brown, or grizzlies and they are more commonly known), mountain lions, wolves, moose, snakes, scorpions, tarantulas . . . In Sussex, the most dangerous animals I was likely to encounter were mad cows.

And, sorry as I was to say it, inconsiderate fellow travellers. The threat from this latter category should not be dismissed lightly. Sunny weekends, I learnt, attracted cyclists to the Downs like flies to a cow pat, often with behaviour to match. So intent were these weekend warriors on demonstrating their belief that they were Lance Armstrong's real rivals that common civility was dispensed with. Shutting gates? Not for them. Thanking others for holding gates open? A waste of breath . . . Failing to forewarn other cyclists or walkers of their impending arrival? What's it got to do with them anyway . . . I soon discovered that the only possible way to deal with such rudeness was to help already put-upon faces turn pucer by being ostentatiously altruistic in my own interactions with them; it helped, too, to overtake such misanthropes between gates and to repeat the dose at the next obstacle.

That most mild-mannered of figures, the rambler, was often little better. Quite why it was necessary to export road rage onto the nation's bridleways, when cars should long since have been forgotten, was a mystery. Yet the mere sight of a cyclist was enough to drive some pedestrians into a frenzy; they couldn't all be London cabbies with a personal vendetta induced by the provocative antics of cyc-

couriers. Other variations on the same theme included those who isolated themselves from the world around them with an iPod and headphones. Their being oblivious to others was OK; my unwitting startling them out of their esoteric trance by passing them on a bike was not.

Even for those not cocooned in their own little world, interaction with cyclists was frequently antagonistic. It may have drawn mockery from youths gathered at bus stops, but I had fitted a bicycle bell to alert people to my presence. It generated a nice, tinkly sort of noise, designed to be a friendly compromise between no warning at all and something that might be considered too strident (such as an air-horn, or a cry of 'Get out of my bloody way, you day-dreaming path-hoggers'). Responses varied. Those a little hard of hearing, or too deeply engaged in conversation, were often oblivious to my tinkling. 'Why don't you have a bell? You should let people know you're coming . . .' they'd say, affronted at what they perceived to be my intentional impersonation of a stealth mountain biker.

Then there were those whose hearing was clearly more acute.

'You don't need to ring a bell, I knew you were there . . .' they'd declaim, affronted at what they perceived to be my impersonation of a juggernaut. I must confess to having at times dreamt longingly of a processional chariot with which to crush them, but managed to resist the temptation to turn my bicycle into one.

Nevertheless, with the start of the Tour Divide now less than two months away and the height of my off-road riding accomplishments so far having been a handful of three-hour rides, the South Downs was going to have to be. Something – anything – had to be done, and they had the distinct virtue of being right on my doorstep.

Accordingly, one misty morning in April, Ian, a cycling friend, and I rode out of Winchester, intending on reaching Eastbourne by nightfall. Actually, intent implies a degree of earnest endeavour that was curiously lacking. We ambled through the dappled, early morning shade of the trees so characteristic of the western Downs and, while most continued to slumber, admired West Sussex at its finest. The greys and blues of the first hour slowly became infinite shades of green and gold as the mist dissipated. By Old Winchester Hill we were bathed in glorious sunshine. We were also lost, but even this couldn't wake us from our torpor. Less surprisingly, nor could the sausage rolls and pasties that we consumed, much to Ian's consternation, at the Queen Elizabeth Country Park as we crossed the A3.

Such lethargy was exacerbated by obstacles not entirely of our own making. At the pub on top of Devil's Dyke, it took over half an hour to accomplish the seemingly straightforward tasks of buying and consuming a pint of Coke and using the facilities, of which we could only find one and for which there was a considerable queue. I waited impatiently, all the while conscious that, hopping around on my cycling shoes on the tiled floor, I sounded like a demented tap dancer. Those in the queue with me, fresh from an afternoon of inactivity and alcohol consumption, clearly agreed that I was at least a little demented.

