LIFE IS A WHEEL

LOVE, DEATH, ETC., AND A BIKE RIDE ACROSS AMERICA

BRUCE WEBER

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Everything Up to the Beginning

Sunday, July 10, 2011, New York City

Like you, I'm growing old. It's harder to remember things, especially good things, the things I want to remember, not so much because my mind is diminishing (hold the jokes, okay?), but because they happened longer ago than they ever did before.

Days seem more alike than they used to, probably because there is an ever-mounting total of them and it's hard to keep them distinct. This happens to everyone, I know, but I think it's worse for people who work at a newspaper, as I do, because our work product greets us each day, steady as a metronome, with the date plastered across the top of the front page. *Tick*. *Tick*. It's relentless—Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc., week after week; July 9, July 10, July 11 . . . 2010, 2011, 2012. . . . Egads. How long can this go on?

This week is my twenty-fifth anniversary at the *New York Times*. Twenty-five years! And, as it happens, for the last three of them I've been writing obituaries. Every day, thinking about . . . well, you know.

So, here's what I'm doing about it. Eighteen years ago this summer, I rode a bicycle, solo, across the United States and wrote about it for the newspaper. Starting next weekend, when I fly from New York to Portland, Oregon, and turn back around on two wheels, I'll be trying to do it again.

I say "trying." This is not modest so much as careful, certainly a function of being fifty-seven, my age now, and not thirty-nine, as I was when I embarked the last time, blithely certain of myself and without any of the qualms that are now weighing down the saddlebags in my mind. In short, I had no concept of the length and arduousness of what lay in front of me. Every challenge—climbing the Rockies, for example, or persisting through the shadeless, sunbaked plains of South Dakota, or rattling over the cold-heave cracks along highways in Idaho and Minnesota that made riding a bike as comfortable as sliding down a miles-long washboard on my ass—was essentially a surprise, and perseverance is, after all, easier for the poorly informed. This time I know exactly how hard I'm going to be working. Does that make me nervous? Sure.

Excited, too. Among other things, assuming I do persevere, I'll be spending a summer and part of a fall largely outdoors, something New Yorkers in general (and obituary writers in particular) rarely get to do. But mostly it'll be a chance to relive—well, maybe that's the wrong word—to revisit an adventure I'd thought, at the time, was a once-only, last-chance, now-or-never thing.

I suppose I can conclude that I'm younger than I thought I'd be at this age. Still, a lot has happened since I last did this, and I expect the trip will give me the opportunity to mull things over. Experiential bookends like this encourage you to take stock, don't they? Add up the life details?

Off the top of my head, here's a quick summary: Both of my parents died. My brother had a son. I survived some bad episodes of depression and anxiety, but eventually ended twenty years of therapy and felt better for it. I moved to Chicago and back to New York. I spent four years as a theater critic. I wrote a book—two, actually, if you count the short one for kids. Much to my surprise, I developed an affinity for country music. I traveled on a bicycle in Costa Rica, New Zealand, Italy, Ireland, France, and Vietnam—where I was arrested and spent a night in jail. A handful of sincere and serious love affairs began and ended. I renovated my apartment. Twice.

So what do you think? How am I doing?

* * *

Partly because of my job, partly by inclination, I'm far better traveled within the United States than outside it. I've actually crossed the country a number of times by means other than a bicycle, the first time in 1973 as a hitchhiker, just for the hell of it, after I'd dropped out of college. In 2006, while I was working on a book about umpires in professional baseball, I drove from Florida to Arizona during spring training and, when the major league teams (and the umpires) dispersed to start the season, back to New York. Not long ago, I went to a conference in California and, instead of flying back, I rented a car and retraced much of the bicycle route I took in 1993. One satisfying highlight: the Bates Motel, in Vale, Oregon, near the Idaho border, where I couldn't resist staying overnight back then—I even took a shower!—was still there. (Need I explain to younger readers that a fictional Bates Motel—Anthony Perkins, proprietor—was the scene of the crime in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*?) The cross-country trek has always appealed to me because as a New Yorker with a New Yorker's bias—and even worse, a Manhattanite's—I find much of America exotic.

After all, New York may be the nation's greatest city, but it isn't representative. You don't need me to count the differences, but an especially pertinent one is that New York is a vertical place and America isn't. To travel on the ground from sea to sea is to have a proud encounter with its horizontality.

Even in a car, each crossing of a state border is a singular triumph because the passage through the previous state has been earned. At ground level you measure a state's actual breadth with your tires, you roll over its topography and live in its weather. When you click past the far border, you put the experience of the state in your pocket for safekeeping and reference. Of course, crossing the country by bicycle is to feel these things in the extreme, and the absorption of long distances on the road has always felt, to me, like the qualifying exam for some enhanced form of citizenship. Even if you wanted to, you couldn't really avoid landmarks and cultural shrines—on my last trip across I hit

Yellowstone National Park; Little Big Horn; Devil's Tower, the remarkable rock formation in Wyoming that was featured in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*; the Badlands; the Judy Garland museum in her hometown, Grand Rapids, Minnesota; De Smet, South Dakota, where Laura Ingalls Wilder spent her teenage years and set five books of her Little House series; Highway 61, the Minnesota highway along Lake Superior that inspired a Bob Dylan song; the Mt Shasta restaurant on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where much of the great Otto Preminger movie *Anatomy of a Murder*, the forerunner of so many courtroom thrillers, was filmed; Niagara Falls; the Finger Lakes; Cooperstown, New York, home of the National Baseball Hall of Fame & Museum on the shores of Lake Otsego, a.k.a. Glimmerglass, the region inhabited by James Fenimore Cooper's Deerslayer; and Hyde Park, Franklin Roosevelt's hometown—not to mention the Bates Motel.

