

Far Sweeter Than Honey

Searching for Meaning on a Bicycle



William Spencer

FAR SWEETER THAN HONEY

SEARCHING FOR MEANING ON A BICYCLE

WILLIAM SPENCER

Copyright © William Spencer 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

The passage on page 7 and on the back cover is from the *Gulistan*, reprinted from Sir Edwin Arnold, trans., *The Gulistan of Sa'di*, which was originally published in 1885.

Photo credits:

UK: Hemel Hempstead *Evening Post-Echo*

Yugoslavia: Trbojević Džarko-Levin

Iran: Mohammed Davari

Pakistan: H.A. Kay

India: Edite Tolworthy

All other photos: Rudy Buursema

All sketches: The author

Printed in the United States of America

Print ISBN: 978-1-951490-92-8

eBook ISBN: 978-1-951490-93-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020922254

Publisher Information:

DartFrog Books

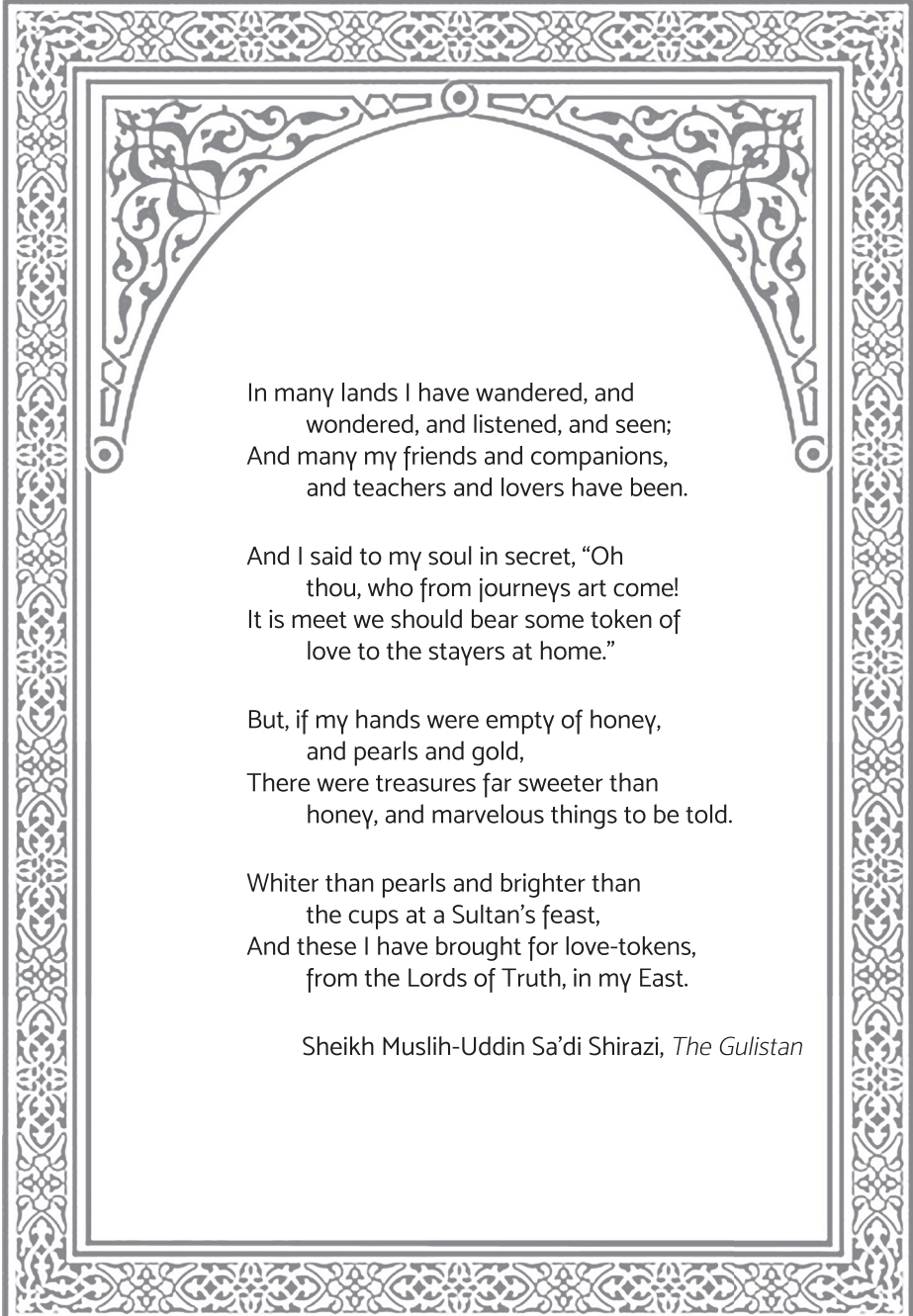
4697 Main Street

Manchester, VT 05255

www.DartFrogBooks.com

Join the discussion of this book on Bookclubz.
Bookclubz is an online management tool for book clubs, available
now for Android and iOS and via Bookclubz.com.

*To each of you who fed, hosted, or cared for me: you taught me
that goodness lies at the heart of humankind. Thank you.*



In many lands I have wandered, and
wondered, and listened, and seen;
And many my friends and companions,
and teachers and lovers have been.

And I said to my soul in secret, "Oh
thou, who from journeys art come!
It is meet we should bear some token of
love to the stayers at home."

But, if my hands were empty of honey,
and pearls and gold,
There were treasures far sweeter than
honey, and marvelous things to be told.

Whiter than pearls and brighter than
the cups at a Sultan's feast,
And these I have brought for love-tokens,
from the Lords of Truth, in my East.

Sheikh Muslih-Uddin Sa'di Shirazi, *The Gulistan*

CONTENTS

One	England, June 11th.....	13
Two	France, June 14th.....	19
Three	Italy, July 10th.....	35
Four	Yugoslavia, July 19th	41
Five	Greece, August 3rd.....	49
Six	Turkey, October 25th.....	81
Seven	Syria, November 20th	107
Eight	Jordan, December 5th.....	125
Nine	Israel, December 12th	131
Ten	Jordan, a Second Time, February 20th.....	153
Eleven	Syria, a Second Time, February 22nd	159
Twelve	Turkey, a Second Time, March 26th	183
Thirteen	Iran, April 1st	195
Fourteen	Afghanistan, April 23rd.....	229
Fifteen	Pakistan, April 30th	247
Sixteen	India, May 23rd.....	297
	Afterword.....	301



The author's route, from England to India.

