

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Suffering

Paris-Brest-Paris 2007

by Paul Jurbala



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In our connected world, it's easy to find quite a lot of information about the cycling event known as Paris-Brest-Paris. For example, PBP is the world's oldest organized cycling event, first held in 1891 by a newspaper looking for new readers. It was the inspiration for the much better known Tour de France, a relative newcomer which made its debut in 1903. More recently, when racers abandoned PBP as too long, too hard and too destructive to their bodies, it was taken over by cyclo-tourists. Not just any cyclo-tourists, but obsessive two-wheeled fiends, dangerous freaks who harden themselves with 400 kilometer-a-day jaunts, men perilously close to second childhood riding zillion-dollar bikes loaded down with bags of enough food, clothing, first-aid equipment and spare parts to outfit a largish scout troop, and of course, accompanied by a small percentage of women whose native good sense is overcome by a bizarre desire to...well, who knows.

These randonneurs, as they call themselves, are men and ladies of means for the most part. They are generally computer-literate, so their spoor of musings, fears, questions, photos and post-ride summaries are to be found all over the internet. For better or worse, though, there are few writers among them, and if there are any, they are devoted to earning a living from their craft, not spewing gratuitous text. What I am trying to say is, most of the ride reports are nasty, brutish and short. Even the one really good example of PBP reportage, Jock Wadley's classic "Brestward Ho!" suffers from a misguided effort to be *interesting*. Engaging as Wadley was, he devoted the first third of the story to his experience getting a new pro-quality bike on loan from a sponsor, and then he totally failed to capture the essence of the event, which is its grinding forced insomnia and protracted boredom. The niche is soon to be filled, for there are few, though I say it modestly, who can capture boredom in prose better than I.

It is the special property of PBP to expand time. Riders have 90 hours to complete the 1,227 kilometers from Paris to the Atlantic coast and back, and although there is a tiny elite who complete it in as few as 45 hours, most like to get their money's worth. Whether it takes 45 or the full 90, it certainly feels like a lifetime, so there is plenty of time for the mind to dwell on matters both deep and trivial, to ascend the heights of philosophy and explore the deep mysteries of science, or for that matter the abyss of degeneracy, and to season the whole of this intellectual smorgasbord with occasional attention to earthly delights and concerns such as, which kind of bush is best to pee behind? The mind, relieved of the daily tedium of family, meetings, and deadlines as well as the blizzard of electronic information we wander aimless and lost, is utterly free to scamper from topic to topic like a squirrel who has forgotten where he has hidden his nuts. At least, that was my experience.

Aller: Leaving Paris

Suffering is the accessible art. Of the many ways one can win respect, suffering is high on the list; yet while athletic prowess, beauty, riches, intellect or great skill are bestowed only upon the few, anyone can suffer. Indeed, not only does it take no skill, beauty,

riches, intellect or physical ability at all to suffer, those things are positive impediments. No long years of study, no interminable and humiliating ass-kissing apprenticeship, no lucky genetic quirk is required: suffering is the glory of the common man. To suffer you just need to show up. Even better, suffering does not need to be visited on you by bitter chance or a vengeful god. In other words, you don't need to wait around hoping. You can go right out and get some. You can buy it. You can make a hobby out of it. Sexual suffering is a bit iffy from the point of view of public admiration, but all the other kinds are good- so as long as you can restrain yourself from having an orgasm, you're a hero. This is the great paradox of pain, that it takes nothing to achieve yet solicits so much praise and sympathy from your fellow men and women. Go ahead: try it.

I tried it, and it works. Every four years there is an event called Paris-Brest-Paris. Cyclists from around the globe congregate in the suburbs of Paris and ride 1,200 kilometers, more or less non-stop, in three days and a bit. If you have a bicycle, can dig enough coinage out of the cracks in the sofa to make up the entry fee, and can demonstrate a proven capacity for suffering, you're in. No questions asked. Well, they do want a doctor's note attesting you're not likely to drop dead, since a stiff in a ditch creates a surprising number of complications for the organizers, most especially the question of who pays to FedEx the squishy bits back to point of origin. And there are the touchy public relations issues which always crop up when the public roads are strewn with bodies. But get that note from doc, and you're golden. Oh, and that proven capacity to suffer part- you'll need to engage in a series of similar, but far shorter rides beforehand. But that's nothing- the relation of the qualifying rides to PBP is the same as the relation between biting off a hangnail to amputating your toes with a circular saw. Honestly.

At PBP, the suffering begins early. It's a long plane ride to Paris, and that's never fun. Some of the riders lose their bikes en route, just for style points. You can let get sick on strange food or catch flu if you want to heighten the challenge. But for most, the real suffering begins in the final day or two prior, with the waiting. We sit, and wait, and talk about the suffering, and go all pale and nervous. We remind each other of how much it's going to hurt, and when it's going to hurt, and why it hurts, and where it hurt last time. We obsess over fine points of preparation and set-up intended to spare us pain, even though pain is inescapable. We pack, and unpack, and repack our bikes. We read long-range weather forecasts and argue over them. We lube chains, fiddle with saddle heights, re-tighten components then go looking for someone to fix the stripped threads. Then there's registration: that's a whole other kind of suffering. Let's start on registration day.

On August 19, 2007, I had already been in France for ten days, gobbling the exquisite pastry, examining French hills at very close range, and generally soaking in the local culture. About that culture: France is a very medieval country in both heritage and outlook, and to North American eyes, almost obsessed with history, tradition and death. Paris is literally built on corpses. In just a few days' visit, I saw the Invalides Museum, home of the sarcophagi of France's great generals, and built around the glorious tomb of Napoleon Bonaparte (the monster, they called him everywhere else); the Pantheon, last resting place of her greatest scientists and statesmen; Pere Lachaise Cemetery, with the graves of hundreds of notable, if slightly disreputable also-rans like Oscar Wilde,

Rossini, and (of course) Jim Morrison, who anywhere else would rate their own shrine; and under it all, the Catacombs, miles of subterranean tunnels housing the bones of six million re-interred, anonymous Parisians. The streets of every French town including the capitol are named after famous Frenchmen, and if they are a little obscure there is probably a subscript on the road-sign: “Architect”, or maybe “Cheese-maker” or “Dentist” if they were running a little dry. Out in the country the farms look much like they did in the thirteenth century, with walls, courtyards and little turreted grain-silos, mini-fortresses nothing like the North American farm with its miles of wire fences that keep animals in but do nothing to keep people out. Even the system of government, not just in France but throughout Europe, bears the traces of the feudal mind-set, the centralized socialist state replacing the seigneur as protector and tax-taker, social organizer and rule-setter, so different from the American cult of supremacy of the individual. If the Acropolis is the icon of Greece’s link to its past, and the Coliseum of Rome’s, then the great medieval cathedrals in Paris, Chartres and just about everywhere else in France are the prized relics of her history. As a result of this self-referential and traditionalist mind-set the French have preserved a beautiful country in which the past is remembered and in which the stoicism and endurance of the medieval peasant persist, quite in contrast to the history-less, chaotic, shallow, immediate-gratification-driven but irresistible culture of America. In short, the French have deep roots, they do not adapt quickly or easily, they stubbornly cling to their past, and they have the innate ability to endure, which explains their current problems with immigration and their passion for a sport like cycling, which is basically a kind of penance on wheels.

Maybe the medieval mind-set explains the PBP registration process. I had a form which informed me that my bike check time was 5:15 pm, although only one day after I had made the final and irrevocable selection of 5:15 I received an e-mail telling me that the Canada group photo would be taken at noon and I should therefore choose 1 pm for bike check. Crap! Could you register early, I wondered? At 9 am on the 19th, having been awake for three hours and having absolutely nothing to do, I drove my rental car from the hotel to the registration area to find out.

It was busy, to put it mildly. The nearest parking was about 300 m away and I was funneled into a business campus parking lot by a line of gesticulating volunteers. I found a nice spot near the entrance for my Citroen and wandered about, watching a steady stream of incoming and outgoing cyclists with bikes, some riding, some walking, some clutching large white envelopes I took to be registration packages. I followed the ant-trail back to the start area- it had suddenly sprouted display tents, a large inflatable start/finish arch, and an immense horde of cyclists. There was a long line up of riders walking bikes through a tunnel under the road and behind the gymnasium complex, which I followed into a stadium. What a sight! Bikes were parked in rows on the stadium track, hundreds of them if not over a thousand...mobs of people you had to push through...t-shirted volunteers attempting to direct traffic or navigate the crush...a babel of languages. Eventually I was pushed toward the inside of the gym, as if by an incoming tide, and I peered through the door. Bedlam! All I could see was a forest of heads. The entire gym was packed, jammed with registering, sweating cyclists.