At last we were inspired to make a concerted effort to recoup lost time. Past Jack and Jill windmill we tried to raise our pace, but it was too little, too late. At nearly 6 p.m. at Ditchling Beacon the game was up. Stymied by impending darkness and seduced by the delightful picnic provided by Camilla, a friend of Ian's, that was designed to fuel our final push, we conceded defeat. To console ourselves, we drank tea and ate malt loaf, pouring honey into each other's ears and telling ourselves our achievements were still considerable. Nevertheless, by the time I returned to Hurstpierpoint, I had ridden scarcely 80 miles in more than 12 hours. I had also suffered noticeable sunburn on my south-facing right arm, hardly a promising portent for the deserts of New Mexico, should I ever make it there.

far.

The next challenge came the following day, when I had to retrace my wheel tracks to collect the car from Winchester (and hopefully turn my left arm the same salmon-pink colour as my right). I set off alone in high spirits, and made good progress for the first 40 miles or so. Then, just as I was bracing myself for another bout with the pasties from the Queen Elizabeth Country Park, disaster struck. My bottom bracket – the axle where the pedals join the bike – ceased to turn. Apart from nearly catapulting me once more into the shrubbery, this sudden seizure made it abundantly clear that any further pedal-powered progress was now beyond me. Even if I had had the correct tools and replacement parts with me it would have been beyond my skills as a mechanic to effect a repair.

Vexed as I certainly was, though, the situation was not particularly grave. By the simple expedient of pushing the bike to the top of the next hill and freewheeling down the other side I made it to the sanctuary of the café. Inspired by tea and yet more pasties, I tracked down the number of a taxi company, who promised to take me and my recalcitrant steed the remaining 25 miles to Winchester. Once safely back at the car, all that was left was for me to spend the long drive home considering what would have been my fate had I been in the great wastes of the Rockies rather than benign Sussex with a taxi company at hand.

I had already been reassured to a degree by a kind offer from my wife's cousin, Steve, a resident of Los Angeles. It turned out that he was the owner of a transport company specialising in moving crews and sets for rock groups around the whole of North America. I was unlikely to need a used Bon Jovi stage design, but logistical backup could prove invaluable in the event of a breakdown.

'As I've said, my reach is rather remarkable, so anywhere along the way that you need a hand please call,' he wrote.

He also gave me a toll-free phone number that I could use 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This appeared to resolve my concerns about getting hold of spare parts, at least those that could be delivered to a town or metalled road. For troubles beyond that, I vowed to increase still further my emergency food supplies.

The beginnings of my second attempt were scarcely more auspicious. The previous night started gaily with family visiting for dinner. The responsibilities of being a host should always be taken seriously and it seemed incumbent on me to ensure a steady supply of aperitifs and then wine with the meal. An all too rare offer to retire to the local hostelry to continue the conviviality was then accepted with alacrity – too much alacrity, if truth be known. By midnight, I collapsed into bed secure in the knowledge that I could now ride un-aided to the South Pole if so required.

At 6 a.m., however, a little voice in my head could clearly be heard reprimanding me for the previous evening's excesses. At 7 a.m., as we started to ride, the voice had become somewhat more insistent, calling into question the wisdom of my chosen path, both for today and in a few weeks' time. 'Go back home, go back to bed,' the siren voice wailed. With a discomfiting wind and rain imminent, I had to rely on the resolve of Ian, once again my training companion, to ensure the day's venture didn't end before it had properly begun.

As is inevitable on the South Downs, the ride started with a stiff climb, at the top of which we were greeted by the squall that had been threatening since we left home. The cloud scudding a few feet above our heads was greyer even than the English Channel off to our left. Once more we seemed – in my mind, at least – to be doomed to ignominious failure. But while I cursed and complained in my new and highly effective waterproof jacket, Ian continued to lead at a stiff pace, clad only in a cycling

jersey, seemingly oblivious to the meteorological conditions. The wind howled and the rain stung and all exposed flesh, but as I couldn't make Ian hear my moaning above the gale I had no choice but to keep following.

At last, the weather eased. The dubious charms of the Queen Elizabeth Country Park café were once again within our reach. Gradually thereafter I began to warm to the task. Even the unlikely traffic jam caused by more than 100 mountain bikers heading the other way as part of an organised 'South Downs Way in three days' ride could not put us off our stride.

'What's the collective noun for a group of mountain bikers?' I asked Ian.

'A bloody nuisance,' he replied, as we were once again pinned against the brambles by sheer weight of numbers.