One
ENGLAND
June 11th

IT'S A MISTY SUMMER MORNING in Hemel Hempstead, England. I make a few adjustments to my panniers and set out on my bicycle. I'm headed for India. It's an hour later than I had planned to leave. Last night's send-off with a group of friends at a local pub has left me in a hangover fog. I do recall that rounds of beer became rounds of Scotch to mark the significance of the occasion. There were rowdy toasts with innuendos about two young men setting out together. A friend wanted to know how I'd maintain my Bowie-style bouffant hair. He asked, "Who'll carry the hair dryer?"

Even my pounding head cannot dull the exhilaration of this long-anticipated moment. But the first difficulty arrives sooner than expected. A puncture flattens one of my tires and stops me at the first corner, not three hundred yards from home. I can't face another tearful farewell with my mother and sisters, so I push the bicycle a mile to Brian's house. He's my friend from work and traveling companion. When she hears about the flat, Brian's mum offers English solace—a cup of tea. Having just set out on the road to India, it's disappointing to find myself seated now at a kitchen table drinking tea, no matter how sweet, milky and hot it is. Staring at the red and white checkered tablecloth, I'm distracted. I can think only about getting underway.

We fix the puncture quickly and set out. Brian and I will cycle together to Greece, where he'll meet up with his mum and dad. They've coordinated their holiday plans with our route. He'll decide from there whether or not to continue. We say that we are cycling to India, but I'm not sure we will make it. Not all that way. Not on bicycles. The headline in tomorrow's local paper will read, "It's Bombay or Bust for the Two Easy Riders." *Easy riders* because, when we were interviewed, we denied all fear of the unknown. Neither of us mentioned Bombay, yet the headline is prophetic.



India bound. Bill Spencer, left, and Brian Parker before they left on their marathon ride

William and Brian in the local paper on the day before departure.



The idea of traveling together took shape over a period of six months. Brian's quiet enthusiasm helped crystallize our thinking from aspiration into a plan. We became friends while working together as computer operators at BP Oil. We are both twenty-two, but we have different temperaments. Brian is quiet and easygoing. He's sensitive, kind to a fault, and slow to anger. He's usually happy to put his agenda aside and defer to my lead—handy, given my willfulness. He doesn't say a lot; perhaps I say too much. Even his dark hair and heavy eyebrows contrast with my pale skin and fair hair.

A few months earlier, Brian had said, "If we are going to do this, we should set a date." So one evening, seated with pints of bitter at a scarred oak table at the Olde Bell Inn, we made a pledge. The sound of darts thumping into a dartboard perilously close to my head gave the moment a certain edge. "OK, then. By the end of June at the latest."

The beer lent a happy certainty to the idea. We both enjoyed cycling. We were free of any need to provide for others. In 1970s England, the majority of students did not continue to university. I'd started work at the age of sixteen. Brian and I had both been working for five years. I'd already experienced the trials and the rewards of a steady, high-paying job. Yet the scent of the sixties still hung in the air like patchouli oil. Assumptions about society and class were shifting. Deference was waning. I needed to know what more there was to life than earning and spending my next pound sterling.

I had no savings, but for several months I'd been squirreling away what I could. My mother and stepfather's reaction to my travel plans had been only positive. My mother was a world traveler herself and wanted to show her support. She bought me a small hand trowel. "So you can bury your poo," she explained. I wasn't sure about the precious cubic inches the tool would occupy in my small panniers.

Planning what to take was a project in itself. I laid out all that I wanted to take on my bedroom floor. Space was tight. For long-distance cycling, forty-five pounds of luggage is the maximum; forty is ideal. There were

choices to be made. One method is to set out the essentials, then remove half, and then remove half again. I knew not to eliminate any of the several layers of clothing. My favorite heavy woolen sweater and waterproof jacket were must-haves. When all was said and done, clothing formed seventy-five percent of the bulk and forty percent of the weight of my luggage. Tools and essential spares made up fifteen percent of the bulk, but a lot of the weight. A few basic toiletries and medical supplies were the balance. To carry atop the rear rack was a tent, sleeping bag, thin foam sleeping pad, two spare tires, and a collapsible plastic water carrier. And then I added a heavy book, but more on that in a moment.

A month before our planned departure, I was doing contract computer work in London. I was staying not far from the Olympia Exhibition Hall, and I visited the first-ever annual Festival for Mind, Body and Spirit. At one booth, I learned about Auroville, an experimental city in Pondicherry, South India. People there pursue spiritual rather than worldly goals, they explained. The lifestyle is one they hope all mankind might one day adopt. It's a bold vision. They follow the teachings of Sri Aurobindo, an Indian intellectual and mystic. I attended a session with the Aurobindo Society on meditation. I couldn't do it, despite my high expectations. Maybe the high expectations were the problem. A movie and photographs of their idyllic community in the tropics offered the promise of a better meditation experience.

This day at the Olympia Exhibition Hall was significant because, in the months to follow, I started to see the trip more as a pilgrimage and less as a grand adventure. I wanted to experience communal life in a place like Auroville and learn to meditate. To this end, I purchased a book: Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri and Satyavan*. The language was too complex for my taste. On the journey I'd shed every ounce of extraneous weight, but I wouldn't relinquish this three-pound, three-inch thick book. I would never read it, yet it would become a symbol of the purpose of my journey. This trip would become a journey of the spirit. Traveling on the outside would become traveling on the inside.



And now here we are, en route to India. Brian and I cycle through Hemel Hempstead's industrial area. The roads are mostly free of cars on this Sunday morning. We stop to adjust our luggage. It's the first time we've cycled with it all in place—panniers filled to capacity, and sleeping bags, tent, water carriers, and spare tires all in place. The added weight gives my bicycle a very different balance and rhythm. This will take some getting used to.