If it was like this now, how would it be at 5:15? Worse? I drove back to the hotel and informed the Ontario riders. A rumour had already started to circulate that there was no real bike check so you could go anytime, but I had seen nothing to confirm or deny that. It started to rain again. I had to return the rental car and be present for the photo just after noon, so I decided to pack the bike in the car, drive back, return the vehicle, and ride to the start for the photo. Anything to kill time. I drove to the train station, where the Avis rental desk was. It was closed for siesta, a nooner or some other French ritual. Now I was standing in the middle of a train station in cycling clothing holding a bike. The idea occurred to me that after PBP I would have still more time to kill on Saturday and Sunday waiting for my flight home, so I visited the ticket office and inquired about train fares, thinking it might be fun to take the TGV to Avignon or some place even older. It must be frustrating for ticket agents to deal with people who neither speak the language nor care where they go: after grimacing at the fare to Avignon I made her go through the same song and dance for Carcassone, which costs even more. Soon I became as bored as she was, although I was nowhere near as charming and helpful, so at about 11:45 am I left the station and rode over to the start.

The crush had eased considerably. In fact, the line up under the tunnel was gone. A man stopped me on the path, stuck a number on the top tube of my bike, and waved me on. It turned out that was the bike check; he rattled off the French for: “You got a bike? Good, you need one. Here’s a number. Off with you.” At the far end I parked the velo at the stadium track and ventured inside to see that there was quite a bit of space in the gym. Better and better! The registration tables were arranged by country and although the UK and USA lines were long, there was nobody at the Canada table at all. A helpful woman found my package in seconds, went through the contents with me in detail, at one point struggling with the English words to explain what would happen to me if I lost or forgot my control card (in this case, a booklet). I knew that already: I simply made the universal slicing motion across my neck. Yes, that was it, she nodded cheerfully. Lose the card and you’re dead.

Now it was across the hall into another line-up to receive the two PBP jerseys I’d purchased. This group was considerably more agitated. One reason was the absurd sizing- I am 170 cm tall and a bit under 70 kg in weight, and I was apparently going to receive XXL clothing, when I usually require M, or L at most. Apparently the garments were sized by pygmies. All kinds of consternation was evident as relatively normal physical specimens were issued 3XL and 4XL clothes, and there was no room at the counter to try stuff on...and while I took in the scene I heard a quiet voice at my elbow.

“Ees thees your first PBP?”

I looked over to see a small-ish Frenchman who for some reason looked like a schoolteacher to me. “Yes,” I responded, to be polite. “And you?”

“Seven” he replied in a matter-of-fact voice. Wha...seven? How old was this guy, anyway? “Seven!” I said. “Sept?”

“Yes, seven” he said. Then he took me into his confidence. He was probably just waiting for someone to share his expertise with...perhaps I looked green enough, or gullible enough. He begins: “Ze Paree Brest Paree ees a vary easy brevet. Ze hard part ees ze preparation.” I nod dubiously- the opening statement was difficult to lend full credence to. Nevertheless, twenty-four years of experience is talking at me here...

“Yes,” he continues. “You must be organized. Ze time is lost at the controls. I suppose you will ride as part of a team?” “No, not really.” “Good- it is best to ride on one’s own. When you are thirsty, you drink. When hungry you eat. When you want to sleep, stop to sleep. Only do not wait at the controls. That is all there is to it.”

I blinked two or three times, rapidly. That’s all there is to it, eh? There was more to every brevet I’ve ever ridden than that. Hell, there was more to pulling on my shorts than that. He continues to confide: “When you see your average speed fall, eet is a sign. You need sleep, you need food. Do not let your average fall.” Huh: my average speed usually starts falling at about 150 km. While I mull this latest gift from the oracle, a violent altercation erupts on our right- an angry but relatively diminutive Swede has been issued a 3XL jersey and is shouting angrily. My mentor asks, “Is he Spanish?”

“No” I say. “Suede- Swedish.” He looks at me blankly. “It is not typical of the Swedes,” I offer. “My friend,” he says wearily, “there are unreasonable people in every country.”

I was warming to the man, but now I reach the front of the line, and in moments I am issued my two jerseys and am carried away by the flow of the crowd like a drowned insect spinning in a stream. A volunteer at the table is making a slightly panicky announcement to the mob that it is chest size, not the tag on the jersey that matters. The quiet voice, now behind me, intones “Enjoy your ride, my friend.” With that benediction he is gone.

The current carries me around the perimeter of the gym. It is very hot. The FFCT (French Cyclotouring Federation) is selling neon green reflective rain jackets, which considering the weather here could be a good investment. Another table is selling energy gels and powders. There is a display by a bike builder. The crush of riders carries me past the tables and extrudes me out of the gym like squeezable cheese. I’m not sure they even have that muck in France.

It’s 12:15, so I head to the square at the start area. Much to my surprise I see what looks like all the Canadians are arranged in rows and photographers snapping away- but it turns out to be just the British Columbia riders. In time an even larger crowd assembles and we stand, frozen smiles cramping our cheeks for an interminable period as wives (mostly) juggle three and four cameras. I strategically place myself at the back so as to be invisible in the end product. Duty fulfilled, I head back to the train station to conclude the return of my rental car. It later turns out that having over 100 Canadians arrive at a single registration desk within 30 seconds of the photo being taken was not a quick or efficient process for any of them. In my bumbling way, I’ve lucked out again.

In total there are 116 Canadian registrants, or 0.00000347 percent of the national population. The largest group, of course, is the French, 2298 of them, or 0.0000376 percent, ten times more on a per capita basis. That's not surprising, since many of them can ride from home to the start. But we do much better than the Americans, who with 606 riders are only pulling 0.00000201 percent. Slackers.

Back at the Novotel there is, again, nothing to do. Sitting around watching French TV has limited appeal. You can only take so many naps. In the evening we all go out for the last supper at La Rosticceria, which does not disappoint. Even there, the topic of tomorrow's suffering is raised repeatedly; it's like that sore spot in your mouth that your tongue keeps probing.

The morning of the 20th dawns grey and breezy. Another whole day to kill. Breakfast: the crew is looking more jittery than ever. We debate the merits of attending the PBP pre-ride dinner, which involves standing in line to eat cold pasta- I have pre-purchased a E 12 ticket- and eventually hit some of the organizers up for extra tickets, just to give us options. Ten am: we can finally take our drop bags out to the DesPres truck for delivery to Loudeac, and suddenly it appears every guest in the Novotel is riding PBP- the line up snakes across the parking lot all the way back to the main entrance. Lunch time: with nowhere else to go we empty our wallets to dine at the hotel/golf club restaurant "Le Fair Play"- my plate comes with an aged-goat-cheese-on-crusty-roll which is so good I decide to pack one to take on the ride, as a sandwich. Afternoon: pack and re-pack the saddle bag, loiter around the bike room, check out of my room and move my possessions to Erez ("call me ET") and wife's room. Wife goes out for a while and he and I try and fail to nap. Evening: a rain shower comes and the urge to line up with a thousand others for pasta dissipates, so we decide to ditch the event dinner and eat at the hotel, again. Nobody managed a good afternoon nap and the mood approaches somber. New England Randonneurs occupy the table next to us, and they are not much more ebullient. We decide to ride to the start late, planning to arrive as the first wave departs about 9:30, in the forlorn hope that we might miss the worst of the line up. We sit around and grow progressively more silent.

The First Night

Finally it is time. We dress and meet in the lobby for 9 pm, rolling out minutes later. It is dusk, the evening is cool and cloudy, the roads still damp in places: could the rain have passed for good? I don't want to drain my batteries by using my headlights. We come to the turn for the easy route to the start, but Bob and Jean have a better idea...we follow them onto unknown streets while a growing apprehension that we might arrive too late mounts in me. Eventually they lead us into downtown St Quentin, but over by the train station- we've overshot by a k or two, but at least I know where we are again. In a few minutes we are at the start. Chaos is expected now...a wave of riders appears ready to go, the crowd is jammed along the barricades. We file down into the tunnel to the stadium and then creep forward inch by inch. There's a tremendous "boom!" of fireworks and cheers from the crowd as the first wave rolls out above our heads. Then we are in the stadium- holy God, the riders are four abreast all the way around both sides of the

running track, all apparently moving at glacial pace toward a control tent at the far end. We could be here for hours!

Another explosion, another gust of cheers as the second wave rolls out. We are inching forward. Thien Tran appears on an orange front-suspension Cannondale mountain bike with worn knobbys- a strange departure from his usual decrepit black fixie. Thien with gears? It turns out his frame has broken- a crack was detected under a layer of ancient hockey tape on the top tube- and this is a loaner bike. My god, across France on a mountain bike- but is it actually an easier option than the fixie? He takes a ribbing from all assembled: “Thien, do you know what to do with those things on the handlebars? They change the gears!” as we inch along. Boom! The third wave is gone. Erez, Fred, Kaz and I make an agreement to stick together for at least the first part of the ride; we know Bob and Jean will ride together, no doubt faster than we want to go, and Thien is too strong as well, but we four make a good group, I think. We are half-way to the tent. That’s when it starts to rain.

To be wet at the start is my worst-case scenario. Wet means chafing, almost inevitably, with no reason to believe my new bio-gel shorts and chamois cream can stave it off. Chafing means that after a one or two hundred k at most my butt will be raw, leaving only a thousand remaining k of agony. The rain is falling in sheets under the stadium lights. I pull out my rain jacket and pull it on. Nothing else to do about it now... Then we are at the tent, pushing our bikes through, wiping the raindrops off our glasses, pulling out our swipe cards and control books for the first time. Mine is stamped 10:50 pm. We’ve nearly lost each other in the funneling crowd, but we reform in the parking lot on the far side where we are held up again. After a few more minutes, we begin to move, riding at last, onto the streets and toward the start area. Another stop. I am so far back I can’t see the start line. Is this my wave or is there another ahead of us? The rain stops. There may be instructions or a count-down going on up ahead but I am too far back to know. And then we begin to roll...the report of the fireworks comes late, I’ve already crossed the start line and am into the roundabout, five hundred of us all jammed together. It has finally begun.