This time we had removed the logistical hurdle of completing the ride from one end to the other by starting in the middle ('I wondered why you hadn't done that last time,' asked Catherine, my wife when I explained our itinerary; I declined to confess that it was because we hadn't had the presence of mind to think of it). As a result, once we had made it to Winchester on our outward leg, the return was facilitated by a tail wind. Learning from our slothful progress of a few weeks previously, we pressed on and surprised ourselves by the relative speed of our return and the fact that we were not overtaken by nightfall. A semblance of progress had been made. We returned to the car exultant.

To distract from my uncertain progress as a mountain biker, I dived headlong into the logistics of preparation, reasoning – hoping – that the vast array of new toys I was collecting would provide adequate compensation for my own fallibilities.

First, it being incumbent on all cyclists to 'look the part' (even if only to disguise the reality of being a spare part), the increasingly avuncular Rod supplied me with a pair of matching black and green Mr Cycles jerseys. His concern for my sartorial welfare was touching, and he assured me that they had never been proved to attract bears.

'And if they do, at least you'll be wearing a well-designed food wrapper,' he chortled to himself.

Through Mr Cycles I was also able to procure most of my clothing needs via one of his suppliers: Altura Pro-Gel cycling shorts (with high-tech gel inserts to protect my 'ischial tuberosities', or sit bones if you prefer); similarly conceived cycling mitts to protect my ulnar nerve, which takes considerable battering on rough tracks; top of the range waterproof jacket and overtrousers; a variety of vests, leggings and arm- and leg-warmers.

Once all that had arrived, only a few things cycling-related remained. I looked down my wish list which had become a mass of crossings out.

'A rucksack and a pair of cycling shoes that I can also walk in,' I concluded, still conscious of my earlier mechanical failings and continuing mechanical incompetence.

'If something happens to the bike that I can't fix I might need to walk 100 miles to get help.'

This was the first time I had articulated my Plan B and, caught up in the moment, I even managed to make it sound like a perfectly reasonable proposition. Self-delusion was clearly a vital part of a traveller's armoury.

Along with tangible supplies, Mr Cycles also sought to help me overcome my phobia of bicycle maintenance.

'You might think it's all right to walk 100 miles to find help, but I suggest you try and fix your bike first,' he advised.

Over tea and a sticky bun, Rod and the equally proficient Rory performed drastic surgery on my new bike in the dungeon below the shop, all the while endeavouring to impart some of their knowledge. Their approach to curing my phobia was clearly to make me confront my worst fears. Accordingly, between them they dismembered my magnificent new machine, removing all the bits that had transformed it from an angular piece of metal into a bicycle: wheels, handlebars, saddle, pedals and cranks. Just when it seemed impossible to remove anything else, Rory produced a grinding implement that was surely better designed for use on victims of 'extraordinary rendition' rather than an innocent bicycle. Indeed, he proceeded to effect some peculiar kind of torture on the poor bike in the nether regions, grinding remorselessly away at the bottom bracket housing until it seemed its structural integrity would be fatally compromised. In Seaford, no one can hear your bike scream.

'They spend so much time engineering these frames to perfection, and then they spray them with paint and leave rough edges,' said a baffled Rod through a mouthful of bun, oblivious to my mounting alarm.

'But take a bottom bracket,' he added, looking at me knowingly. 'If a bottom bracket housing has rough edges that aren't perfectly parallel to the frame it will mean the stresses aren't distributed through it evenly and it will fail, and we wouldn't want that to happen where you're going.'

I smiled weakly, and tried not to get in the way as the bike was reassembled.

Further distractions came by the way of camping and first-aid requirements. Uncertain as to whether it was possible to ask a doctor for 'something in case I fall sick while cycling in the Rockies' I nevertheless made an appointment at the local practice. I was greeted by a youthful Irishman, who listened intently as I explained my predicament. I endeavoured to make the tales of upset tummies that abound on the Tour Divide website sound as macabre as possible, and stressed the remoteness of where I was heading. Before I could make an explicit plea for antibiotics, he prescribed me with two varieties.

'This one is a general purpose, broad spectrum antibiotic, and this one is for serious, water-borne infections like Giardia. You'll know when you have that,' he said cheerily.

I had less success when requesting a generic snake venom antidote.

'There is no such thing. The best approach is to avoid being bitten.'