The cycling is easy enough the first day. We pitch our tent among bushes next to the A2, the main road from London to Dover. A curtain of greenery hides us from the solid flow of traffic. Just yesterday, that was our lot; we rushed from one place to another and then headed home from work, the shops, or the pub. Back home to a warm bed in a comfortable house. But no longer. Brian and I now inhabit a parallel universe, where we're more aware of the cold, the quality of the light, the unpleasant smell of exhaust in the damp air. I tell Brian that this glorious, dry day means that summer is here. It then pours down rain through the night. We awaken in the predawn hours to the rumble of huge trucks on their way to the ferries and the Continent—what we English call the rest of Europe.

I'd learned a lot last year about what to expect on a long cycling trip. I'd cycled three thousand miles around France with my girlfriend, Sharon. We had no particular destination in mind; we wanted only to "cycle around Europe." We detoured into northern Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium. We repaired numerous broken spokes, as our bicycles were not built to carry heavy luggage. We camped with a group of young travelers in a spectacular spot by the River Loire. As workers in the apple and pear harvest, we sat around an open fire each evening. Staring into the flames, we heard stories of travels to India, Nepal, and the Himalayas.

But conditions were not ideal. We had set out toward the end of summer, and we didn't have enough money. The most challenging part was being together day in and day out, seven days a week, in a tent not five feet by seven. Our relationship became strained. I lacked the skills to express

the feelings that accompany a full-on commitment. Our itinerary and relationship went round in circles.

That trip taught me that being on a bicycle brings out the best in those we meet. Most people can be trusted, especially those in rural areas. I also learned that covering long distances on a bicycle is easier than I'd imagined. I was surprised by how quickly my body and mind adapted to a more basic lifestyle. We overcame each difficulty as it arose: being unable to wash daily, a broken luggage rack, sleeping in subzero temperatures, coexisting with an insect horde on a hot evening, and more.

On our first night back in the UK, Sharon and I stayed in Dover at the youth hostel. In its small library, I read a hippie guidebook for the trip to India. For many years, traveling overland from England to India had been the alternative thing to do. It signaled an exit from the mainstream. The author asserted in the introduction, "A year spent in India is worth ten years of formal education in the West." A seed was planted as I read that sentence. Six months later, this journey to India is its fruit.

There will be no Dover Youth Hostel comfort for Brian and me. We plan to take the night ferry to Boulogne, France. Approaching the ferry terminus, we're caught in another downpour. We spread our wet things over the radiators in the waiting room. Hours pass. The man in the Automobile Association booth looks at us with disdain, but says nothing. In England, the disapproving glare is intended to put one in one's place. Brian and I are practicing being out of our place.



Route through England: Hemel Hempstead, St. Albans, Waltham Forest, Barking, Dartford, Rochester, Faversham, Canterbury, and Dover.

Two
FRANCE
June 14th

THE FERRY DEPOSITS US IN BOULOGNE in the early hours. A brightly lit café beckons. We're damp and the warmth is welcome. The hiss of a cappuccino machine provides a lift, even before the coffee arrives. We drink café-au-lait and Pernod, eat croissants, and play the few English rock songs we find on the jukebox. Our tiredness, the Pernod, and the familiar songs in unfamiliar surroundings create a surreal moment. We set off as the first gray light seeps into the sky, cycling beyond the town. We pitch our tent in a shabby campsite, crawl into our sleeping bags, and immediately fall asleep. When we wake, the sun is high in the sky.

At midday we stop in Equihen-Plage and get thoroughly drunk on cold French beer. We pitch the tent at another nondescript camping site. We fall asleep to the sound of rain pelting the flysheet. For the next two weeks it's raining, or about to rain. The sky remains a sullen gray. We cycle along arrow-straight roads lined with poplar trees. The plains of Normandy are as bland as the gray weather.

Our relationship changes as the miles pass. Back home, Brian and I were drinking and working buddies, but not close friends. I'm learning to appreciate his understated ways. His dogged determination is a welcome counterpoint to my impetuosity. Each morning, we agree to a route for the day on identical maps. However, near Amiens we lose each other. I cycle on and then wait for him to catch up. After some time, he still does not appear and I start to worry. An ambulance passes with lights flashing and siren blasting. I imagine the worst; I see Brian in the back of the ambulance with no one there to comfort him. I bolted on his front wheel after a recent puncture. Did I forget to tighten a nut? I decide to cycle on, heavy thoughts filling my head. The more time that

passes, the surer I am that the ambulance I saw carried a broken Brian. Sorrow and remorse descend.

Two hours later, I hear Brian's cheery voice coming from behind me. He had some trouble with his luggage rack and stopped to fix it. We sit by the side of the road and I tell him about the day and how I felt when I thought something was wrong. We celebrate our reunion by consuming a huge bar of Belgian chocolate we'd intended to be dessert for several days. I realize that I'd miss him sorely if he were not here. We camp that night near a huge garbage dump outside Amiens. It would seem that even the French produce garbage.

We proceed southward. After two weeks, the weather turns and we cycle beneath cloudless blue skies. The French countryside in summer is all delight. We coast along small country roads that shimmer in the warm air. The French rural way of life is a measured one. There is time for simple things: repairing a fence, having a conversation at a roadside café, eating a meal. There's a smell of dewy earth early in the morning. The leaves of plane trees tremble. Disinterested cows chew the cud in a meadow. The balmy air enhances this ageless glory. The midafternoon silence is amplified by the droning of bees. The surroundings work a spell on us both. Our pace and minds slow. The need to be somewhere else becomes a little less urgent. In the timelessness of nature, I start to see that I am part of a larger whole. I am content to just be; contentment comes in several flavors, and this one is sweet.

France may be the best country in the world to travel by bicycle. There's a network of small roads that's easily found with the excellent Michelin maps. These small roads allow us to ride mostly free of traffic. The country that hosts the Tour de France is a bicycle-friendly place. People wave. Cars slow and follow behind until they can pass safely. Passing motorists call out, *Bon courage! Bravo!* In France, heroes ride bicycles.



Our daily routine settles into a wholesome rhythm. We awake spontaneously a little before dawn. There's magic in these first hours of the day, when we

share the world only with cows. The grass around our tent is wet with dew. Spiderwebs along the tent guy lines shimmer with drops of water in the early light. We start our morning routine with washing quickly in cold water, then packing our sleeping bags and striking the tent. If it rained in the night, or there's a lot of dew on the tent's nylon rain fly, we delay so that the morning sun can dry it off. If you pack a tent away while it's still wet, it'll mildew. After some weeks, we perfect this packing and departing routine. We work our choreographed routine in silence. It takes little more than twenty minutes, and we're on the road as the first light of day creeps into the sky.