My first thought, of course, is not to crash. I have lots of pack-riding experience, but my history with the randonneurs at home tells me that almost none of them have any at all. Extrapolated across the five hundred riders in my group, I’m surprised we’re not all lying on the ground already. There is a sharp left as we leave the roundabout for the main road and I am almost pinched against the curb, but then the pressure eases. Next challenge- not to get so excited I start sprinting off like a madman. Even with self-restraint I am in the big ring and we are all motoring along at 30 kph or so along the wet roads. Are the others still behind me? Yes...on we go through the roads of St Quentin, through the “agglomerated towns” of Guyancourt and Elancourt, fast and easy in the tremendous slipstream of five hundred riders. I pass a lot of them. Maybe I am four-hundredth in the group by now...maybe I am two-thousand-four-hundredth on the road...

It’s just like being on a train. I know from the route sheet that there are several turns in the first 10 k or so, but there is no need at all to look at the sheet, or even to look for the

signs that mark the route: just follow the herd. It's really liberating not to have to navigate. I'm just riding easily and steadily with no particular exertion, and every now and then I check over my shoulder, or hear the voice of ET behind me, and I know the others are still there. Then the street lights are gone, and we wind out into the dark countryside. For the first time I understood what all the anciens and all the web reports have told me: the red tail lights of hundreds of bikes stream off into the far distance like a river of lava, a magnificent sight. But I notice something else that nobody has mentioned- it is happening in near silence. It is almost eerie. There is the rushing of wind past my ears, the whirr of chains, the sizzle of tires on the wet pavement, but there are almost no voices. Every now and then, a word- a rider checks on a mate, the Americans call a name: "Phil?" the French say "ca va?", a grunt of reply and it is silent again. The silence gives the river a kind of inexorability, like a true river that cannot stop until it reaches the sea.

Then there is a village. The street lights flare again as we pass the buildings. There is a cheering crowd out, they whistle and cheer as we pass, people in high windows over our heads call down to us. In one of the first villages there is a man playing an accordion. It's quite a reception for midnight, but it's also quite an occasion: the quadrennial coming of the cycling horde, like a vast migration, flowing through their town and out the other side in wave after wave. Back into darkness. I'm using only one headlight on minimum setting, just to satisfy the rules, for I can see quite clearly due to the headlights all around. The first hill: many slow down, I shoot by them, keeping pace with many, many more. The hills make me sweat, since I am wearing a rain jacket over a nylon vest over my jersey. Eventually I hear ET call out behind me, "do you want to stop to take off our jackets?" but I'm still in the flow and the last thing I want to do is stop, so I say "maybe in a while, not now". I don't know it then, but that's the last I'll see or hear of ET or the others for the next 24 hours.

There are more hills, long ones that rise before us intermittently, but none of them hurt. I simply cruise up them beside the others. At one point I realize that I am passing and re-passing a woman in a Canada jersey, which is odd, she's not built like a climber, how is she getting ahead of me? More villages, more hills. I take a drink of Perpetuem from my bottle, I don't want to forget to drink altogether. Gradually, gradually, the pack is thinning out. I begin to look for wheels to ride on. I come upon a small group of French riders, about eight, containing one woman, clearly riding together and I latch onto the back. They have a strong rider doing most of the pulling at the front, and they are perfectly smooth and disciplined as they flow around other riders and through a village or two, so I begin to feel that I could stay with them for a hundred k or so. In fact, I ride with them for no more than 10, at most, and then we encounter a bigger mass of riders, or one of them has to stop, I forget...but they are gone. I regret it- where will I find other wheels as good? We make a turn where the road signs point to distant Rambouillet and Chartres, and come to a brightly lit chateau on the outskirts of a town, some kind of historical site. It disappears behind. The roads are flatter and faster again.

Darkness again. I find new wheels- two Americans together, chatting as they go. The one man is huge, a perfect shelter...I wonder if any of these riders even know I am behind them. I am alone and silent, I stay on a wheel for 5 or 6 k and there is no sign they know I

am there. The Americans are, in general, not such good wheels as the French- these two guys are OK, but many are not. Then they slip away as well, and I regret it again. This will become the pattern of the next three days, riders met and lost, over and over, good wheels but a little too fast, or slow, or they stop, or I stop, or they are lost in traffic as we pass other groups. I never feel the panic that I do at home, when to lose the group means to ride alone for the duration; PBP is like one of those sushi bars where the food comes in an endless procession of little boats. There is always another rider, another group.

I come to a long straight road with streetlights along a row of trees, heading into yet another town. I have lost the others, for some time now...I don't know when or how but they are gone. Maybe I'll follow their suggestion to remove my rain jacket- and pee. I pull over. Immediately the riders behind begin passing, groups of five and ten shooting by, maybe thirty or forty by the time I'm back on my bike, but no sign of ET, Kaz and Fred, or anyone else I recognize. On I go. The first control is the "feeding control" at Mortagne, not a real control where I have to get my card stamped, but a place to buy food at the 140 km mark. In my planning I never imagined I'd want to stop there, which is odd since typical brevets at home have stops after 80 k or so- what makes me think I can breeze by the 140 k mark without slowing down? Anyway, now I'm beginning to wonder where it is. Maybe a stop for a bite isn't a bad idea, I have that cheese sandwich, and maybe I'll find the others there. But I'm not there yet. We speed through the next village, this time there is a bend in the road and an illuminated church on a hill, or there is an illuminated church at the foot of a hill, or there is a church and then a bend, the villages are all the same, cheering people and bright lights at what must be 3 am by now.

Then, somewhere before the 120 k mark, the rain begins. As always there are a few warning drops, and as the idea "I hope it's not going to rain" forms in my mind it begins to come down. This rain comes on deceptively, not too hard, and close enough to Mortagne that I decide I don't need to put my rain jacket back on since it will probably stop any time. It does not. The kilometers pass and I feel my feet are beginning to get wet, a certain sign that I will soon be soaked. Drops on my glasses make it hard to see the road ahead. Another village, not Mortagne. And then another which is, left turn and suddenly there is a town square full of lights and riders and rain. I slow and circle, looking for anyone I know, then looking for a doorway to pull into. Unsurprisingly they are all full of riders. I pull off the route, 50 m or so down a main road. There is a Caisse d'Epargne, the bank with the stylized squirrel logo that I call "Squirrel Bank", and a man is taking money out of an automated teller in a doorway. It's an ideal spot, I can see all the approaching riders enter the square, so I pull in.

I'm dripping wet. It's all quite miserable. I toy with the idea of just going back to St Quentin, but 140 k in the rain back toward home is not much better than 140 k away from it, and anyway, I didn't cross the Atlantic Ocean to quit PBP after 140 k. I take off my vest and stow it, pulling my rain jacket on and zipping it up to my collar. I think about all the things I didn't bring, like booties or my helmet cover, or don't own, like rain pants or waterproof gloves. I try to eat the cheese sandwich. It is both difficult to chew and disgusting: funny how the situation changes the food. I stow the uneaten half and eat a Lara bar, washing it down with water. I drink some Perpetuem. I look out into the rain,

which shows no sign of abating, and watch the patterns it makes under the streetlights. I've been standing here too long, perhaps twenty minutes, staring bleakly into the rain. Reluctantly I get on my bike and ride past the food tents and riders into the night. There is another 80 k or so to the control at Villaines la Juhel.

The topic "why?" sometimes surfaces among randonneurs. Why we do it, I mean. The usual answer is that we are crazy, which is nonsense. That's a good answer for a cocktail party, but it worries me that randonneurs might actually believe it, or worse, might not have reflected on the reasons at all. To me it's quite clear: we do it to suffer. Now that I've set off into the cold, dark rain to do another 1100 k or so, I have a bit of time to reflect on the subject of self-inflicted suffering.

The book on suffering is that it is something all sensible people try to avoid. It seems intuitive. All the things that sustain life, like food, shelter, and sex, afford us pleasure, while the deprivation of these things brings us misery. Framed this way, the simple act of living is a pursuit of pleasure, which implies the avoidance of suffering. Rationally, that's all we are: little bio-machines which pursue pleasure and avoid suffering. Yet it is equally obvious that if all we want to do is to pursue pleasure and avoid suffering, we've made a complete balls of it. As individuals, we suffer regularly; as a species, continuously. It's not just that we have failed to wipe out things beyond our control that bring misery, like illness and natural disaster, but more important, we've utterly failed to wipe out miseries over which we have complete control, like war, environmental destruction, and cruelty. Our best and brightest have chewed over this mystery for millennia, and the best we've done is to come up with spirituality and philosophy as the means by which we rationalize suffering. But as it happens I don't believe we want to avoid suffering at all.