Nor did he have any bear vaccine.

'Sounds like a fascinating trip,' he concluded, making it sound little more than a visit to a museum. 'Be sure to come back and tell me how it goes. Next, please.'

Meanwhile, in Brighton, Eddie at Open Spaces undertook to supply me with all the necessary camping goodies. The only problem was defining what exactly was necessary. Did I need a stove? What about a water filter? Should I take a tent or a bivvy bag? Of course, Eddie couldn't answer the questions for me, but he could provide the benefit of his wisdom, even if his habit of only looking sideways at his interlocutors rendered this wisdom even more enigmatic than it already was.

'I should opt for the most comfortable approach if I were you, but then I'm not you, am I?'

I took this sagacity as an indication of great experience in the wilder parts of the world, and assumed his idiosyncratic demeanour was the result of casting wistful glances over the Downs, wishing they were the more imposing ranges on which he had previously roamed. Maybe he could come with me and act as an adviser? He declined politely. In the end I opted for two parts asceticism to one part indulgence: no stove, no water filter, but a tent rather than a bivvy bag. Food and water I hoped to be able to find from external sources; sleep would be my own responsibility.

The final piece in the jigsaw was to fashion a means by which all these belongings could be safely carried on my bike. With a rucksack, a rear pannier rack and a small saddlebag already sorted, the crux remained the handlebar bag into which I hoped to cram all my food as well as my direction notes and maps. Such vital and probably heavy fare would need a particularly resilient arrangement to cope with the rigours of off-road riding, yet off-the-peg solutions in the UK were noticeable only by their absence. The much vaunted, custom-built designs from the US that featured regularly in Tour Divide photos were unavailable due to the demand generated by a field of 42 riders. Inspiration finally arrived at 2 a.m. one anxiety-ridden, insomniac night, leading to a mad dash out to the shed in my pyjamas to check the plan would work. Confident in my design, it then fell to my neighbour, Alan, whose own shed all sorts of metalworking wonders abounded, to turn concept into reality: a two-pronged piece of metal rod to fit through the sleeves of an existing bar bag, shaped like a shallow 'U' and held in place by passing over the handlebars but under the stem. One brief trip to the scrapyards later, plus a few grunts and groans as the steel was bent to shape, and 'Alan's patented bar bag mount' came into being. Lightweight it was not, but heavy and hopefully indestructible would do for me.

The countdown continued. With two weeks left before departure, I was joined by another Alan and Steve, two Tour Divide veterans, for a final training ride on the South Downs. The aim was to complete the entire length of the Downs twice on consecutive days, fully laden.

Just making sure I could fully load the bike was the first hurdle. In spite of considerable preparations, the moment of departure still found me baffled by the absence of a place to stow my sleeping mat. Trying hard not to betray my incompetence to such vastly more experienced companions, whose bikes and kit looked as rugged and efficient as their owners, I spotted a spare strap. Quickly tucking the mat under this strap, I announced that I was ready for the off. I also hopped immediately onto my bike, hoping to disguise the last-minute nature of my packing arrangements.

I was too late. Alan and Steve were already casting a paternalistic eye over my set-up. A few vaguely promising nods of approval suddenly halted when Steve saw my sleeping mat.

'That will fall off,' he warned. 'If it doesn't fall off today, it will definitely fall off in the Rockies.'

With no other options apparent, I shrugged my shoulders and we set out. Sure enough, within a few miles I had to retrace my steps to collect my free-spirited mat. Eventually, space was contrived in my tent bag and the ride continued.