We talk little for the first hour. A shroud of mist demands silence. We wear gloves, hats, and windproof jackets. The sun rises in the sky, and we peel off a layer at a time. We stop for breakfast after an hour or two. This is often muesli we mix from oats, nuts and raisins with milk from powder. On colder mornings, we stop at a café. Steaming bowls of sweet, milky coffee and made-this-morning baguette with fruit jam warm us from the center out. We cycle without stopping for several hours after breakfast. In the late morning, we stop to buy Camembert cheese, tomatoes, an onion, and a baguette. Brian ties the long loaf across the top of the luggage on the back of his bicycle. With our appetites raging, we look for a place to stop for lunch. By this time, we have already covered two-thirds of the distance for the day.

We wait until just the right place appears. A golden wheat field sprinkled with poppies, where butterflies move among wild flowers at the margins. Or maybe beside a canal, where dragonflies skim black water below pollarded willow trees. Or a bench in a shady village square, watching old men play *boules* in the dust. We wash down the brimming sandwiches with a local table wine served in our enamel mugs. Dessert is several squares of Belgian milk chocolate sandwiched into more of that crispy, cake-like bread. We eat slowly, savoring both taste and setting. Washing up requires only rinsing our mugs and wiping the blades of our pocketknives. If they are still damp from the night before, we spread our sleeping bags and tent in the sun. We wash some clothes by hand if we're near water. We doze in the warm afternoon air, lulled by the music of bees. This is the time for writing letters home, or perhaps a little reading. It's also a good time for fine-tuning the bicycles. I

hunt down each rattle or squeak. I put a drop of oil on every cable and every point of movement. Over time, I adjust each screw and nut, each bearing and lever, until the bicycle is a pitch-perfect instrument.

Late afternoon sometimes calls for a cold beer and a game of table football at a roadside café. As the sun sinks in the sky, we look for a place to camp. We need two hours of daylight for the evening routine—set up camp, boil water, make a pot of soup. We look for a pleasant setting that's out of sight of the road and on higher ground. Last year, Sharon and I learned the importance of that last requirement after a miserable experience of being awoken by cold, soaked sleeping bags in the middle of a rainy night.

Traveling through fenced farmland, we knock on a farmhouse door and practice our French. *“Avez-vous un place pour notre tent pour la nuit?”* The farmer smiles that smile one reserves for when foreign mouths mangle the mother tongue. This smile translates roughly as, *“Ah! My cows speak better French. Let the Englishmen sleep near the beasts, so the visitors may learn better pronunciation.”* The light of day drains from the sky. We are in our tent in a cow pasture, comfortably nestled in our sleeping bags. Sleep comes quickly: the blessing of miles of exertion.

Our predictable daily rhythm is interrupted only by rain. If it's raining when we awake, we stay in the tent. We read, write, or make repairs until the rain eases. Should it rain heavily all day, we remain within our nylon universe. This makes me claustrophobic and brings my spirits down. I am a skittish creature, yearning for the road and the wind in my face. If the rain starts while we're cycling, we don waterproof jackets and continue. If it gets heavy, we seek shelter in a shop, bus stand, or under a large tree. Warmth drains from the air. We stand in silence to watch puddles form and wait for the rain to ease.

We cross a stretch of flat country near Gisors. An inland escarpment appears in the distance. We check our Michelin map and see on our route the dreaded triple chevron (<<<), which is reserved for the steepest of hills. They point against our direction of travel, which means the hill goes up, not down—a critical distinction for any cyclist. We study the map for alternatives. With a spider's web of tiny country lanes that cross every corner of

rural France, there are usually several ways to get from point A to point B. In this case, the only alternative would take us many miles out of our way. We must tackle the hill head-on.

As we approach this geographic anomaly, it's hard to imagine how the road could cross such a steep incline. We arrive at the base of the climb. Hills are never as steep seen from up close as they appear from a distance. Yet this would surely win a prize in an outrageous incline competition. The midday heat makes the climb tougher still. I set my jaw, select the lowest gear and concentrate on the road ahead. Twice I consider getting off to push the bicycle, but I don't want to be beaten. I'm hauling two hundred twenty pounds up a one-in-six incline—a bicycle, fully laden front and rear panniers, and myself. After twenty minutes of this self-inflicted torture, I arrive at the top, gasping. The road is as flat as a billiard table up here. Beneath the shade of a huge tree is an area of mown grass with a wrought iron bench. It's an inviting spot. I lean the bicycle on the bench and flop down on the grass, thoroughly spent.

My pounding heart slows, and I open my eyes to see Brian's head appear over the rise. His face is the color of the tomatoes he's carrying for our lunch. He sparkles with perspiration, and he's breathing hard. Slowly, he crests the hill and looks ready to join me on the grass in the shade. He stops pedaling to enjoy a short coast. His bicycle slows, and he throws his leg weakly across the back of the bicycle. But he has forgotten about the long baguette loaf across his rear carrier. His leg and the baguette tangle briefly. He remains on the now-stationary bicycle, his other foot strapped into his pedal. He shoots me a look of helplessness as he hangs there. Then, as if in slow motion, he and the bicycle topple sideways. The sound of metal meeting road and a loud curse break the quiet of the afternoon. I can't help my laughter, and it's some time before I can administer first aid to his bleeding knee.

The days and the miles pass. We discuss how we might supplement our limited funds. When I picked apples and pears in the Loire Valley last year, I learned that it's possible to work through the summer picking fruit. One starts in Spain in early summer with apricots and peaches and then works northward to finish picking grapes in Germany in the autumn. In larger

cities, we scour notice boards at the *Agence Nationale de l'Emploi* offices: the government employment agency. But it's too early in the season. So we visit the Vignaults, a family in the Cognac area with whom Sharon and I stayed last year. The family gives us a warm welcome. They grow Folle Blanche grapes that are distilled into cognac. The *vendage*, or grape harvest, is some weeks away, so we help out around the farm. Trying our hand at milking goats, Brian and I wrestle unsuccessfully with the teats. Marcel, the half-wit farm hand, roars with laughter and bellows, "*Les Anglais. Ha, ha, ha! Les Anglais!*"

After five days of bottomless hospitality, it's time to move on. We set out, laden with several bottles of local brew. There's *pinaud*, mead made with fermented grape juice and honey, and an illicit brew of triple-distilled cognac. They warn us that this will remove varnish from furniture. A tentative sip confirms that it belongs in our first aid kit, its use limited to cleaning wounds.