An impressive list, right? I haven't considered before the string-of-signifiers aspect of these long rides. But it's true, you pedal and pedal and every now and then—more often than that, really, intermittently and unexpectedly—you find yourself in a place where something has happened, something of interest beyond itself, that has made a distinct mark in history or geography or culture, that helps describe the country, the known world, in some small but crucial way. Connect the dots on a bike ride the way I did then, the way I'm looking forward to doing again in the coming weeks, and you feel like the owner of a tiny, private slice of it all.

Partly for that reason, one of the strongest lingering memories of my last trip was how it fired up my patriotic instinct. You can't gobble up the nation, mile by mile on your own power, without assimilating a sense of its greatness.

You can't pass through the Badlands on a bike in ninety-five-degree heat, for example, and not feel some sense of proprietorship: you're proud of yourself and proud of the place, too. It really is a weird landscape—the Badlands, I mean—like another planet come to rest on earth with the spectacular cones and spirals of ancient sediment deposits rising from the prairie. You think, or at least I did, Cool beans! I crossed that sucker! It's mine!

And you can't encounter other Americans living lives completely different from your own without being reminded of what you share. A conversation I had in Canby, California, has stuck with me. Canby is in Modoc County in the northeast corner of the state on a plateau of rolling ranchland fitted among mountain ranges to the east, west, and south, and a desert to the north. I'd ridden through the pine-forested Sierras to get there, and it was probably the first time, of many that would follow, that I was taken by how much space there sometimes is between actual places (places you'd find people, that is) and by the marvelous vistas that the few who lived in the region lived with. I remember thinking, as I pulled into town after twenty miles of early-morning riding, that whereas I see water tanks on the tops of buildings every day from my bedroom window, the quotidian backdrop of the lives of Modoc residents features deep black lakes, grass, and scrubland stretching toward foothill, and, in the distance, the snowy peak of Mount Lassen. (I've come to think of the water-tank view as the screensaver of my life; now there's a metaphor that I didn't have at my disposal in 1993.)

I stopped for breakfast at the Canby Hotel, whose sign featured the carved outline of a steer's head. A photo I found online recently shows the hotel and sign are still there, with the addition of a hand-drawn wooden placard leaning against a telephone pole and declaring the place to be the home of the world-famous Modoc-burger. Anyway, I remember the meal I had—pork chops and eggs—and the proprietor, a man named Charlie who looked like the old actor Melvyn Douglas as he appeared in the movie *Hud*.

"Pretty country," I said to him.

"Yeah, well, country's all we got," he replied. He spoke in a resigned, low-volume growl that I recognized; he could have been a city cab-driver complaining about crosstown traffic.

Canby, California—that's another point. Entertaining the idea of a cross-country bike trip, most people think about the length of it, and because of that the endless stretches of empty road spanning vast swaths of the country, especially in the West, the distances between places instead of the places themselves. But there are towns, too, so

many towns along the way; you can't believe how many towns, dozens for sure, maybe hundreds, and each one you pass through represents dozens, maybe hundreds of others you don't get to see. Each leaves a trace of itself in your memory. A lot of them make an effort to do so. The welcome signs that greet visitors to many, many places in this country are touching testaments to local pride. Nyssa, Oregon, for instance, on the Idaho border (not far from the Bates Motel, actually), calls itself rather dully the "gateway to the Oregon Trail," but also more colorfully, the "Thunderegg Capital of the World." (Thundereggs are geologic formations, most of them about the size of baseballs, that look like rocks on the outside but sliced open reveal intricate patterns of agate.) In Michigan, Onaway is the state's sturgeon capital, Atlanta is its elk capital, Fairview the wild turkey capital.

I should have made a list of the towns I passed through last time. (I will this time.) But I remember a lot of them—well, some of them: Wagontire, Oregon, population two, for instance, on the high desert in the southeast quadrant of the state, maybe eighty-five miles from the closest town of any size. (That would be Lakeview, to the south, which is known for its elevation—4,798 feet—as the "Tallest Town in Oregon," and, with 7,000-foot promontories outside of town, as a hangout for hang gliders.)

Wagontire had a motel, café, general store, and, across the road, a dirt runway with a windsock and a sign reading WAGONTIRE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT. Local recreational pilots would land on the airstrip, taxi across the two-lane highway, and fill up at the gas station.

A couple named Bill and Olgie Warner owned the whole place when I went through (they were the population), and after seven years there they were ready to retire, buy an RV, and visit other places, presumably not as isolated as Wagontire. I was glad to have met them before they left—they were engaging folks with a good act, affecting an amiable, henpecked husband–weary wife routine, and they fed me very well. In 1998, they were evidently still there. Interviewed by the *Medford (OR) Mail Tribune*, Bill identified his wife as the mayor and chief of police. "Maybe I'll run next year," he said.

On the TripAdvisor website, I found a customer's restaurant review of the Wagontire Café from 2003: "Good home-style food and good service in a dumpy-looking little café in the middle of nowhere." And I found another article in the *Mail Tribune* from 2005 that identified a different couple as the town's owners, saying a general spiffing-up of the place was in the offing. Not too long ago, though, I passed through Wagontire again—in a car—and everything was closed up. I stopped and poked around. The buildings were still standing, a little the worse for wear but not too terribly run-down. The airport sign was still there. No more windsock, alas.

About thirty miles down the road from Wagontire is a town called Riley, whose population in 1993 was six. The guy who owned the café and gas station that made up the town was actually named Riley—Rich Riley—though he said he hadn't named it after himself; it already had the name. (I looked it up later. Apparently the name has been around since the nineteenth century; Amos Riley was a local rancher back then.)