Take randonneuring. There's no need for it. It's a pastime, a recreation. The suffering is built-in, inescapable, so it is a pastime founded on the inevitability of suffering. It's not as though the suffering is merely endured the better to reap the rewards- there are none. If there were positives that outweighed the pain it would be one thing, but put two randonneurs together and they don't talk about accrued physical fitness, the beauty of the passing topography, or the interesting birds and butterflies they saw. They talk about how much it hurts. "This is harder than the Oak Ridges 400; I remember on BMB when my back was so bad I had to ride the last 900 km without getting out of the saddle; I remember the time I bonked so hard I had to gnaw off my right foot; did you ever have diarrhea in your shorts; does anybody want any Advil?" Just read the ride reports: neither hail, nor sleet, nor food poisoning, concussion, heat stroke, boils, plague of locusts, hail of toads, well you name it, will stop a randonneur. When they complete one challenge, say a 600 km ride, they look for a bigger one, like a 1200. Did a 1200? How about doing one in the Death Valley, say the Furnace Creek 508? Or Race Across America, that's good fun...

The fact is, suffering is the sole universally shared experience of mankind. Well, except for birth and death, but we don't remember the former and can't swap stories about the latter. So by default, suffering is the key to the Good Ol' Boy's Club. Everyone secretly hates a champion, and everyone loves a loser. We can identify. That's me out there!

Literature is full of lovable losers- Don Quixote, Charlie Brown- and despicable winners. Sit down and tell us about the year you finished PBP with hemorrhoids and Ebola- it makes you one of us! Suffering is the price we pay to share this universal bond, so in a weird way, riding PBP is a reaffirmation of a shared humanity. That's why we don't merely accept suffering, but if we feel we're in short supply we actively seek it out, the way people with a chronic lack of essential minerals in their diet start eating dirt. And who is more suffering-deprived and out-of-touch with their essential humanity than the well-aged, well-off salarymen (and women) who make up the start list for marathon runs, adventure races and PBP?

What drags a man, still cold and wet, out of shelter and back into the wind and rain? To do- what? Ride a bicycle to Brest and back? Why? For no reason at all, except that I feel like doing it. Madness! There is no purpose to this, I am helping nobody (save the economic impact of my lavish spending on the French economy), I am accomplishing nothing, the starving are not fed, the sick are not healed. At least I am not harmful. I just suck in oxygen, blow out carbon dioxide, and piss on a few bushes. I beat no children, ruin no cities, abuse no employees, kill no trees, kick no dogs. "What is more excellent than prayer?" "More excellent than prayer, lord, is for you to ride three days straight, that for this time you will not afflict mankind." But that's no explanation for why I am making myself ride into the cold rainy night. I begin to see how this is a culmination, how I have in fact painted myself into a corner though a long series of decisions, investments and pronouncements which make it nearly impossible for me not to continue. The most subtle limitation on freedom is the self. This is the mystery: one voice tells me to go on and one voice tells me to stop, and I am both of them.

The next three and a half hours to Villaines contain few memorable moments. I am more alone on the road than ever, although there are still plenty of red lights ahead to navigate by. There are hills and villages I don't remember. My French vocabulary is expanding; I've learned that a *butte* is a shorter, steeper hill, while a *mont* is either at least 2 k of climbing, or just poetic license. At one point I suddenly start to feel very drowsy, the first time I've ever felt like falling asleep while riding, and I struggle with it; after ten or fifteen minutes it passes. Perhaps the rain in my face is helping me stay awake. At another point it seems to be getting harder and harder to see, I'm really straining to see the edge of the road and I turn my headlight to high. It doesn't help much. This is becoming dangerous- I may well ride off the edge of the road on a downhill. Belatedly I pull off the road, lean my bike against the wall of a church, and stow my glasses in my saddlebag. Much better- I can see the road again. Ride on. Drowsy once more, but it goes away again. Villages and hills and rain. It is the downhills that are the challenge, cold and dark, a reflecting road surface and raindrops in my eyes. I begin to take inventory of my body, which is nearing six hours in the saddle. To my amazement, my seat seems unchafed. My neck and shoulders, often sore and stiff by now, seem fine, as does my back. My hands are usually numb by now, but to my surprise seem quite normal. But it's dark and cold and I begin to pray for the light.

Napoleon Bonaparte, who was something of an expert, said "I have rarely met with two o'clock in the morning courage." This is the hour, just before dawn, when our circadian

rhythm is at its lowest ebb. We are tired, cold, weak and stupid. In the hospitals surgical patients in recovery rooms and elderly pneumonia victims in their wards give their last rattle and gasp. In the seniors homes the staff are wheeling the dead to the morgue before the sight can disturb the early risers on their way to breakfast. I try to look at my watch- it's getting toward 5:30 am. Six and a half hours on the bike. I expect dawn near six, but it's dark with clouds, even if the rain has tapered to a drizzle. Dawn will be delayed today. A long time passes, and little by little I convince myself that the sky is growing imperceptibly lighter. At something like 6:30 am I have to concede that light is penetrating the gloom, and I can actually see the shoulders of the road next to the dark fields and shadowy trees. The first night has passed; everything will be easier now.

The First Day

I'm near the 200 k mark now, and Villaines is at 222 k. Twenty-two k is no distance, and now that it's light I am more optimistic. There is a steady headwind which has been with me for hours now, but it is not strong enough to make me obsessive. I check my body over again. These shorts are nothing less than amazing, hours riding I the wet and still no chafing. I can see riders ahead more easily on the long straight roads, a long line of neon green rain jackets off into the distance. Where is Villaines? I am looking forward to some food. The drizzle has stopped altogether- more to be thankful for. Then, I am not sure how, I am there- Villaines la Juhel- there are cars and motorhomes and crowds, I pass by the control building itself, which appears to be the Town Hall, and see the bike parking stretching off into the distance. How far away am I going to have to leave my bike, anyway?

I'm more than 70 meters away from the entrance when I eventually see an empty spot, but I am on the wrong side of the barrier. But there is Jean Longtin- I wonder where Bob Kassel is- heading out from the control as I head in. He helps me lift my bike over the barrier, we exchange a few words, then he is gone and I plod toward the control. This is my first PBP control, so I have only a vague idea of what to expect- a crowd- and I am not disappointed. On one side of the large room, which might see occasional use as an auditorium, are two rows of tables and here the riders line up to have their card swiped and route book stamped. On the other side is another line up for food, although I cannot read the menu from where I stand. In between, rows of tables cafeteria-style, where riders sit eating and, surprising to me, sleeping. It seems too early in the ride for sleep. I pass through the control line and, swiped and stamped, enter the food line. After about five minutes I realize I've made a mistake, since it appears it will take me at least ten minutes more to reach the front, and all they are serving is pastry, but I continue to wait, eventually emerging with pain au chocolat and coffee. Now I have to sit and eat. When that's finished, I need to use the toilet. Another line! The washroom only holds two, but there are twenty of us lined up- on the men's side. On the women's, there is no line at all, the reverse of every other mass gathering of humanity on the planet. In time, some of the men begin to go into the women's, and I wait for howls from within that never come. I begin to think about it. An American in front of me says something like, "Take your chance, dude, but I wouldn't be caught in a ladies washroom." So I wait...and wait...and

by the time I am done and back at my bike, I have spent nearly two hours at Villaines control!

This is a nasty shock. I've lost two hours doing what should take fifteen minutes! I begin to see what the little Frenchman in St Quentin was getting at, and I decide two things- first, I need to make up some time on the road to the next stage, and second, at controls to come I will just get the book stamped and look for food and toilet elsewhere, at a nearby restaurant or bakery. But now I must get on with it. I am off to Fougères.

The first stretch takes us out of Villaines and toward the next towns, Loupfougères and Hardanges. Up ahead I see a car and several people kneeling by the roadside- they turn out to be photographers from Maindru, who will be happy to sell us souvenirs if we get back to St Quentin. I eye them suspiciously the first time I pass. Shortly afterward begins what turns out to be one of the nastier climbs of the ride, to a place called Bel Air. I grind steadily up in 42 x 27, passing a few riders. The whole thing must be nearly two kilometers long. At the top, there they are again- the Maindru people, with lawn chairs and an umbrella set up, flash blazing away like a lighthouse beacon in the drizzle. I decide to look determined, and I put on a fierce face and pass them climbing out of the saddle, which is not really necessary but makes a good photo. We go down the other side, then onto a long, grey flattish stretch crossing the N highway at Le Ribay- my mock determination on the climb has got me over-excited and I charge along for a few k in the big ring, passing riders by the dozen. At night it was the red tail lights, but by day it is the neon green of countless rain jackets, stretching off to the far horizon, and I am passing them in bunches. It's not wise, though, and eventually I get a grip and slow down.

Three riders come up, one a woman with the dragon flag of Wales on her saddlebag. Another is a big man with a shaved head who looks more like a rugby player than a cyclist, so I inquire, "Are you all from Wales, then?" The big bloke looks over: "Na...they are, I'm not." Then a voice comes from behind, the other man: "He just wishes he was!"