We push ourselves to meet our target of fifty miles per day. This requires five or six hours on the bicycle. In reality, the distance we cover is determined by hills, the quality of the road surface (a smooth tarmac speeds the way), and—more critically—wind direction. Battling a headwind can cut speed and distance covered by a quarter. In a strong wind, we learn to cycle close, one behind the other. Whichever of us is in front creates a slipstream that the other enjoys; then we periodically switch places. But in these first weeks, the hours we can spend in the saddle are limited by soreness in our southerly regions.

A bicycle is surely the most energy efficient mode of travel. With this simple machine, modest amounts of energy yield impressive results. In the course of a single day, we reach a place far removed from where we started. We cycle through most of the daylight hours, and the miles add up. In the European scale of things, one can cross a country in a couple of weeks. It's a deeply satisfying experience. We create little noise and no pollution. We can enjoy and be an active participant in the scenes through which we travel. No passive observation from the sealed bubble of a car for us! Add sharpened senses from constant aerobic exercise, and a wholesome

routine fixed by the sun's rise and fall, and we have the ingredients of a truly memorable experience.

The farther we travel, the clearer my head. My eyesight, hearing, and sense of smell improve. My mind quiets and my appreciation deepens for things about and within me. My awareness of nature increases. I become attuned to daylight and darkness, the sky and clouds, dryness and rain, warmth and cold. The heaviness of an English lifestyle falls away to leave a sense of well-being. Even this city boy, pickled in rock 'n' roll, beer, cigarettes, and late-night discos, can adjust. I learn that we're more adaptable than we might think, and can readily regain our innate connection to nature.

Although I had freelance computer work until three days before we left, I've saved only nine hundred pounds. I don't know how much money I'll need, but imagine I can budget to what I have. In a final attempt to find work, we visit Bordeaux. This is a southern wine-producing area, and we hope that the *vendage* has started.

We cycle through the port area of the city. Ahead is a pair of tram rails. They're recessed into the road surface and cross only at a slight angle. The narrow channel along each rail is treacherous since it can easily trap a wheel. It's impossible to stop in time, given our speed. I think, *Bet Brian comes off*. Brian shares later that he thought the same thing. To cross, I stand up in the pedals and yank the handlebars upward twice in quick succession so that the front wheel momentarily leaves the ground just as it crosses each rail. Since the rear wheel can't turn, it does not drop into the channel.

Brian's front wheel drops into the first track. I turn to see him sprawled on the road, his front wheel badly damaged. The city traffic rushes past in an unbroken stream. I am appalled that no one stops to offer any assistance. I help him clean and bandage a badly scraped knee. We sit in this dusty, miserable place and painstakingly repair the wheel. By adjusting the tension of individual spokes, we coax out the worst of the buckle and get the wheel somewhere near to its true form. But from this point on, when Brian brakes, his front wheel plays a rhythm section: *ker-chunk-e-dink, ker-chunk-e-dink, ker-chunk-e-dink, ker-chunk-e-dink*.

Our visit to Bordeaux is fruitless—metaphorically and literally. The *Agence Nationale de l'Emploi* office is in the ultramodern Tour 2000 government complex. With our imperfect French and Brian's small French dictionary, we decipher the many cards posted on huge job boards. There's no fruit-picking work. There's a job as a tractor driver, but neither of us has ever driven one. The other job seekers are Moroccan or Algerian, and, like us, they lack work papers. We browse the boards but can't approach the staff to ask for further assistance. Sitting on the steps outside, a pretty young woman approaches us and introduces herself in a lilting Irish accent. We invite her to join us for a cold beer at a nearby outdoor café.

Mary is from a strict Catholic family. She describes how, through a pen pal, she arranged a job for herself in Lourdes, in the South of France, "selling the holy relics" to visiting pilgrims. She gave up a steady job and said goodbye to a worried family back home. She arrived to find that the job had fallen through. A young woman away from home for the first time, she was at a loss as to what to do next. She dared not tell her family what had happened because someone would be on the next plane to bring her back home. And, after living with her pen pal's family for a time, she felt she could no longer accept their hospitality. She made her way to Bordeaux and got a job in a mental hospital in return for room and board. She's learning French and is here seeking a different job.

We share a beer, offer some suggestions as to what else she might try, exchange addresses, then say goodbye. Some months later, I write to her. A sporadic communication starts up between us. I learn that she did find work, keeping house for an elderly gentleman. I imagine meeting up with her after I return. Her charming Irish ways and pretty face stay with me.



Leaving Bordeaux, we head southeast. We skirt the foothills of the Pyrenees, which separate France from Spain. The countryside changes as we cycle away from the Atlantic. Farms and vineyards slowly give way to

scrub-covered hills that are good only for raising sheep. This is an austere place, with little rainfall. Wild thyme perfumes the late afternoon air with a heady scent. The road rises and falls: another stretch of uneventful cycling.

Carcassonne is a medieval, walled city. It looks much as it must have seven hundred years ago, and its rocky outcrop presents an imposing view from a distance. People have lived here since the sixth century BC. This settlement was conquered in turn by the Romans, Visigoths, Moors, Franks and Crusaders. We enjoy a view of the city walls and turrets from the road. We don't stop.

Beyond Carcassonne, we call it a night at a small campground. There are similar municipal campgrounds scattered across France, their blue and white signs easy to recognize. They are mostly bland places with cinder block toilets and laundry buildings. Once a week, we seek out one of these campgrounds and pay a nominal fee to pitch our tent. We take long, hot showers and wash our clothes in hot water.

There's a young Frenchman and his girlfriend staying in a worn khaki tent next to ours. Patrick Vincent is a bear of a man with a bushy, untended beard and a gentle manner. With his limited English and our imperfect French, we talk. It is all we have to offer, so we share some of the Vignaults' devil's brew from the first aid kit. It tastes better after the first mouthful does its work. Patrick invites us to join him tomorrow *chez moi*—at his place. It's not far off our route, about a day's cycle from here.