Rich Riley, who looked to be in his thirties, had been a truck driver in a previous professional incarnation, and he explained to me that passing through town once, years earlier, on his route, he had stopped to eat and a waitress in the café was rude to him. It stuck in his craw. So he returned at some point and bought the place, planning to put her out of work. She was gone by the time he got there, he said, but when I met him he said he was still hoping she'd apply for a job.

He did acknowledge that he liked the idea of owning a place that already had his name on it. He moved his family in; that was the population: six. After I ate in his café—I'm pretty sure it was pancakes—he gave me a souvenir: the rattle off a rattlesnake that had bitten him two years earlier. I still have it.

I didn't stop in Riley on my recent drive through the area, so I don't know if Rich Riley is still there. The café and post office are. One addition is a billboard just beyond them, reading: WHOA! YOU JUST MISSED RILEY!

Bicycling makes you wonder about places like these in a way you wouldn't otherwise. When you drive through a place, the windshield

is a barrier against its reality, the speed of the car a defense against memory. Hemingway, of all people, once made that point: "It is by riding a bicycle that you learn the contours of a country best," he wrote, "since you have to sweat up the hills and coast down them. Thus you remember them as they actually are, while in a motorcar only a high hill impresses you, and you have no such accurate remembrance of country you have driven through as you gain by riding a bicycle."

On a bike, the same thought crosses my mind often as I go through a town, mundane but nonetheless mind-boggling. All the time I've been living my life in New York City, people have been going about their business here, living theirs.

The options in the world! The size of this country and what's in it!

New Yorkers tend to think of Americans elsewhere as provincial, but we have a hard time recognizing our own provinciality. That's something else I learned on my previous cross-country ride. We share the country but not much else. It's amazing, isn't it, how so many of us can have a collective experience and see it differently? To put it another way, Americans may disagree about what it is that makes the country we share so fabulous, but we do seem to agree on its fabulousness.

I embark this time with a little less delight and a little more concern over all this. We are a more polarized populace now, with hostility hovering as our default national emotion.

The big political issue in June 1993 was gays in the military. The official Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy was enacted just a few months later. Now, of course, it seems just about ready to be overturned* and we're carrying on about same-sex marriage, though why it bothers anyone—except maybe a jilted lover—that anyone else wants to marry someone is beyond me. Issues evolve, but it's hard to account for the evolution of our national temperament, with a ratcheted-up

*Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed in September 2011, while I was bicycling through Wisconsin.

vehemence and implacability that strikes me (and a lot of other people, too) as poisonous.

When I pulled into little towns like Canby and Wagontire in 1993, looking for a diner, a motel, a milkshake, or a cold beer, not necessarily in that order, I was received, most often, with curiosity and warmth. And now? How well will a complete stranger on two wheels be welcomed in places he's never visited before? It's telling, I think, that this time I've had many people ask me if I'm carrying anything for protection. In the world I'm used to living in, the implication has generally meant a condom. At this point, I don't think that's what they mean. For the record, I'm not carrying a knife or a gun or mace or any other weapon—or any form of contraception, for that matter.

What else might be different? In 1993, neither cell phones nor personal computers were the ubiquitous human appendages they are today. The GPS was yet to be invented; I stopped at dozens of 7-Elevens along the way for local maps, which turned into a significant budget item. The stories I wrote for the newspaper about once a week were scribbled longhand in a notebook—then I called them in from a motel room or a roadside phone booth, reading them aloud into a tape recorder to be transcribed by a typist and passed along to an editor.

Quaint, right? The newspaper's recording room doesn't exist anymore. Among other things, this process kept me at a remove from the people who were reading my work, not to mention from my friends and family. The series generated more mail than anything I'd written before for the newspaper, but I had no idea of it until I found the stack of letters on my desk when I got back. People really liked the idea of the trip; they found it romantic—and I think they were amused, learning where I was popping up from week to week—but I didn't know that while it was happening. Aside from other cyclists I encountered on the road occasionally and the people I interviewed along the way, I pedaled along in pretty much total isolation until the technology of the day—television—intervened.

After a handful of my newspaper columns were published, the *Today* show on NBC sent a crew—a producer, a cameraman, and a driver—to meet me in Rapid City, South Dakota, and we spent a sweltering day cruising side by side through the Badlands, I on a bike, they in a van, the cameraman leaning out of an open door and taking endless film of my churning feet.

Some three weeks later, *Today* broadcast its piece, which included a live roadside interview with me on the outskirts of Atlanta, in north-central Michigan, conducted by Katie Couric. (On screen they spelled my name wrong, it turns out, but that was another thing I didn't know until I got home.) Twenty minutes or so after Katie signed off, I was pedaling along when a station wagon passed me and screeched over to the shoulder of the road, blocking my path. A woman got out tugging her small son, six or eight years old, by the arm, and slung him toward me. "May I take a picture of him with you?" she asked.

I was still mulling over the meaning of this when I stopped for breakfast at a restaurant in the next town. I walked in carrying my helmet, and the diners began applauding.

For this trip, I'll be blogging regularly on the *Times*'s website and sending out brief updates on Twitter, my first ever venture into social media. We'll see how that goes; like most reporters from the Pleistocene era, I'm curious about and fearful of this in equal measure, not sure what I'll be inviting. The whole reader-friendly aspect of online journalism is something that reporters often discuss. We get a lot of helpful stuff from readers who, with the convenience of email, now write to us, and overall the close scrutiny of our readership keeps us well warned about ever growing lazy, but we're also heaped with a lot of scorn, disparagement, and complaint from those who live to play gotcha, decry the incompetence or bias of the media, or simply send maledictions into the world. Certainly one unexpected consequence of the cyber age is how much unprovoked venom it has let loose. Pandora lives on the web.