I like the Welsh, at least the few I know, so I take a bit of a chance and reply, "Why? Can't he sing well enough?" I've guessed well: both the man and woman behind laugh and the man exclaims "You heard us then! You heard us singing in the night!" He starts singing, not a bad voice at all. I ask, "Do you take requests?" and get the standard reply, "Oh, you mean, can we sing 'Far Far Away'?" "Well," I say, "I was hoping for 'Men of Harlech'". "We generally save that for the end" he says. It's a jolly moment, but soon the road parts us.

More hills, long but none so long as Bel Air. Then mostly down, speeding along to a town at the half-way-to-Fougères mark called Ambières les Vallées, which seems accurate as we are obviously near the bottom of something big. I recognize the inherent problem in this; shortly the road begins to rise up again. On and on, a straight open road through the fields, rolling and passing the odd herd of white cattle that I think might be Charolais. A truck goes by and I translate the words on the tailgate: "artificial insemination services." That must be interesting. Up to your elbow in cow, for a living.

Then I am at a bigger town, decorated for us with signs and bicycles covered in lights along the road side. One sign celebrates and encourages the “Les Gorronais” of PBP and names them all, “Allez Jean, Marc, Pierre...” This is the town of Gorrion. It’s here that my computer finally drowns in the rain: the display flickers, then fades, and when I press the buttons it begins speaking German to me. My first reaction is “Crap! Now I won’t know how far to the next control.” My second is to be pleased to be relieved of the tyranny of the thing. I will get where I am going in the end, and obsessing about what is sure to be steadily diminishing speed will only be another psychological burden. Or so I rationalize.

Every watering hole and bakery in every town and village has its cluster of parked bikes. Every time I pass one I wonder if I should stop too. Now, in Gorrion, I decide that it is time. I pull over at a small patisserie that promises baguette sandwiches, go in, wait my turn behind several nice lady customers, and eventually emerge with an immense jambon-et-beurre baguette and an iced tea. There’s really nowhere to eat, so I stand on the sidewalk outside, chewing and watching the steady stream of riders pass. I’m not half finished when the drops begin to splash down again, so I edge under a partially-deployed awning at the florist next door, which I share with a few townspeople. The rain accelerates. A photographer runs across the road to join us under shelter; I take him for one of the Maindru mob but he explains that he is actually employed by the ride organizers, to help create the official record of the ride which will be released in the winter. The awning is too small and we are all getting wet, but in a minute the young woman running the shop runs out, smacking her forehead in embarrassment, and fully extends the canvas over our heads. It does me no good- I have finished my sandwich and I have to wade out into the rain, get on my bike and ride away.

There is nothing too remarkable about the next kilometers. The drizzle stops and starts. There are more long, long hills, the “unrelenting climbs” that I was warned about, each one like a mini-Vermont gap, not nearly so steep but almost as long. One in particular stands out, Mont Romain, where the narrow road twists and slowing cyclists bunch together like leaves stuck against a gutter drain; I pass many as I climb on and on in 42x27, unzipping my rain jacket with one hand to dissipate the heat I generate. There are villages too, and at a pretty one with a stone church and houses with flower boxes I stop for a moment, take a picture of the long line of riders coming from behind, and ask a couple to take one of me standing by my bike. It is the last known image of me smiling on PBP.

One naturally becomes interested in what is going on beside the road, just to help pass the time. Almost from the moment the pack thinned out enough for me to take my eyes from the wheels inches away, I became aware that riders were stopping along the side. They are pulling on or taking off jackets, fixing flat tires, or waiting for others in their group. Later on- but surprisingly early, as early this morning- some are sleeping just away from the road, in bus shelters or any sheltered place, and as the days wear on, they can be found wrapped in reflective space blankets almost anywhere along the roadside. Most of all, they stop for a piss. It eventually became my standard operating procedure to avoid

the overcrowded toilets at the controls and to simply ride 5 kilometers out of town, prop the bike against a post or wall, and relieve myself. It's comparatively simple for a man, even in bib shorts. I wonder if the relative difficulty for a woman- I never see any of them squatting at the side of the road- explains why the women's participation rate is only about 7%. Someone should do a survey.

Now the road rolls downward for several kilometers, passing the Foret de Fougères and coming, finally, into the city. It is nearing two in the afternoon. We circle into the town, through roundabouts, following the PBP arrows. It's quite a big city. We pass large stores and small factories. Then just when I think I must be there, the route takes us off in a very unusual direction, apparently into the countryside again...onto a narrow lane and down a steep hill by a meadow...around a bend and what the \$#@!... look at the climb up the other side! I curse the route designers for this gratuitous use of terrain- there is absolutely no need for this, except to prove that if you look hard enough, there is a Wall of Fougères. I drop down onto the 30 chainring and pass some gasping riders. Then it's back into the city, right turn, pass the parked cars and vans and applauding spectators, and into the control.

Fougères was one of the least pleasant controls, I thought. All of them are in some type of school gymnasium. Fougères was just a bit smaller and older than the others. There are the same barriers outside to lean your bike against, the same relatively long walk to the control, the same line up, it's all just a little uglier in Fougères. I was aware of my resolution not to waste time, and in just a few minutes I was on the bike again, looking for a likely place to eat. Leaving the control, you ride down a hill on a main street through town. As it happened, there was a red light at the bottom of the hill. A few spectators are standing on the corner, watching the riders pass and applauding. There is a brasserie on the corner as well, with a sign board advertising the daily specials. Why not? I lean my bike against the wall and go in.

Immediately I feel as though I am on a movie set. You know the scene where the stranger walks into the bar and everyone stops talking and looks him over? That scene. I admit, in cycling clothes I looked a little *different*, but PBP was passing by the open window...it's not like they had never seen a cyclist before. I examine the denizens more carefully. They look a mixed, middle-aged group...it wasn't obviously a gay brasserie or anything...still, it's eerie...I take my helmet and gloves off. One of the proprietors beckons me to a table near the window. Conversation gradually resumes. A large, slightly tipsy middle-aged man and his sidekick come over to me. He begins to speak in broken English, still light-years better than my French. He wants to know why I am doing this. I do the translation in my head and say, "Parce que je suis fou!"

He blinks. Quoi? "Fou" I say. "You know, crazy. I am doing this because I am crazy." It takes three tries but eventually it begins to penetrate. I suppose he was expecting some kind of philosophical tract. I don't know why; philosophers have cardigans and pipes, or at least Sartre did, while my mode of dress is, well, fou. He changes tack. He used to be a cyclist too. Where am I from, America? "Non, je suis Canadien." Ah. I tell him if we were in Canada, he would be a good hockey player- "hockey sur glace". Quoi? I try to

get the concept across, making wrist-shot motions. The other guests are beginning to chuckle, as though there's some kind of inside joke I'm not privy to. I just can't get through to this guy, but he persists in conversation. He seems friendly, but is becoming a bit of a pain since my sole motive in visiting this particular establishment is to save a few minutes...eventually the proprietor asks me what I want and I settle for bifteck with pate, which I expect to be steak with noodles. When it comes the steak is thin, tough and resembles cheval more than beef, but I choke it down with Orangina. I fill my Camelbak with bottled water, pay and depart; the friendly drunk bids me adieu. Now I get to climb the hill out of town and try not to vomit as I do it.

Later on I reflect on my odd "Bad Day at Black Rock" reception at the restaurant and develop a theory. I see it this way: Buddy boy, after a few beers too many, was holding forth to the assembled about the sheer stupidity of the PBP riders passing by. What idiots! I can do it in a warm car in six hours- these fools are grinding themselves into shadows to do the same in ninety! And then in I walk. The crowd grows tense- will Buddy here just embarrass himself, or will he embarrass us all? He can't resist the chance to prove his point- why are you doing this, he demands of me. I disarm him by immediately agreeing with his thesis. "Because I am crazy!" Huh! Quoi? Non, monsieur, non! We are all good fellows, n'est pas? I was a cyclist too, in my day! But no doubt he is thinking, "le Canadien tres stupide..."

The roads are dry now, but it is a grey afternoon. The next leg, to Tinteniac, is only 55 km long, and I want to keep my speed up to regain lost time. There are lots of riders ahead to catch, once I leave the streets of Fougères, and I try to keep it on the big ring as much as I can. Once the climb out of town is behind me, the route is fast- I've finally found a flatter part of the ride- and I pass through Romagne into an area where the town names echo those of familiar Quebec: Saint Sauveur des Landes, Saint Hilaire des Landes. The road curves sharply and drops down into a valley, then curves the other way as we climb out. Near the 30 km mark I come to a different name, Vieux Vy, "view-vie". What's a view-vie? I don't know what speed I am making without my computer, but I am passing a lot of riders and feel that I am riding a kind of low-intensity time trial. This is the beginning of Brittany. I pass through Sens de Bretagne, just to drive the point home.

Suddenly my energy runs out, and I am struggling. Maybe it's the rain, which is falling again. The terrain hasn't changed much; the ground still rolls a bit and there are intermittent long hills to climb. It's just that the energy has gone out of me. It's not long since I've eaten, it's not that. I don't really know what it is. I do know that my speed has dropped and I am getting more and more anxious to see Tinteniac. I pass through a village called Dingué, which I christen "dingy", and encounter the Maindru guys again as I negotiate a wet downhill curve with a hay-bale in the middle of town. I wonder if they've set up there because the riders are crashing? No sign of blood or broken bits on the road...I'd like to stop and stay the night in Tinteniac and I turn the idea over in my mind, but of course I have no choice, since my drop bag is waiting in Loudeac. Eventually I drag myself into town and see all the tell-tale signs of a control: the crowd, the lines of parked vehicles, the barriers, and finally the waving volunteers in the grey and green

shirts and the steady trickle of riders past the gate and into the control area. I have ridden a little more than 360 km since the start.