The following evening, Brian and I set out to find Patrick's house along a series of dusty, unpaved roads. In the small village of Montseret, we ask an old man for directions. He tells us to follow him and fairly jumps onto an antique black bicycle. We follow down a path that becomes progressively narrower. Our guide stops and points a gnarled finger at a scarcely discernible track. We push our bicycles up a low hill, bare but for wild thyme, sage, and brambles. Stepping on the vegetation underfoot releases a heady scent into the air. The hot air of late afternoon is loud with countless bees.

Atop a low, rocky hill ahead there's a small clearing around an old Citroen van. The maroon paintwork of the van is faded with age and painted with mysterious white symbols, yet the place exudes a welcoming air. In one

corner of the clearing is a stone oven with a chimney shaped like a kiln. Some odds and ends lay off to one side, but things are otherwise orderly and clean. On the far side of the clearing is a small vegetable garden enclosed by chicken wire. Beside it, a plastic pipe emerges from the sloping ground. From this pipe flows sparkling water. Each of the tree saplings that dot the clearing is also fenced with chicken wire. We're on a small island in a scented sea of thyme.

Patrick greets us warmly and explains that the chicken wire is to keep out the wild rabbits, but that it's a losing battle. He tells us with a laugh that even his carefully guarded patch of marijuana has been eaten to the ground. Apparently, the rabbits are particularly persistent when it comes to reaching these delicate plants. I imagine rabbit stoner parties in tunnels below our feet.

Patrick has been here for four years, living a simple life. He works on a nearby building site, helping to build a *maison de la weekend* for a rich Parisian couple. The sun settles into the hills. We sit around a fire and Patrick produces an old turntable that he has somehow wired to the van's battery. The light drains from the sky. The Rolling Stones sing about not always being able to get what you want; the rabbits probably disagree.

Patrick explains that he paid a farmer far above market value for this piece of land, for the chance to live the life he dreamed of. Here, with his wife and child, working and living off the land. The villagers allowed him to tap a nearby spring, and he had all he needed to make his simple dream a reality. With one hoe, one spade, and one garden fork, he transformed rocks and scrub into a level plot. It required many months of hard labor, then some months more to get the van here, cutting a path through the brush a little at a time. His plan is to live in it while he builds a house, using the large, flat rocks that lay all about. He shows us pictures of stone houses that look like igloos, built in France during the Stone Age. This is the design he'll use, eliminating the need for expensive wood timbers.

Patrick is a vegetarian and seeks to kill no living thing. I walk ahead of him along a narrow path near the clearing; he grasps my arm suddenly and tells me to stop. Stooping, he picks up a small snail. He places it to one side

and lets me continue. He collects honey from hives set in the brush nearby, but he must soon give up this fragrant treat. He says the bees he kills as he removes the combs are too high a price to pay for the honey. Living this life, Patrick explains, has changed him. Being close to nature helps him see things in a simpler way. He aspires to live here year-round, remaining naked so as not to need clothing and eating raw only what he grows. When he does venture out to visit his family in Paris, he is bewildered by their complex desires. The French place great store in appearance and conformity. So, Patrick has become an outcast. His wife ran away with their young daughter to live with another man. Sitting beneath the stars by an open fire, light dancing across his bearded face, Patrick's eyes fill with tears.

After two nights *chez* Patrick, Brian and I leave in a reflective mood. We also seek simplicity. Does that require giving up cooked food, wine, honey, and clothes? And what about listening to Mick Jagger and the lads? Where does that fit into the picture? Can a person be good and behave ethically in a contemporary life? Does simplicity require moving to a mountain?

We continue east, headed toward the Mediterranean coast and the Italian border. We take a detour from Beziers to Agde to visit the fabled shoreline. A row of swaying palms? No. Perhaps a line of sand dunes? Sorry. It's a bland, flat expanse of caravan parks. On the beach, a line of trash piled eight feet high extends as far as the eye can see in both directions. The seagulls are happy with the arrangement; I am appalled. How many people carrying in how much garbage over how many months does it take to create this insanity? Surely this is a local aberration. We visit the shoreline again ten miles farther east, and a similar scene greets us. The vacation season is ending, and I can only hope that a cleanup is planned.



William and Brian in the South of France.



Mountains are not the cyclist's devil—wind is. It can be a quiet friend or a relentless foe. A strong wind at your back is a joy. In northern France, Brian and I covered a record ninety-six miles in one day on a flat, recently paved road, courtesy of a tail wind. On a flat road with no wind, we manage twelve to fifteen miles an hour; a strong headwind can reduce that to three or four

miles an hour. A side wind is merely frustrating, while a strong headwind sucks all joy from a day. Twenty miles by a circuitous route is preferable to ten when you're headed directly into the wind.

We face the worst headwind of the journey in the South of France in les Bouches-du-Rhone, or "the mouths of the Rhone." It is a coastal, marshy delta and is utterly flat. The wind comes off the Mediterranean with great force, and there is nothing to block its path. Not only is the hard work dispiriting, but the constant roar in my ears gives me a headache. We study the map to find an alternate route. We hope to zigzag sideways to our destination, like a sailor tacking across the wind. But few roads cross the marshes, and our options are limited. Tall marsh grass rises on either side, blocking any view beyond. A disused windmill breaks the monotonous scenery. We cycle with our heads close to the handlebars, leg muscles burning, lost in this fight with an invisible enemy. The wind is ferocious. When it gusts, it brings us to a complete stop.

We periodically consult the map and recalculate how many miles to go before the next intersection. Will a turn put us sideways to the wind? Yes, it looks as though it will. We pedal on, each hundred yards a fight. Is this what we left England for? What were we thinking? What if we were to turn around, go back the way we came, and find another route? No, that could add days to the trip. I ponder these pointless questions as we struggle on. Heavy traffic adds to the misery.

Finally, we arrive at the intersection and turn a full ninety degrees to the north. I swear the wind changes then and is again blowing directly in our faces. Hell on toast. A full day of this torture follows. In the late afternoon, another turn takes us in almost the opposite direction from the one we set out on this morning. And we're still being buffeted by a full headwind. The end of the day leaves us dispirited, and our backs sore from pedaling bent over. We have covered twenty-two miles; each was a hard-won battle.