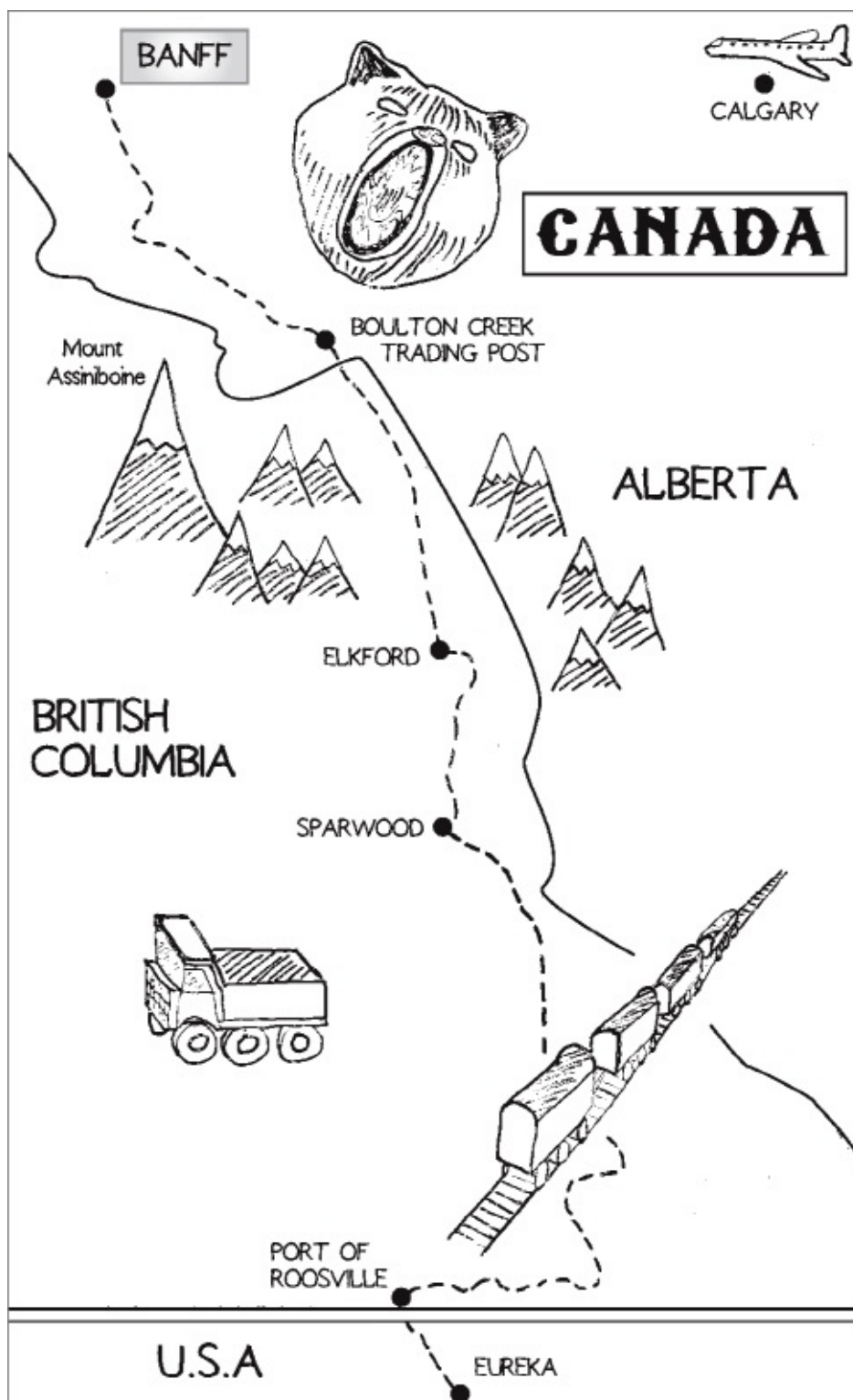
The pattern was set early. Alan and Steve rode cheerily uphill, chatting away and admiring the birds in the trees and the sheep in the fields. I laboured in the rear, trying to pass off my wheezing and panting as appropriate responses to their conversation. The flat sections would be spent with me trying desperately to recoup lost ground, while downhills were merely a chance to anticipate how severe the next climb would be.

The situation slowly deteriorated. New shoes and an inadvertently modified foot position caused my right knee to become first slightly sore and then noticeably painful. My inability to keep pace increased in direct relation to the discomfort induced by my knee. By halfway I was reduced to borrowing painkillers and anti-inflammatories from Alan (my own 'first aid kit' was in fact no more than a facsimile, stuffed with what I hoped would be an appropriate volume and weight of prosthetic materials – batteries, deodorant sprays, that sort of thing; it had seemed inconceivable that I would need a supply of real medication so close to home). At Devil's Dyke, with more than 30 miles still to ride but only a stone's throw from home, I had to admit defeat. Although endeavouring to put a brave face on it, I had no option but to leave my companions with my tail between my legs.