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Like last time, I'm starting in the West for two reasons—because the prevailing wind blows west to east (though expecting the wind to assist you is foolish) and because home is such a compelling destination. The idea of celebrating the finish by putting my feet up on my own coffee table is irresistible.

In 1993, I started in Marin County, California, just north of the Golden Gate Bridge (which I actually crossed the day before, just to be able to say I did); this time I'm pushing off farther up the Pacific Coast, riding initially in Oregon and Washington. The plan is to stay north, mostly because it'll be cooler, and because the only state I've never set foot in is North Dakota; I want to fix that. (Full disclosure: My only trespass in Hawaii was in the Honolulu airport. I'm counting it.) For some reason, I'd like to visit Lake Itasca, in Minnesota, the source of the Mississippi River. After that, we'll see.

One concession I've made to my age is a new bicycle, which I had custom-built to my precise dimensions and for the precise purpose of this journey. It cost about as much as a good—very good—used car. Not to be coy: the price was about $8,000.

As for other FAQs:

- I'm estimating the trip to take three months, which will bring me back to New York in time for the World Series. The last trip took seventy-five days; I'm giving myself an extra day for each year older I've gotten.
- The plan is to average three hundred miles a week, or fifty miles a day with one day off. A very doable schedule, though there is a relentlessness to it that I'm certain will become mentally as well as physically taxing. I averaged about sixty-five miles a day last time.
- I'll be sleeping indoors. Against the possibility that I'll be stuck without a roof a time or two, I'll be carrying a sleeping bag and a tent, but if I never ever sleep on the ground again, on this trip or afterward, I'll have gotten my wish. The theory is that if you carry an umbrella it won't rain.

Yes, I have thought about the obvious physical question: Can my body handle this?

Here's my self-assessment: I'm in reasonably good health and reasonably good shape—for someone getting close to sixty. I get to the gym most mornings. (In my opinion, given the amount of time I've spent exercising over the years, I should have a much better physique than I do.) I drink a little too much—bourbon is my chief vice—but I don't eat many sweets. A year ago, I rode a rigorous tour in New Zealand, somewhere north of three hundred miles in six days, including some pretty vertical terrain, so I'm not starting from a place of utter weakness or ineptitude. I'm six one, and I weigh just about 190, precisely my weight when I began my trip in 1993. (I finished at 176.)

All that is mostly to the good. So is the fact that I quit smoking three months before the 1993 trip, but it has been ten years this time.

On the other hand, my knees aren't great; they haven't been since I tore an anterior cruciate ligament playing basketball in grad school. I've long since given that up. Tennis, too. Don't even play much softball anymore.

I have gout, a couple of episodes a year for the last ten or so, though medication keeps the severity down.

A tendon in my right foot is degenerating, and about half the time it hurts when I walk.

Last year, tendinitis in my left elbow kept me from straightening my arm for about a month.

I have tinnitus—persistent ringing in my ears—the result of some ill-advised scuba lessons in the Caribbean a couple of winters ago.

I now take medication daily for acid reflux, which caused an irritation in the back of my throat that gave me a persistent, and occasionally debilitating, cough off and on for more than a year.

Three years ago, I had surgery to reattach the retina in my right eye and a subsequent laser procedure to repair a tear in the retina in my left; we caught that one before it detached. My eyesight has never been much to brag about and it is now fuzzier than ever. I've worn glasses for nearsightedness since I was six and once had an optometrist try to persuade me to wear contact lenses and glasses at the same time.

This spring I was diagnosed with cervical spinal stenosis—a narrowing of the spinal cord in my neck, which pinched a nerve and sent throbbing pains into my left shoulder and upper arm. It was treated with steroid injections—cervical steroidal epidurals, in medical parlance—and, knock on wood, it feels better.

The standard joke is that I'm both perfectly healthy and falling apart, and my doctors have pretty much confirmed this. The eye surgeon told me that nearsighted people are seriously at risk for retina detachment after fifty.

I asked the doctor who helped me with my neck problems what caused them. Gravity, he said. Most men my age are at risk for stenosis. He's exactly my age and he has it, he said.

Last month I went to my long-time internist for a full physical, just to make sure a cross-country bike trip was only a little crazy, not entirely insane. I said I thought I'd had an unusual string of irritating problems, and she laughed.

"It's a short list," she said. "Believe me."

What about the bike trip? Did she want to talk me out of it? Would she?

She laughed again. No such luck.

Before I go, I need to mention two people who have been close to me for decades but who have only recently, and with startling urgency, become part of the story of this trip.

The first is Jan Benzel, whom I met in the *Times* newsroom twenty-five years ago, but who is now, remarkably, suddenly, my girlfriend. I guess it happened over a long time—you know what I mean by *it*—but it also happened all at once, on a trip to Provence (yes, on bicycles) that we took together in May. I can't believe my luck.

The second is my oldest friend, Bill Joseph, whom I've known since we were ten-year-old Little Leaguers and who is dying of cancer. I went to see him last week in Los Angeles, where he is being cared for by his ex-wife and suffering in front of his young children. I can't believe his luck.

Sigh. I suppose every midlife reckoning story is implicitly about the idea of impermanence and teeters between the poles of love and death. I didn't plan mine to be literal in that regard, but I'll be bringing both Jan and Billy with me, of course.

"Don't do it," Billy said to me last week about the trip. Everyone who's known him forever still calls him Billy. "You did it once," he said. "You don't have anything to prove.

"It's too dangerous," he said.

For her part, Jan just wishes she could come along, though she knows even if she could arrange it, I wouldn't let her.

"I know, I know," she said the other night, though she added a good point, that we're getting started late, that we've already had our time apart.

Tick. Tick.