I have no recollection of Tinteniac control at all, other than it is just like all the others, a square block of school and a million steel barricades to lean your bike against. I am in and out as fast as I can be. It's about 6 in the evening, and there are 85 km more or less to Loudeac, where I will definitely be stopping for the night. At one time I had daydreamed about missing what will undoubtedly be a huge crowd in Loudeac, taking what I needed from my drop-bag and riding on to Carhaix, but that is looking more and more ridiculous. I'll be lucky just to get to Loudeac...

Away again: follow the "Aller" sign pointing to Brest. The road is taking me into Brittany and into the "ac" country: I see signs for Medreac and Quedillac. Where is Maniac? Not far... At first the wet roads are fine, but after 10 k or so another huge climb rears up into Becherel. Sounds like a sauce. No, that's béchamel. Grind up and up. Fly down the other side, a welcome chance to rest. Time and distance compress on these rides; it seems not very long in terms of either until I am in Medreac, about 20 km out from Tinteniac, but it must have taken the better part of an hour. Now comes a countryside of long rollers, one after another, and you can see them lined up into the distance. Quedillac comes a little before the 30 k mark. The evening sky seems to be clearing ahead but is still dark and threatening behind, and I wonder if the pre-ride forecast of sun on the coast will turn out to be correct.

We turn south toward Saint Meen le Grand. Ou est Saint Meen le Petite, I wonder? Saint Meen features the usual groups of applauding spectators, with a few tables and tents at roadside offering food and coffee. Children lean out of bedroom windows to cheer us on: "Allez! Allez!" Now the sky is definitely clearing, yet dark will be coming soon, so on the far side of town I pull over to put on my reflective vest and eat some Lara Bar. It's turning into a pleasant evening.

More kilometers pass. Ilifaut- I just like the way that sounds, "eely-foe", so I repeat it to myself for at least five minutes- then I see a sign for nearby Merdrignac. It's all merde to me! I wonder what it's like to live in Shittyville. I comment to some riders who happen to be in earshot, "Merdrignac? How can they call it Merdrignac?" but get no response, so either the pun is lost on them, they don't speak English, or they simply regard me as a dangerous lunatic and are giving me a wide berth. Then we come to Meneac, which is close enough to maniac for all intents and purposes. Who names these places?

Somewhere near here I encounter another big climb. Up and up, on and on. Near the top I give a push the pedals with a little extra gusto and feel a small "pop" on the outside head of the right quad, near the knee, accompanied by a bright twinge of pain. That's not good. I'm not even at Loudeac yet. I ride on, hoping the pain, which is not great, will just go away again. It doesn't.

The Second Night

We drop suddenly down into a town called La Trinite-Porhoet. I am beginning to notice that all the town signs, as well as many signs within the town, feature a second language below the French. I assume it's Breton. It's an interesting discovery, not just that there is a viable Breton language- I didn't know- but that regionalism is strong enough to maintain it. But we have to climb back out of La Trinite, so I quickly forget all that. In due course we climb into Plumieux, which I dub "plummy", then through La Cheze, which I call "cheesy". Funny what little things amuse the mind. I have no idea how far I am from Loudeac, but it *must* be very close by now. Soon begins a long series of rolling downhills. I am with a group again, there are about 6 or 8 of them, and I latch onto the back. We are all in big gears, powering down the hills at a growing speed. The sun has set in the western sky, and there are definite breaks in the cloud through which I see stars coming out. Surely Loudeac is at the bottom of all this? Where the \$#@! is Loudeac, anyway? I lose the group and then the descending stops and the climbing starts again, but my enduring memory is of the long descent and the fact that on the return, we will have to climb it all.

By the time I approach Loudeac, which is long, long after I should have been there, the light has almost completely gone from the sky. The signs that I am approaching a town are all there long before it comes into sight. We cross a highway at a roundabout and I follow the signs. There are bigger stores and warehouses. I finally come into the town itself and pass a barrier, but the control is still 100 m off...I see a cyclist and a woman walking together, where are they heading? To a hotel? I know many riders have booked hotels for the night here, which are of course all full by now. The thought of a shower and a bed is almost overpoweringly appealing. It is about 10:30 at night; I've been on the road a night and a day and covered 452 km, which is by a little the farthest I've ever covered in a single 24 hour period. Now, here is the entrance to the control: the volunteers wave me in, right turn, this time onto a long, twisting barricaded path. There is a crowd, a big one, and they are applauding like mad as each rider enters, calling out "Bon route! Great ride! Good work!" There is a woman waving an inflatable kangaroo. I feel like I've finished a stage of the Tour.

The path turns sharply right as we single-file through the barriers, drops down a little ramp, and turns left behind a building. Here is another whole complex of buildings; we must be at some kind of college. What a crowd! There are riders everywhere and a vast, lit bike parking area to the right, with more buildings further to the right beyond that. On the left, brightly lit buildings house the control desk itself. I look for an empty space for my bike. It seems almost inconceivable, but in this acre of bike parking, with perhaps a kilometer of barriers if you laid them end-to-end, I can't find a space. Finally I find a space big enough for half of it, but by pulling several other bikes away I manage to thread mine in, replacing the others on top. Then I take my pouch out of the saddlebag and walk wearily up to the control. Really, all I want to do is to go to bed.

The control itself is small, crowded and hot, but I pass through and get my swipe and stamp. I see Lori Matthews, strangely without her partner Bruce Hogg- they've become

separated on the road and Lori is here to post a message for him. It's worrying, and I promise to let Bruce know about the note if I happen to see him. On the other end of the desk I decide to ask where the sleeping area is, since there are so many buildings on this sprawling campus. All I want is directions, but they insist on dispatching a personal guide, who leads me back past the bike parking area to a doorway with a long line of waiting cyclists- perhaps 40 or so- which is the dortoir. Merci! I wait and notice yet another doorway to the left where showers are available. First, though, I need to recover my drop bag, which is eventually found among a sea of similar bags under an awning which has failed to keep them dry.

Now I am back in line, holding both my saddlebag and drop bag. We snail forward. Without exercise to keep me warm, I notice the gusty, cold wind buffeting my wet, tired body, and I begin to shiver. It gets worse. I'm beginning to wonder if I will ever make it inside. When I do, I am confronted by a couple of tables and a big board numbered, as far as I can see, from 1 to 450. Four hundred and fifty beds! And they are almost all taken! There are perhaps fifteen free, if I am reading this correctly, and perhaps ten riders ahead of me in the queue. But in a few too-long minutes my turn comes and I fish out my E 3,50 and specify, using the little cardboard clock they have handy to manage the challenge of working in thirty different languages, that I wish to wake up at 4:30 am. That will be four and a half hours of sleep, more than I was planning originally, but originally I was not exhausted, wet, cold, and with a sore knee which I hope will be better in the morning. So I am going to treat myself to a bit of luxury, an extra hour on the gym floor, and wake up in time for a leisurely meal and a pre-dawn departure, the better to minimize my time riding in darkness. Screw the shower- it's off in another building and I'm not going back out into the cold.

A man with a flashlight shows me into a cavernous dark gym, with rows of sleeping riders, all four hundred-plus of them. Here is an empty mattress on the floor, with a folded wool blanket on top. I don't want to sit on it, since my clothes are all wet, but it's difficult to get out of the clothes without sitting down. It's a laborious process to spread my things along both sides of the mat, between the occupied mats to the left and right, without disturbing those sleepers. In the end I have to sit down, making the mattress wet, but I feel immediately that it's quite wet already. After at least fifteen minutes of stripping off wet spandex, putting on dry shorts and shirt out of the drop bag, laying out wet things in hope that they may dry some, and ejecting my disposable contacts onto the floor, I lie down and pull the blanket over my head. It takes forever to get to sleep.

The Second Day

Someone is gently shaking my shoulder. "Monsieur? Monsieur?"

I awaken. Everything is just as I left it, wet and snoring. I sit up and try to read my watch. They have awakened me right to the minute. Now I begin the long process of trying to move new supplies from my drop bag to my saddlebag in the dark, with the old challenges of darkness and the need to maintain quiet, and a new challenge, blindness. It takes a long time. I have to change the batteries for my front and rear lights. I have to

take everything out of the saddlebag, sort it, empty the garbage and put it all back in, and I have to put everything back into the drop bag, saving the soaking wet socks, shorts and jersey for the top layer. It all takes at least fifteen minutes.

I pull on my wet leg and arm warmers over dry shorts and socks, and put a new dry jersey over the top. I then put on my wet shoes, so in seconds my dry socks are damp. This is Day Two, the day I have been dreading. I assume that Day Three will be easier; I will be more tired, but closer to home. Today I am still heading out, toward Brest, and venturing into the unknown, the first time I will ride beyond 600 km in a single ride. This will be the hard day.