We continue along the Mediterranean coastline. After passing Marseilles, the land folds up once again into hills. The foothills of the Alps marching south, row upon row into the Mediterranean, make for spectacular scenery. But the Cote d'Azur, a playground of the wealthy, was not developed with

cyclists in mind. There's a single road that weaves along the water, hugging the hills. Most here drive sparkling Porches or Mercedes coupes. These drivers suffer from a visual peculiarity, which allows them to see only other Porches and Mercedes. We share the road in some imperfectly intertwined dimension. We see them, yet they appear not to see us. They make no eye contact, drive us off the road, and are deaf to our shouted curses. Cannes, Nice, St. Tropez: chic people and expensive yachts pass briskly to the click of derailleur gears. We do not linger.



That overland to India book I read in Dover offered some sound advice. Pay off all debt before leaving on an extended trip, since financial or emotional debt holds one back. Before leaving, I sold everything I owned except what I have with me. I left nothing behind—well, except my collection of LP records, which I couldn't bring myself to sell. That I carry most of what I own is a source of deep satisfaction. And, as the journey progresses, I learn that I need even less than I'd imagined. Wherever there are roads, there are people. Where there are people, the basics of life are to be found: water, food, shelter and warmth. I keep everything clean and organized. I sew patches onto the seat of my shorts. It's the one thing that regularly wears out.

Bicycle parts in mainland Europe and beyond come in metric sizes that don't conform to British standards. So I carry critical spares: a spare chain and extra chain links, a dozen spare spokes, assorted nuts and bolts, and spare inner tubes. Last year, I had problems with tires. Having no spare, I hand-stitched a patch of old tire to the inside of my threadbare back tire. When that trick no longer worked, I had to wait two weeks for a replacement to arrive from England. So now I carry two extra tires. There's a trick to carrying a spare tire. Twist it into a triple figure eight with three equal circles. Fold the outer circles in on the center circle so that the twists cancel themselves out. Hard to visualize, but it works. You're left with a cylindrical tower that's nine inches across and four inches high. Two tires folded

in this manner, stacked one on the other, sit on top of my sleeping pad on my rear rack. They form a handy container for carrying food: convenient for the frequent snacking that accompanies the constant calorie burn.

There's pleasure in having and caring for just a few things, each with a purpose. Years later, with the paraphernalia required for babies, children, and life in general, I'll exhale a wistful sigh; there was a time I carried all that I owned on a bicycle.

Brian and I take turns carrying the tent, which is our heaviest item. Our one weight variable is water. I have containers stored in each side of my front panniers to keep the weight evenly balanced. We have chlorine tablets, but we don't need them in Europe since potable water is freely available. We partially fill our containers in the late afternoon for the evening's cooking and washing, and for a flannel bath the following morning. Other than this, we simply fill our bicycle water bottles as needed.



Route through France: Boulogne, Amiens, Beauvais, Chartres, Blois, Poitiers, Matha, Cognac, Bordeaux, Marmande, Agen, Toulouse, Carcassonne, Beziers, Sete, Aix-en-Provence, Frejus, Nice, Cannes and Monaco.

Three
ITALY
July 10th

WE RECOGNIZE OTHER TOURING CYCLISTS by the luggage they carry. We stop to chat when we encounter fellow members of our clan. On one of our first mornings in Italy, we stop in a village square with an ornate stone fountain. We wash our feet and grimy necks in the clear, cool water; several locals scowl disapprovingly. A tall fellow on a bicycle pulls up and introduces himself. Since he's headed along the same road, all three of us set out together.

His name is Rudy, a Dutchman with curly blond hair; he's cycling from Amsterdam to Israel. He has a fancy bicycle with the latest accessories. It has the narrowest wheels and tires that I've ever seen, which help lessen rolling resistance. He has hand-stitched pannier bags that he designed, with a clever arrangement of straps. The rear panniers convert to a rucksack with shoulder straps. Here's a man who means business.

In the evening, we pitch our tents together in a small orchard in the hills above Mortola. With meticulous attention to detail, Rudy cooks us a wonderful meal on a tiny cooker that burns gasoline, rather than kerosene. It's a proper meal, and no one eats until all the dishes are ready. This is unlike the evening meals we have become accustomed to. With the hunger that comes with a day's cycling, Brian and I usually fall pell-mell on our food. In Rudy's company, we wait patiently as the food is prepared. It's an enjoyable way to eat, savoring both the process and the food. We sit around a small campfire and share stories of our travels. I'm a little in awe of this lean giant of a man: good-looking, organized, and generous to a fault. I like his confidence and openhearted manner. Like most of his countrymen, Rudy is multilingual. He speaks Dutch, excellent English, German, and French.

I tell Rudy about my fascination with the Indian subcontinent. It started when I was six years old. A homework project of mine on India was selected

for an exhibition of local children's work. I recall the two pictures I included; one was a sepia photo of a Bengal tiger and the other was of the bathing *ghats* on the Ganges in Benares. That picture kindled a longing to see that place and to bathe in that sacred river.

Rudy describes his plan to cycle through Turkey and the Middle East to Israel and then work at a kibbutz there. Brian shares that he decided some days ago to meet his parents in Corfu, and will likely not continue after that. This leaves me unsure about my plans. Will I continue solo?

But there is an elegant solution; I suggest that Rudy and I combine goals. We could travel together—first to Israel for the winter and then continue on to India. The detour to Israel makes sense. At this pace, I'd find myself in Iran or Afghanistan come winter: not the warmest places in December. It makes more and more sense as we discuss it. The idea of continuing to India appeals to Rudy. His plan is to cycle to Florence, south through Italy, then travel by ferry to Igoumenitsa, a port in the extreme northwest of the Greek mainland. Brian and I think we'll reach Igoumenitsa around September 15th, so we agree that I'll check the post office there daily for a telegram from Rudy. He should get to Igoumenitsa a few days after us, and from there we'll continue on together. We'd both prefer to cross the wilds of Turkey with a companion. This plan is ideal for Brian, too; he can catch a ferry from there to meet his parents in Corfu.

We pitch our tent near Rudy's, and the following day we three cycle together. Brian and I struggle to keep up with Rudy. Later that day, he takes a road to the southeast. Brian and I continue east across northern Italy.