Tuesday, July 12, New York City

A bicyclist not in possession of his bicycle is at sixes and sevens. Mine, brand-new, custom-made, after only about sixty-five miles of test driving here in New York City, is now winging its way, via FedEx, to Portland, Oregon, where I'll pick it up on Monday. In the meantime, like a bereft parent missing a child, I'm happy to tell you about it.

First of all, it's red, rather dashingly so, though with a boxy profile, not terribly sleek. It doesn't look like an aerodynamically contemporary machine, which was a bit disappointing to me, but it's what I asked for, durability before aesthetics, and anyway, the more I look at it, the better I like its simplicity, its unadorned form. There is something tanklike about it; it emanates sturdiness. On a ride through the city the other day my friend Bobby Ball, riding behind me, reported that it remained uncommonly erect on the road, with none of the angling away from upright to the right and left, back and forth, that most bikes effect as their riders stroke their pedals. Even so, compared with the bike I rode across the country eighteen years ago, it's a featherweight. Before the addition of a rack, handlebar basket, lights, water

bottle cages, bike computer, or any luggage, it weighed just a shade over twenty pounds.

I'm an experienced cyclist, though not an expert one. Or maybe a better distinction is that I'm an experienced rider but not a fully committed cyclist—that is, one of those people who lives in Bikeland, who proudly declares himself with the ugly spandex apparel, who speaks in the lingo of brand names and component parts. I love bicycles when I'm on one, not generally otherwise—okay, I'm a dilettante—meaning I can sense when something is wrong but generally can't fix it. Change a tire, restore a slipped chain, or tighten a brake cable? Sure. Replace a spoke, true a wheel? Uh-uh. I know what a headset and a derailleur are, I think, but I'm not going to risk my credibility by trying to prove it.

When I decided to give myself the advantage of a custom-built bike for this trip, I put myself in the hands of the erudite specialists at NYC Velo, a shop located in the East Village of Manhattan and also deep in Bikeland. The proprietor, Andrew Crooks, measured and interviewed me for over an hour—the first of several conversations—before the bike was designed, the frame built, and the components chosen.

The crucial info: I wanted straight-across handlebars—well, didn't want them, exactly, but promised my physiatrist I'd get them. (*Physiatrist*, what a word! So exotic-sounding I'm almost proud to need one—a nerve, muscle, and bone specialist who treats injuries.) He was worried about the pinched nerve in my neck and didn't want me spending weeks with my head tilted back and my neck contracted. Andrew also brought up the idea that I was going to spend a lot of money on this bike and that I would want it to be, very likely, the last one I ever bought. When the trip was over, he said, I wouldn't want to be riding a bike that was built only for long-distance touring and carrying extra weight and that couldn't be a little bit frisky on a casual ride.

NYC Velo worked with Independent Fabrication, a frame builder in Newmarket, New Hampshire, and together they decided on titanium as the best material for the frame, a compromise between hardiness and handling. The straight-across handlebars, highly unusual for a touring bicycle, mean that the top tube—the frame's horizontal beam connect-

ing the seat post to the steering column—has to be slightly shorter than normal; and to keep me sitting at least semi-upright, the head tube—essentially the steering column, the vertical tube that the front fork passes through—is slightly longer.

Once I rode a few miles, I brought it back to the shop for some adjustments. The handlebars were so wide and keeping me so upright that on my first couple of trial rides, I felt like a sailboat sail, my body's breadth working against me. So Andrew lowered the bars slightly and cut an inch off each end. I also had him add bar ends—grips affixed perpendicular to the handlebars—to give me alternative hand positions.

Unlike the wheels on many new bikes, mine are made from separate components—hub, rim, spokes—which adds durability. (Prebuilt wheels tend to be a smidgen lighter in weight.) Each wheel has thirty-six spokes, rather than the standard thirty-two, another strengthening element. And the tires are touring specific and essentially flatproof, with a layer of puncture-resistant foam between the outer rubber and the inner seal, though with the extra armor you don't roll with maximum alacrity.

"The bike is unique," Andrew said. "It's expected to do dual duty, to get you across the country loaded with a certain amount of gear, in as fine a fashion ergonomically as possible. For the trip we wanted to balance the need to be lightweight, to be durable, and to be comfortable. But you're also going to use it for other rides, so we wanted to make sure you had a bike that wasn't singular in function."*

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*I'm a little embarrassed by how little I know about bicycle design, bicycle components, and bicycle repair, and as I knew they would, a fair number of readers have chastised me for being a mere tourist in Bikeland, someone without a real grounding in bicycle mechanics who doesn't want his hands greasy. I accept their scorn, but that doesn't mean I'm going to discuss the elements of bicycle building. For those who wish to read about that, I suggest *It's All About the Bike: The Pursuit of Happiness on Two Wheels*, a 2010 volume by an accomplished English rider, Robert Penn, who discusses, in largely readable prose, the design and construction of his perfect bike. That said, for my gearhead readers, here is a components inventory:

This morning, before I took it back to Andrew for packing and shipping to Portland—he's got a pal who owns a bike shop out there where I can pick it up—I took a final test ride, about thirty-five miles, up the West Side bike path and over the George Washington Bridge into Fort Lee, New Jersey.

I spent the ride thinking ahead, trying to imagine living on this bicycle for three months and more than four thousand miles, alert to the slight irritations of the moment that can balloon into future pain. The bike is comfortable and perfectly sized, but the repetitive motion of pedaling hasn't yet worn a groove in my psyche, and the various body parts that work together on a ride, the muscles and joints for which every bike is a different solar system, haven't yet described their orbits. I'm still getting used to wearing bike shoes, locking into the pedals, and at each stop clipping out again; the aggressive twist of the ankle needed to release the shoe from the lock feels peculiar and unnatural.