Finally organized and ready, I stand. Then I remember something important. I am a middle-aged man. The specific reminder is the sudden urgent need to urinate that I experience every morning. Usually the call finds me within ten steps of my own toilet. Today it finds me in the dark, holding two bags, blind without contact lenses, and a whole building away from relief. I try the usual things, vibrating my knees together like a hummingbird doing the Charleston and hopping from one foot to the other like a fire-walker on hot coals, but it doesn't work. I'm giving it everything I've got, but in a few seconds I piss into my dry shorts- enough to soak the front and half the chamois. Very nice. A perfect start to a perfect day. I can't wait for the rash to break out. Also, my knee is still sore. I hobble quickly off toward the door...but outside, where they take the money for your bed, some kind of commotion is going on. A familiar voice is shouting angrily.

I ease through the doorway. It's Erez, with Kaz! I haven't seen them since the start of the ride. Can they just be arriving here, at 5 am? How have I opened five hours lead on them, and how can they possibly finish the ride now? But ET is shouting at Kaz about something, which is extremely odd. Kaz appears to have dropped the little chit they give you on the floor. ET is one of the sweetest, most even-tempered people I've ever met, and here he is chewing Kaz out for dropping a slip on the floor...something must have gone very, very wrong. I say, "ET! Hi! What's going on?" and Erez snarls something about flat tires and Fred abandoning from the ride. Then they follow the man with the flashlight into the gym, leaving me feeling confused and uneasy; in fact I completely forget that I just pissed in my shorts. There is no time to find out more, so I head outside. It's still dark, windy and drizzling lightly.

After a brief adventure trying to explain in the shower hall that I don't want to buy a shower but merely need a place to wash my hands, I manage to insert new contact lenses and head toward the cafeteria. My drop bag goes back into a dry-ish place under the awning, and my saddlebag onto my bike, when I manage to find it. Since I arrived, many frustrated riders have simply dropped their bikes on the ground for lack of a parking space. It's the same in the cafeteria where the floor is littered with sleeping riders who no doubt arrived too late to find a mattress in the dortoir. I step around them and get into line. Half-an-hour later I exit, having eaten a large portion of fish on mashed potatoes ("puree"), yogurt, juice, and coffee, and taken a litre bottle of water to mix new Perpetuem as well as a couple of bananas for the road. Then I down a couple of Advil,

lube my chain, use a nearby bit of paper to wipe the puddles of water off my saddle, and mount up for the day. I've been in Loudeac nearly seven hours. Seven hours!

It's nearly 6 am, but there's no sign of light. The treetops are still whipping around angrily. I rode all day yesterday into a headwind, although in the general misery I didn't notice it too much. It looks like another day of the same. I negotiate the chute of barriers back toward the exit and turn onto the road to Brest. I will find out later that as I take the road, over 600 riders have abandoned PBP, the largest number, 365, officially showing as abandoned "before Carhaix", meaning they reached the Loudeac control and abandoned sometime thereafter. I know where they were: they woke up in Loudeac and simply couldn't face getting on the bike again for another day of cold, wet and wind. Despite my sore right knee, the thought of quitting has never entered my mind. Yet.

This leg is about 75 km long, which should take me about three hours, so I look forward to getting to Carhaix by 9:30 am. My knee is sore but it loosens up and in a while I've forgotten about it, more or less. Light creeps into the sky. The first test of the new day is after Uzel, where we drop down into a valley and climb out toward Merleac. I would describe this leg as rolling, bordering on choppy, with lots of hills one after another, but none of them too extreme. Then, a little before 8 am on this grey windy morning, in the little town of Corlay, I come to the first secret control; there is a man waving us off the main road saying "Controle! Controle secret!"

Well! An adventure! But it's really more of the same, the usual struggle to find a place to put the bike, pull out the pouch, get into the long line-up of riders. Interestingly we are next to a restaurant called "Le Clansman", which I assume purports to have a Scottish theme. Good thing they didn't spell it with a "K". Inside I decide to have a coffee and a pain au chocolat, and then I am off again. A direction sign points to "Mur de Bretagne"- I'm glad we're not going *there*.

We are out of "ac" country, but clearly in Brittany. The nearby towns have strange-sounding, almost Germanic names, like "Rostrenen" and "Kergoten". Past the 50 km mark the road evens out again, although it continues to pass through unremarkable fields of corn, cattle and occasionally, sunflowers. Plounevez-Quintin- in Breton it's "Kintin". I wonder if we'll see anyone in traditional Breton costume at the controls- women in those high white lace hats, for example. Eventually I see a sign on a shop featuring such a woman, which is as close as I ever come to the real thing. But there are still lots of small knots of spectators at the roadside as we pass through the villages, and an increasing frequency of riders heading back toward us.

When I begin to think we must be getting close we come to Le Montagne, which isn't one, and then to Mael-Carhaix. I know we're going to Carhaix-Plouguer, but it sounds like a suburb! It isn't: there are miles to go. I feel cheated. Mael-Carhaix sucks. My knee is still hurting, so I begin to look for the green cross that signifies a pharmacy, and eventually come to one which appears open in a pretty stone village. I nip in and in five minutes or less am out with a package of thirty ibuprofen tablets, taking the first two. By the time the ride is over, only two will be left.

Now the countryside changes character yet again. We come to a long stretch of hedgerows, with the road sunk low between walls of stone. The walls are themselves covered with moss and ivy so I am riding down long corridors of green, while the wind whistles over the top. Sheltered, I can pick up some speed. Riders head back toward me and I note the setting in my mind, looking forward to the moment later today when I enter this beautiful spot from the other side. Then I emerge. I come up on two riders just before a crossroad; one is a slight young woman wearing a New England Randonneurs jersey (they call themselves NERds), on a fixed gear. I've seen her before- it was her at the table next to ours at the Novotel on Sunday evening. And as I pass I hear her saying to her companion, "This was the first brevet we didn't ride to from home!" Fixie riders are a different breed, all right: I imagine her off in the dark near Boston somewhere riding 100 k to the 6 am start of a 400...heck if you're going to ride 400, might as well make it 600...and on a fixed gear. Why not? I shake my head and ride away.

We descend gradually toward Carhaix. At the moment I have no idea where Carhaix is, although it, like every control, is tardy. I conclude the French have lost control of the kilometer, especially in these ill-policed rural areas, letting the unruly things follow their own inclination to stretch out to unprecedented lengths. "Give them a centimeter, they'll take a meter" – the kilometers here might as well be miles, really. The buggers go on forever, each and every one. Rarely do you see a sign indicating distance to destination, and when you do, it's absurd, like "Carhaix-Plouguer 18" when it can't possibly be more than 5 km or so away. It must be expensive, changing all the signs every time the local kilometers grow a bit. Where the \$#@! is Carhaix, anyway?

Eventually, just as I'm about to give up altogether, I enter the traffic-zones and roundabouts that presage a town. It is Carhaix-Plouguer. There it all is: the parked caravan, riders pulled over to open tailgates and hatches taking on supplies; the barricades, the volunteers, the control. Carhaix control is nondescript, just a small white building. I park the bike and stand in line. Fixie-girl and her husband are right behind me. I thought I must have opened up 10 minutes on them, but there they are. I chat to them briefly, then am inside, card swiped, book stamped, out the other side...it's about 10 am.

This is the last leg to Brest, 88 km or so to the coast, and contains by far the biggest climb of the ride at Roc Trevezel. We will also pass through the oddly-named town of Huelgoat, where, for no good reason, I plan to take a photo of the town-sign. All that is a long way off, though. I take a couple more ibuprofen and ride out. On the other side of town, I catch up with a Frenchman and a female companion I take to be his wife, you can tell just by the way they ride together. We are at the foot of a long, gradual hill out of town. I go to the front and hear a voice from behind: "Doucement! Doucement!" It's funny how you never think someone speaking a foreign language is speaking to you...but he realizes the same thing and says, "Slowly!" Oh! I slow down. Also funny: I assume that just because these people are on home turf that they know how to ride a 1200 far better than I, and they all slow right down to nothing on each and every hill. I've been rocketing by riders on the climbs ever since Paris, and I'm not going hard. But this time I

slow down. It does no good, of course- they stay with me for the first hill, but on the next one I pull away.

After not-too-many k the character of the countryside changes yet once more. It becomes forested, for one thing. The terrain becomes more rolling. I find myself on a long very gradual climb through trees that reminds me of Vermont. It's quite beautiful, the air smells wonderfully of pines, and the sky is lightening...wait...it can't be...is that my shadow? It is! Minutes later, still climbing, I see a small patch of blue sky. Incroyable! I celebrate by pulling over for a pee.

Back on the bike, back on the climb. It's getting warm, and my rain jacket is fully open. The road winds to the left. Far ahead, across the rolling hills, I can see a church steeple on the highest point of land. There is no doubt in my mind that I am going there: where else would the ride take us? Twenty minutes or so later, my suspicion is confirmed and I climb into the town square and past the church. It makes me want to stuff a piece of newspaper under my jersey before the descent...I settle for zipping my jacket a bit.