‘See you in Canada,’ said Alan. Right at that moment, nothing seemed less likely.



CANADA



CHAPTER 3

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THE BEAR NECESSITIES

Two weeks after the ignominious end to my training ride with Alan and Steve, my departure from the UK was suitably low key. The coach station at Gatwick can never be a fitting place for taking leave of anyone, let alone wife and children. Just finding the right place to unload a car was a minor miracle and an unwanted cause of extra anxiety. The prefabricated concrete ceiling was so low and so oppressive as to dampen even the fondest farewells.

‘Don’t get killed,’ was Catherine’s eminently sensible and comforting advice as I struggled to remove the boxed-up bicycle from the boot of the car. I assumed she was thinking of the dangers I was set to face. The possibility of an even more untimely death caused by negotiating fat concrete pillars and thin pavements with a wonky trolley and speeding coaches close at hand only became apparent shortly after she left.

In a mild state of emotional turmoil after having said goodbye to Catherine and to Thomas and Freddie, my two youngest children who had turned three only the day before, I cursed every wobble and teeter of my precariously perched load. Fellow travellers once again seduced into oblivion by their iPods and mobile phones provided moving obstacles – or sometimes targets, I confess – for my cumbersome load. As I waited, drenched in sweat, for the shuttle to Heathrow, it seemed unlikely that the Rockies could house any trickier terrain.

An hour later and my first experience of Heathrow’s much vaunted Terminal Five was, if hardly the architectural revelation some may have claimed, at least much calmer. The doorways were wide enough for the bike box, and the process of checking in was smooth. Unable to fathom the machine that purported to allow me to register my arrival myself, I went to enlist the help of a rather suave chap clad in a corporate BA uniform. Fortunately, he seemed to be the check-in clerk equivalent of contemporary television newsreaders – no longer desk-bound, he was at liberty to roam the terminal’s wide open spaces, dispensing wisdom and assistance to all who required it. In less than the time it had taken me to read the initial page of instructions, he had accomplished the task delegated to him and found me a sought-after seat by an emergency exit.

Nevertheless, the cost and time-saving benefits of DIY check-in, even when aided by a roving member of staff, were immediately undermined by my need to then check-in my luggage. At least there was no queue.

‘Is that a bike in the box?’ I was asked by the man who was studying my passport with the air of a bemused child looking for a sliver of hope in an overwhelming exam paper.

I supposed it was the large, handwritten notice saying ‘BICYCLE – FRAGILE’ that had given away. Such powers of observation clearly boded well for identifying undesirable travellers.

‘Is it heavy?’

‘Oh, no,’ I replied, lifting it up as effortlessly as I could – no mean feat with not just a bike but a sufficient kit for four weeks in the Rockies also stuffed inside. I made sure not to put the box down onto the scales.

‘It’s amazing how little bikes weigh these days, isn’t it?’ said the clerk, happily oblivious to my artifice. Maybe his powers of observation weren’t so great after all.

‘You need to take it over to the outsize baggage department.’

As I did so, I once again passed the DIY check-in machines, where the helpful newsreader-type chap now had a queue of puzzled travellers asking for his assistance. The ‘do-it-yourself’ aspect of the process didn’t appear to have been widely adopted.

After startling the two operators of the outsize baggage handling machine from their afternoon reverie, I placed the bike box gently onto the conveyor belt. Too gently, it seemed, as the conveyor did not engage and the two operators, doing a very passable impression of children’s television favourites the Chuckle Brothers, edged it forwards and backwards to entice it to move.

‘Be gentle with it,’ I pleaded, nicely I hoped, before I went to buy a newspaper from the newsagent next door. Leaving the shop two minutes later, presumably just at the point the Chuckle Brothers thought I’d long since been consumed by passport control, I watched them pick up my bike box and drop it from a considerable height onto the conveyor which, gratifyingly for them at least, started to move. The Chuckle Brothers had become the Brothers Grimm. As the bike disappeared from view into the bowels of the airport, I hoped this particular fairytale would have a happy ending.

The flight itself passed uneventfully. Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino* warned of the dangers of a side trip to North America that I was hoping not to encounter in the Rockies.