Frame (titanium) and custom paint: Independent Fabrication
Fork (steel): Independent Fabrication
Headset: Cane Creek
Brake levers: Paul Component Engineering (short-reach flat bar)
Brake calipers: Paul Component Engineering (touring)
Shift levers: Shimano (10-speed flat bar)
Front derailleur: Shimano Ultegra
Triple rear derailleur: Shimano Ultegra
Long cage chain: Shimano Ultegra
Cog set: Shimano Ultegra 11-28
Crank set: Shimano Ultegra
Triple bottom bracket: Shimano Ultegra
Stem: Ritchey WCS
Seat post: Ritchey WCS
Handlebar: flat bar
Hubs: Shimano XT
Rims: Mavic A719
Spokes: Phil Wood (custom)
Tires: Schwalbe, Marathon 700 x 32
Tubes: Q-Tubes 700 x 32
Rim strips: Velox 17 mm
Saddle: Terry

For twenty years I've been riding with sneakers and toe clips, just sliding my foot back out of the clip as I coasted to a stop; I'm sure an awkward fall from a standing position is in my future.

I had chosen a seat with some gel padding to it, for additional initial comfort, rather than a Brooks leather seat, which molds to your ass after a few hundred miles and would probably be better in the long run; I didn't want to start out any more uncomfortably than I had to. In spite of a recent article in the *Times* about the benefits of a noseless seat, which allegedly relieves pressure on the perineum and is said to prevent a numbness in the genitals, along with a host of other discomforts that many riders are familiar with, mine has a rather long nose. The proof will be in the pedaling, and I won't be averse to changing along the way; a saddle is easy to replace.

It was a steamy day, and I was more worn at the end than I wanted to be—or should have been. I haven't trained enough, and with no extended hills on the ride, I still found myself pedaling comfortably only in lower gears. So one mistake I know I've made already is that I bought the bike too late (or that I'm departing too soon). I won't have broken it in before I begin the long trek. I'll be starting out with a stranger and not an old friend.

Sunday, July 17, 35,000 feet above the Midwest

High above America, somewhere between JFK and Portland International, I'm thinking it's going to take me six hours to get across the country east to west and ninety days or so to come back the other way. Why am I doing this again?

Well, okay, one reason is that as a writer I tend to think in storytelling terms, and a long bike ride is a good long story, after all. Since I finished the baseball book two years ago I've been waiting for another subject to seize me, and this seems like a natural. In fact, I've thought about a bicycling book, a cross-country bicycling book, since the last time I made the trip, though something told me back then that I wasn't prepared to write it, that the story I wanted to tell hadn't fully perco-

lated. I know now, of course, that that's because the story I was contemplating was my own.

Bicycling, the way I think of it, is solitary, and if it's going to stand for anything in a narrative, it might as well be the solitary experience of being alive. That's a bit of high and mighty ambition, I guess. But why not? I've now got almost twenty more years of living and twenty more years of thinking about it.

There's another thing, too: For the past three years I've been writing obituaries, each morning arriving at work and trying to condense the life of someone else into a coherent, meaningful—and interesting—story. Sometimes I succeed and the dead come alive—I say that fully aware of the wordplay—or are at least recognizable to the people who knew and loved them. But sometimes either the details don't coalesce into a whole or they don't add up to much more than a résumé and a list of grieving survivors. I'm feeling both challenged and ready now to focus that task inward, especially without the pressure of a daily deadline, and the cross-country journey as a narrative spine, as a controlling metaphor, strikes my writer self as worthy. In other words, in one sense I'm doing this again to consider why I'm doing this again.

Here's something that's already different from the last trip and that has me both surprised and curious. People are already checking in, both in the comments on the newspaper's website and in emails to me personally, with some rather forceful opinions, and I'm finding myself provoked by them, inclined to respond.

How should I react to the feedback to what I'm writing while I'm still writing it? How deaf should I be to compliments and complaints? Say I listen to good ideas and accommodate them or take criticism to heart and adjust my thinking. I wonder: Is using readers this way, as editors before the fact, interesting? Is it good for the book? Is it kosher?

Anyway, here I am still at the very beginning—before the beginning—but I can already start to parse my readership and, like a poli-

tician scanning the polls, begin to recognize where my sympathizers and critics come from. The readers who accept what I'm saying at face value—about myself, the trip, my bike—seem compelled to applaud and offer sincere advice.

Matters of uncertainty for me have included where, exactly, to begin pedaling and in what direction. Tips have been pouring in on these issues, and my volunteer counselors are divided. Some say head east from Portland up the Columbia River gorge to Hood River, then cross the Columbia into Washington and ride in the direction of Walla Walla. Others tell me the Washington side of the Columbia is preferable. Another option: I could go south into central Oregon and then turn east toward Bend. Or I could begin by going in the wrong direction altogether, west toward the coast to dip a tire symbolically in the Pacific. I've had this last one in mind all along, but one cool thing about a trip like this is it doesn't really matter. It'll be new and eye-opening whatever I choose. On the other hand, it's the beginning: Is any part of a journey—or a narrative—more important?

I've been impressed by—flattered and touched by, too—the encouragement and generosity that the majority of readers have expressed. I've had offers of meals and lodging in Washington, Idaho, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, West Virginia, and Maine, and I hereby acknowledge that I am not too proud to ignore such hospitality (though Maine isn't exactly on the itinerary). Several readers have already alerted me to cross-country cyclists already on the road, among them a group of students from St. Paul's School in New Hampshire, who are riding to raise money for the rehabilitation of wounded American soldiers, and a woman who on her blog is keeping a body count of animal roadkill. I've been advised to carry Good & Plenty candy (licorice is reputedly therapeutic for acid reflux) and to take full advantage of technology.