The English cyclist's bible, *Richard's Bicycle Book*, contains a chapter devoted to dogs. Well, *devoted* is the wrong word. Richard Ballantine advises that when a cyclist first sees a threatening dog, he has to make an immediate decision. He can either stop and face the dog, or outrun it. Should the cyclist choose the latter, he needs to be sure he has the speed

to get away. A moving cyclist provokes an agitated dog, and it will bite if it can. Richard describes how to keep the bicycle between you and the dog when you stop (which is difficult if there's more than one in pursuit), and that a bicycle pump is a handy weapon. He also describes how, in dire circumstances, you can immobilize or even kill a dog by trapping its neck between the front wheel and the bicycle frame. He does not, however, explain how you get the dog to place its neck just so. *To the left a little, please. OK, hold it right there.*

Following Richard's advice, I carry a heavy steel bicycle pump. This can inflate a tire or deflate a dog's attack impulse. I keep this weapon directly behind my saddle, inside my rolled sleeping pad. Dogs have an unnerving habit of rushing out unannounced from bushes or behind fences. I've perfected my response. I reach behind me as I ride, unsheathe the weapon, and then face the attacker.

As we pass a farm in northern Italy, three large, mean hounds charge us from behind. They're suddenly upon us, barking wildly. Pumps drawn, we come quickly to a stop, skidding in the roadside gravel. The effect on my system is the same as several shots of Italian espresso. We stand back-to-back, pumps raised, ready for battle. The dogs snarl, standing just beyond the range of Excaliburs I and II. They drool, probably in anticipation of succulent thigh muscle. We wait, perspiring heavily in the sun.

Several minutes pass before they break eye contact, lower their heads, and wander away a few feet. One lies down in the shade of a nearby tree. We breathe a sigh of relief and sheathe our weapons. My pulse returns to normal. I take a step forward, and the dogs instantly reassume attack positions. Their hackles are raised, their teeth are bared, and they bark wildly. I stop. After a minute they retreat again. If either of us takes even a single step, the same frenzied threats resume. When we're stationary, they yawn and lie in the shade. Yet they remain close at hand—and leg.

We talk in a low monotone, trying not to move our mouths, as if they might understand our strategizing. "Reckon we could jump on our bikes and pedal like crazy before they reach us?" "No way; they'd be chewing on our bones after ten yards."

Neither of us has a plan. We try waiting fifteen minutes, twenty minutes. Moving slowly, we drink some water and consult our maps. We try to enjoy the scenery while remaining glued to the spot. This is ridiculous; we could be here all day. Man's best friends show no inclination to be anywhere other than here, terrorizing us with their presence. Unlike us, they've no place to go.

When I raise my hand with the pump as if to strike, they cower even though they are well beyond my reach. I recall seeing farm boys throw stones at dogs. Nonchalantly, I bend down and pick up a handful of ammunition. Brian does the same. I throw a stone and miss, but they yelp as if hit and retreat a few steps. We take a few steps before they charge again. We each fill one hand and our pockets with stones. We maintain a steady barrage of fire as we start off, wobbling with a hand on the handlebars.

I later discover that this works even when there are no stones to hand. I can throw imaginary rocks with the same effect, including the yelps of pain. Dogs remain the biggest threat on the journey. In Europe it is farm dogs, and in Asia it's their wild cousins. Some say it's the sound of the chain passing through the derailleur gear mechanism that antagonizes our canine brethren, but I have my doubts. They react just as wildly to a cyclist with silent internal hub gears. Whatever the cause, the danger is real. Traveling at speed seems to make you a particularly appealing target to dogs, and the threat of crashing is real. In Italy and beyond, the risk of rabies is an added threat.

Apart from dogs, cycling across northern Italy is easy. The scenery is consistently beautiful; the foothills of the Dolomites form a backdrop as we pass through farming communities and small towns. We stop by a river one afternoon for an extended lunch break. I've been frustrated with my hair; a haircut is overdue. We have a small pair of scissors, and I ask Brian to cut my hair. He says he doesn't think this is a good idea. I insist, "Brian, look, I don't care how it turns out. No one is going to see me, and I don't care how it looks. You just take the scissors and cut. In this weather, I want it short. So please just cut it, OK?"

He takes a long time, surveying his work every few snips. He finally announces that he's done. We carry no mirror, so I look at my reflection in the river. A hairdresser friend once told me that the difference between a

great haircut and a good haircut is about a week. The difference between this haircut and a good haircut is about two months.

We cover the distance across northern Italy quickly. Venice is close to our route, and we can't pass it without stopping to visit. Along the causeway to reach the area where cars can park, I have my first accident. We're on a narrow road bounded by stone walls. There's no room between the cars and the walls, so we pass on the left side of a long line of cars that are waiting to move forward. A German driver opens his door, and my front wheel goes into the edge of the door and I topple over it. I manage to tuck and roll to escape major injury. The bicycle appears to be fine, but the German tourist can't properly close the door of his car. I'm guessing he'll check his mirror before opening his door in future.

In Venice, the youth hostel is full, so we simply place our sleeping bags on the pavement outside. This is our first night without the tent; it's a delight to be outside on this warm and clear night. When we wake in the morning, passersby give us frosty looks. We meet two girls from England who are staying at the youth hostel and ask them to join us for the evening. We buy a bottle of wine and borrow two glasses from the hostel, then sit in St. Mark's Square and have a wonderful evening impressing the girls with our stories. Our bottle of wine finished, we find a bar for more drinks. When we stand to leave, we take our borrowed glasses with us. The barman objects, believing they are his, and speaks rapidly in Italian as he takes our glasses from my hands. We try to protest, but our Italian isn't up to the task. I tell Brian that we should just take two of his glasses—they're all identical anyway. I do so, and we walk away from the bar. I am proud of the simplicity of my solution.

Moments later, someone comes up behind me and pulls me violently by the shoulder. The barman swings and punches me hard in the face, then grabs the two glasses. Before I can gather my wits, he's gone. His ring leaves me with a chipped tooth that I still have to this day. I later discover that my St. Christopher pendant was lost in the scuffle. It would have been wiser to leave the glasses and not set the record straight. May this lesson in the cost of bravado stay with me as we pass into more dangerous parts of the world!