Once below the early evening clouds, the descent into Calgary was revealing. Circling over the city, the surrounding plains seemed to be endless. Roads and fields came and went in the vast blanket of high flatlands. The only topographical features noticeable in the midst of the myriad gentle undulations were shallow gullies carrying water courses, some natural, some man-made. The city itself, even though a classic example of North American sprawl, was dwarfed by its setting. If this was how overwhelming the flat parts of Canada were, I wondered how my arrival in the mountains would feel.

On the ground, the sense of being somewhere very big was confirmed by the wildly varying times shown on the clocks in the customs area. I knew Canada had several different time zones, but this seemed ridiculous. Maybe it was all part of a plan to disorientate newcomers and help officials flush out ne’er-do-wells. I assumed the ferocious questioning I received just as I was about to break out into Canada proper was similarly motivated.

‘Is that a bike in the box?’ said a uniformed woman (was this my first ever Mountie?). The sense of déjà vu from check-in was only overcome thanks to the mirror sunglasses worn by my questioner.

‘Yes, it is,’ I replied, trying desperately not to sound as irreverent as I felt. The large ‘BICYCLE FRAGILE’ labels had survived the flight intact.

Behind her mirror shades, my interlocutor betrayed no indication of her likely reaction. Time stood still while I contemplated the hassle of unpacking the bike simply as a result of inadvertently mocking an officer of the Canadian Border Services Agency. After all, it had taken me more than three hours of incompetent fumbblings in the garden to squeeze it into the box in the first place, although trying

send off footballs aimed imprecisely at the nearby goal had contributed to the delay. At last, the silence was broken.

‘Enjoy your ride,’ she said, with just a trace of a smile.

The shuttle to Banff confirmed impressions of the scale of my surroundings and the incongruity of Calgary, a rapidly expanding city of a million inhabitants located in the middle of what appeared to be nothing. Downtown, a few miles to the south, was an impressive array of skyscrapers lit by the receding sun that was now peeking out under the western edge of the glowering clouds overhead. Whatever the non-downtown sections of such cities are called was a less than glittering amalgam of poorly maintained, rectilinear streets and down-at-heel malls. Occasionally, older streets at curious angles betrayed the underlying morphology and confirmed it was not entirely flat.

As the shuttle began its long trek west, the city eventually had to yield to grassland. Ranches replaced suburbs. First horses, then cows and even deer appeared out of the window. Johnny Cash sang on the radio. Every few miles an impertinent tree broke the monotony of the terrain. The excitement this generated was tempered, however, by the fact that such brazen cheek only served to magnify the emptiness everywhere else.

Everywhere else except straight ahead, that was, where the Rockies were rising ever more abruptly out of the surrounding plains. The sun glinting on snow-clad summits did its best to soften the jagged profile, but the general picture was of dark rocks and even darker trees. Closer inspection would not dispel this assessment. The sun had set by the time I reached Banff, but it was still light. The sense of being in the heart of the mountains was palpable.

My cumbersome arrival at the Young Women’s Christian Association hostel drew a good degree of attention, though not from the staff at reception. Instead, I was greeted in what I would soon learn was a West Texan twang.

‘Hey, how ya doing? Do y’all mind if I ask if you’re a racer?’

Even though the Tour Divide was very much a race, it hadn’t dawned on me until that moment that my participation conveyed onto me such a vaunted status. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to say yes.

‘Gee, that’s great. I got here yesterday and I sure been looking forward to meeting some other racers.’

My new companion was Cadet, a schoolteacher from Midland-Odessa.

‘It’s famous for two things. First, for being the setting for a football movie called *Friday Night Lights*. Y’ever heard of it? It’s a great movie.’

I said no, football in the US being played with the wrong-shaped ball. I also assured Cadet that the village I lived in was not famous for anything, as far as I was aware.

‘It’s also famous for being where George W. Bush is from,’ he added, with slightly less enthusiasm.

This was something about which I felt I could offer fewer assurances.

After a receptionist eventually appeared, I was concerned to find myself allocated to Room 10. Cadet put me at ease.

‘Anything has to be better than where I was last night,’ he said, before detailing the raucous party thrown by his Quebecois roommates. Like all good parties it involved wine, women and song, and didn’t stop until nearly breakfast time.

‘Ideal preparation for a near 3,000-mile bike race,’ Cadet added, but he still preferred to join me .

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