"Loneliness is the biggest problem," David Goodrich, a 58-year-old cyclist wrote to me from Sumpter, Oregon, 3,800 miles into an east-west cross country trip that he's also blogging about. "Stay in touch through these remarkable gadgets. You will have a down place; use your friends to help you get over it."

Pretty sound counsel, I'd say.

Of course, I'm hearing from others, too, those who simply know better than I do—about bicycling and bicycles, certainly, but about life in general as well. From them I'm already hearing snorts of derision.

Like most people, I think, I tend to be more wounded by criticism than buoyed by praise, and I'm nervous enough as it is. "You're a total Fred," one guy wrote, scorning my new bike as badly thought through, foolishly designed, and overpriced. I don't know what a Fred is, but surely not anything good.

An online debate has ensued regarding my choice of straight-across handlebars; many reader/riders seem to think it a big mistake that I'll regret when I face the inevitable headwinds or when my wrists and shoulders stiffen because I won't have the alternative handholds and riding positions offered by drop bars. Also, they say, I haven't trained enough, I haven't planned my route adequately, I bought the wrong saddle, and my rear cassette is too small; a larger one, with more cogs that would make for easier pedaling uphill, a grannier granny gear, is something I'm going to wish I had. (Actually, I'm pretty sure that's true.)

A certain amount of resentment has accrued to the cost of the bike, and this has pissed me off a bit. I'm convinced most of the attitude has come from people who own cars—I don't—that cost a lot more than $8,000. And why does anyone care how I spend my money?

And then there is a truly dyspeptic character from Arizona—he calls himself Thus Spake the Dancing Scorpion—who just shat on the whole idea. "Nah, I wasn't one of those readers who encouraged this aging *New York Times* obit writer to pedal across the wide dangerous spaces of a nation busily devouring itself these days," he wrote. "My suggestion, Webber [sic], is that you stop acting out and return to work as soon as possible. Don't you have a girlfriend or OTB to keep you distracted? By the way, clinical professionals don't have a lot of nice things to say about someone backing into a frenetic past indulgence to find meaning. Learn to be calm and you will always be happy. Most men pursue pleasure, like this stunt, with such breathless emotion that they hurry past it."

What a reaction to someone else's essentially harmless adventure! There's a lot to pique my curiosity in that, not least Mr. Scorpion's apparent misanthropy. Why does he care so much about what I'm doing that he took the time to craft such a crabby critique, not just of my work, but me?

Anyway, he's probably right. If I could only learn to be calm I'd always be happy. Just typing that makes me giggle.

I should clarify something. I'm hardly a person you'd describe as spiritual. God? Nah. For one thing, there's been too much misery too close to home. (I'll no doubt get back to that later.) I've never been a yoga devotee—a girlfriend once attempted to get me interested, but as much as I liked her, it didn't take. I haven't explored enlightenment through Eastern philosophy or, for that matter, sought it through mind expansion. My one LSD trip, in college? A disaster. It was sleeting outside and I ended up losing my hat, scarf, and gloves. I whined through the whole thing, didn't sleep for three days, and got a terrible cold.

That said, to my mind a long bike ride comes close to being transcendental. For one thing, no matter how many people you're traveling with, cycling is a consuming enterprise, one in which you are communing all at once with your body and your bike and the road and the weather and the traffic and the scenery—in other words, the whole world as it pertains to you. The relentless pedaling is the cyclist's version of chanting or prayer.

This isn't the same as being contemplative, by the way; to the contrary, cycling is not especially conducive to brooding or pondering or weighing your options.

People often ask me what I think about on a long bike ride, as if all I have to do while tootling along is to meditate on grand themes, and as if part of the challenge is filling empty hours with fruitful cogitation. I tell them I think about the bike ride. I listen for the sound of my chain in its orbit: Is it gritty and grinding? Does it need oil? I pay attention to the keening in my thighs, the strain in my quadriceps and hammies and glutes as I pump uphill or into the wind: Should I slow my stroke? Gear

down? Gear up? I keep tabs on my fuel level and hydration; cycling when you're hungry or thirsty is an agony. I monitor my progress, watching my odometer/speed gauge/clock for info and entertainment as though it were a television set, checking on mileage, the distance to the next turn or the next town, the hours until I rest for the night. None of this amounts to thinking so much as release from thought.

The point is that big thoughts don't happen on the bike. The contemplation stuff—that will mostly happen at night. Though maybe not; then I'll be packing and unpacking, seeking and eating a substantial dinner, planning the next day's route, obsessively tracking the weather.

No, biking across the country for the second time is a thing I'm doing to have important things to think about afterward.

Tuesday, July 19, Astoria, Oregon

The novelist Richard Ford was a teacher of mine long ago, and among the things he said that I've remembered is that a novel has no place in the world except the one it makes for itself. In fact, I stole the thought from him when I began my first cross-country trip in 1993.

"Novelists will say that one reason their work is so agonizing is that no one out there is waiting for what they do; they have to create their own welcome in the world," I wrote then.*

Then I added, "A cross-country bicyclist feels the same way."

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*I don't want anyone to think I'm apologizing here or coming clean for borrowing from Ford without attribution twenty years ago. But what goes around comes around. Many years ago, when I was a high school English teacher, I told Ford, who is still a friend, a story about one of my students who, in a paper, referred to the competitive environment of a high-level prep school as "a doggy-dog world." That phrase subsequently showed up in a Ford short story, and when I confronted him about it—this was mock indignation, you understand—Ford looked off vaguely into the atmosphere, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Well, we find fiction everywhere."

I'm not a novelist and this isn't a novel (though I'd argue that because I'm generating the plot as I go along, not as the writer but as the main character, it amounts to something pretty similar). In any case the parallels between riding and writing are actually substantial; it seems so, at least, for someone engaged in both of them.

Like a writer beginning a book, a cyclist has a long way to go before he can envision the end. Both push off in a specified direction with hope and uncertainty. Both make wrong turns, both are prone to whimsy, serendipity, and sudden inspiration. Both come up with ideas they didn't know they had and encounter surprising characters who change the course of things. Trying to effect and negotiate a compelling path from beginning to end, both confront potential disaster, succumb to misleading optimism, experience hubris and self-doubt, anguish and delight. Indeed, sitting down to begin a piece of writing and climbing aboard a bicycle to begin a long journey are both daunting prospects, equally likely to induce procrastination. I know something about that, too.

To wit: I haven't gotten anywhere yet. In fact, I've traveled one hundred miles in the wrong direction.

On Monday morning—jeez, was that only yesterday?—I picked up my bike from Erik Tonkin, who owns Sellwood Cycle Repair in Portland. A former racer who, like a lot of cycle shop owners (and like a lot of people who work in or just hang around in cycle shops) he is a promoter of bicycling in any form. Bicycling accommodates a subculture of true believers, that's for sure, and Erik was a warm and enthusiastic counterbalance to my cynical correspondents.* He and a coworker, Julie

*Several months later, I wrote to Erik and asked him if he was surprised that I'd made it. I thought I'd come across to him like a novice—it's certainly how I felt—and I could only imagine that he and Julie were shaking their heads at my folly when they left me. He wrote back that he wasn't in the least surprised: "I didn't think of you as a novice, either. Life experience can carry the day. Even if I had, I would've admired the courage it takes to do something new. When I teach bike riders the sport of cyclocross, for example, I'm always impressed by

Kramer, got on bikes and rode with me from the shop along the Springwater bike trail on the Willamette River. They led me over the Hawthorne Bridge and deposited me downtown where, for the first time, I was left alone, thousands of miles from home, on my new bicycle. I was sorry to see them go.

Since then I've done some shopping; I bought a tent and a sleeping bag at the local REI, things I hadn't bought (or owned) in years. I've never been especially good at the minutiae of camping, which includes matching tent pegs to eyelets, but I'd assumed that during the time since I'd last tried to put up a tent on my own, the ingenuity of tentmakers had solved the ineptitude problem embodied by the likes of me and that you could pretty much just snap your fingers and the thing would stand up by itself, with the tent flap invitingly unzipped and maybe a wood-burning fire cozily ablaze inside.

Not so, it turns out. I tried setting up the new tent in my hotel room last night, and a Chaplinesque scene unspooled. At one point I managed to catch a tent peg in the lamp cord and pull out the plug. At another I snagged my foot on a tent flap and tumbled over the back of the sofa. After an hour or so I finally got the thing erect, with the rain tarp slung over it and my new sleeping bag inside, though, alarmingly, there was a collapsible pole with an elastic band strung through it lying extraneously on the bed. Yet another reason to hope I never have to sleep on the ground.

This morning I packed and repacked my panniers and shipped home some clothes I already knew I wouldn't need, or at least wouldn't miss. And then I loaded up the bike and rode around town for a couple of hours, getting used to handling the extra weight, maybe thirty-five pounds, on the rear. It was raining, and the road surfaces were slick. I was a little wobbly. Gulp.

I knew before I arrived, of course, that Portland is about a hundred

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their bravery. Yes, some part of that bravery is misinformed by ignorance, but who cares? I'm there to help. I often wonder if I'd be so brave if the roles were reversed."

miles inland from the Pacific coast, and that Astoria, at the mouth of the Columbia River, is a traditional launching site for cross-country cyclists. But for reasons I'm not sure of, I didn't do much thinking about how I would get from there to here and what route I would set off on once I did.

I considered pedaling here, but two days heading in absolutely the opposite direction I wanted eventually to go was a little too psychologically onerous for me, so I decided to put myself and my bike on a bus. Then last night I had dinner with Laura Guimond of the Portland travel bureau, and she brought along a television reporter—a young woman—and a cameraman from a station in the Czech Republic who, on a limited budget, were in town to do a travel story about the American Northwest. We made a deal; they'd drive me to Astoria, and I'd give them an interview when we got here. Their English was textbook good, though slangier idioms left them looking puzzled. At one point I said I was bushed, and their reference point was the former president; I made a mental note to speak on camera as literally as I could. They wanted to shoot me doing the dipping-a-wheel-in-the-Pacific thing.

We left Portland the next afternoon. They were nervous on American highways, so I drove their van to Astoria, listening all the way to the voice of their GPS giving me directions in Czech. Astoria is pleasant and weatherworn, a fishing and tourist hub that is not actually on the Pacific, but on the Columbia, a few miles upriver. (Don't tell the Czechs.) It's not exactly a pretty place, but it has an aura of admirable longevity; it is, in fact, old. Founded by John Jacob Astor as a fur-trading outpost in 1811, it was the first enduring American settlement west of the Rockies, none of which I knew until I got there, three weeks before the city's bicentennial celebration, just in time to miss it. I have a newsman's timing, don't I?

Anyway, the Czechs set up a shot beneath the Astoria-Megler Bridge, a gorgeous, steel-girdered viaduct that dramatically spans the river from Oregon to Washington. I spoke into the camera, declaring my love for

the beauty of America and my nervousness and excitement at the beginning of such an arduous journey. And we did three or four takes of a departing shot, with me riding along the wooden boardwalk in Astoria and disappearing from sight, ostensibly in the direction of New York.

Then I bought them dinner. They were earnest and sweet-tempered. Probably not yet thirty, they seemed very young to me, and a little unnerved to be on their own in an out-of-the-way corner of a foreign country, though they surprised me a little. After we ate I excused myself, saying we all must be tired, and the young woman reporter smiled. "Bushed," she said.