Somewhere near here I pass an apparition. I've come up on so many cyclists from behind that they begin to seem the same, but this one is clearly very different. He's riding very slowly, for one thing. Then there is the black-and-white striped shirt and the black beret. It's a black, fat-tired, upright handlebar bike...I flash by him. Was that a braid of onions draped over his handlebars? Do such peasants still exist in France? Or am I hallucinating?

A few kilometers later, the climbing begins again, and the forest reappears. It's turned into a lovely day, with more and more blue patches in the sky and a temperature nearing 20. This climb also seems to go on at length. There are signs that seem to advertise hiking or camping areas and the cars passing and passed have families and loads of gear, much as we would see in cottage country. We pass a family out for a ride, the woman on a mountain bike, the man towing a child on a trailer. It's a long climb for that sort of thing, and a stretch to imagine too many North Americans doing it. The road takes a few twists, then there is is: the Huelgoat sign. I pull off for my photo. Then I remount, finish the climb into town, and take a road to my right that seems to lead to the shops. It's time for lunch.

On the other side of the wall, almost invisible from the main road, is the town square. It's really quite beautiful, the ring of little shops around the perimeter and a small treed park in the center. I find a patisserie with outdoor seating- all empty, as it's in the shade and still a bit early, say 11:30. Inside I order ham and cheese on a baguette, a big slab of tarte abricot, and an iced tea...outside, as I sit, a departing rider bequeaths me a litre of water. I eat happily, watching the traffic in the square. A baguette sandwich and a pastry may not be haute cuisine, but it beats the living snot out of what I get at a Tim Horton's or Subway on a brevet at home. Huelgoat is evidently a holiday sort of town, for many of the pedestrian passers-by are British. In a minute an American rider comes up, sees me, and stops- it's like seeing trucks outside a diner, one bike is sure to attract others- and goes in for food. Then a Brit rides up. I bequeath them the same liter of water, which I

can't use, and am away again, soon back on route and passing the little lake at the edge of town. I wonder who that litre of unwanted water will go to next?

The route continues to twist and turn, and eventually we begin to climb again, a long, gradual climb. As it often does the climb seems to bunch the riders on the road, who are all around me now. I hear a French rider to my left say, in English, "this climb is six kilometers long". Really? But it is, it goes on and on. I am climbing happily in 42 x 24, passing people as usual. I pass a number of recumbents. One of the recumbent riders sounds ready to have a heart attack- a rhythmic wheeze emanates from him- but as I pull along side I see it is a strange kind of rowing-bike and it the mechanism groaning as he pulls steadily on the handle, propelling himself along. Rowing across France: curiouser and curiouser. Next I come upon several Americans, one of them chatting compulsively to a companion who seems tired of him. The chatterbox swerves left and right, yo-yos up to his companion then back; the Americans are so often awful wheels. We come to a bit of a crowd and I pass them all by. Up and up we go, gradually, I am not breathing hard but I am passing riders in bunches of two, three and four. Over to the right I spy several riders in Canada jerseys standing by the shoulder- Dick, Cary, and Rolf- and wave.

The climb leaves the trees behind, and comes to a high plateau covered with waving purple heather. It seems to be flattening out, but we are still climbing. It dawns on me that this must be Roc Trevezel, but I see no sign bearing the name. Now there is a rocky outcrop ahead, red rocks piercing the heather, and a wind across the treeless plateau. There are cars and vans pulled onto the side, their occupants out cheering us on, as though this were the Alpe du Huez. I can see down the other side, rolling hills into the distance and the immediate descent back into forest. Is that a patch of blue ocean far ahead? Riders are climbing up toward us on the return leg with the wind at their backs. I envy them.

We fly down the other side of the Roc. The riders I recently passed shoot by- why is that always the case? The recumbents and tandems always descend like rockets. In a while as we drop down I see Thien coming toward me on the other side of the road. He can't have more than an hours' lead on me, we must close to Brest- how can that be?

We are, in fact, nowhere near Brest. The place we are nearing is Sizun, and there are probably 30 km still to go to Brest. I hear a familiar voice and there is Dick Felton beside me. It's been a while since we rode together, since June's Huron Shores 600 in fact. He'd come into Markdale and our shared motel room an hour behind me that night. The following morning I found him a little too slow and, at his urging, rode away to complete the ride alone. Now he had caught me from behind at the 580 km mark. I said, "Dick! You're going like a train today!" or something similar, and we settled in to chat for a while. He told me that Rolf was having a tough time and might not finish, that there had been a record number of abandons already, and that the controls were allowing an extra two hours just to help riders get in. We talked about his aluminum water bottles: "I used to be in the plastics industry, I know what happens to plastic"- and about my helmet light: "Neat! But isn't it heavy? Doesn't it bother you?" It was nice to have, at last, someone to talk to. It certainly made the miles pass more quickly.

Brest, like every control town, was not where it was supposed to be. We kept dropping down hills and I was sure Brest was at the bottom of each, but it never was. I kept looking for the top of a suspension bridge ahead, above the treetops, but I never saw it. We crossed a major highway which could only have served Brest, and still it wasn't there. So, where was it? Then, there was the water- a glimpse anyway, then back into trees. There it was again! We entered something like a park...there was the bridge! At last! They say you don't forget the sight of the bridge to Brest, but what you really remember is the infinite road that precedes it. Somehow I'd opened a little ground on Dick, and when I got onto the bridge itself- battling the wind gusts- I pulled over, took out my camera, and waited to take a picture of him as he crossed. This accomplished I had to catch up with him again.

Foolishly I imagined that the control would be just on the other side of the bridge. Instead the road circled down under the bridge nearly to the waterfront, past a rail yard. Nothing down here looked even remotely like the massive gymnasium which would house a PBP control. Unsurprisingly, the route then turned away from the water. I knew what that meant: it meant up. Up and up. Brevet designers are sadistic bastards, all of them, and this lot had determined that for symbolic reasons we had to cross the bridge and see the sea instead of taking a more direct route to the control. Now we had to climb, a steeper climb that resembles Dundas hill near Hamilton. I shifted onto the 30 chainring, put my hands on the tops, and climbed.

It's hot. There is a narrow bike lane at the right shoulder and as I catch other riders we bunch up in the lane. We climb for several hundred metres...and then I see a disturbance on the right shoulder. First the flashing lights. Then I see a small white Renault on our side of the road, pointing toward us, with a smashed grill and a head-sized spider-web indentation on the windshield. It was inevitable that I would next see, as I painfully climbed by, the ambulance workers clustered around the sprawled body and the twisted bike, a celeste green Bianchi. I say "No!" out loud...the thought that one of us had come over 600 kilometres to be hit by a car within a few hundred metres of the Brest control is an outrage, a terrible insult. Somehow I form the impression that the rider is still alive. The image stays with me for a long time.

Little by little we come to the top of the climb. Here it is at last: the Brest control.

Inside it was much the same, although in a newer, more attractive building. After the control formality I looked around a bit. They were giving out a free drink to riders, and I passed on the Kronenbourg and took an Orangina. There was no serious food in sight, and I didn't want to get in line, anyway. They were selling cycling things in the lobby. If I expected traditional dress, dance or anything else by way of a greeting celebration, I was disappointed. I *was* a little disappointed; the half-way mark should be celebrated. It was a bit anti-climactic, although not for the guy out there lying beside his Bianchi. I decide to get on my bike and look for a place to eat elsewhere.

Retour: The Way Home

Leaving Brest is different than entering it- instead of retracing our steps we are directed to the right (the sign says “retour” and “Paris” to make it easy for us) and through the town. I’m interested in finding a place to eat but this particular road is long on car dealers and short on restaurants. There is the usual broken string of riders ahead and behind but I am more or less on my own, pedaling steadily as my sore knee loosens up again. Nothing looks promising...then, on the left, I see a patisserie and swing across the road. In a minute a couple of others join me. Inside I see, unfortunately, that this is not a “sandwich-making” patisserie. There are loaves and baguettes and lots of pastries, though, so I order two pains au chocolat and an ice tea, and go outside to eat. The other riders are English-speaking, possibly Canadian, although I don’t ask. The pain au chocolat is outstanding, the best since Paris: buttery, light-as-air pastry that first explodes then melts in the mouth. Wonderful. Unfortunately, I can’t sit here on the parking lot in front of a patisserie all day.

Preceded by the others, I am off again, re-entering the steady stream of riders. It is warm and partly sunny but the tail wind, which I had eagerly anticipated for hundreds of kilometers, is absent- if anything, I am still riding into a headwind. I block this out of my mind on the basis that I am probably going north or south, not east, so the tailwind (or at least a cross-tailwind) will no doubt make itself felt in due course. There is a long bike lane which occasionally diverges from the road, which we follow until it ends. We climb into the town of Guipavaz, then out and eventually into Landerneau. From time to time I see a small crepe factory, a specialized sort of bakery I guess, as we pass. Then in time we are free of the towns and back into a rolling countryside, unfamiliar as the east-bound route diverges from to the westbound until Sizun.

Now I’m perhaps 30 km out of Brest. The sky is darkening again. I look up the road and see the unmistakable grey curtain of rain a few hundred meters ahead; unfortunately I meet the shower just as I begin to descend a long hill at speed, so the drops suddenly sting my cheeks and hands and I splutter and drop my head. Cold, cold rain. Then it stops again, although I am wet by now, and I ride on wet roads for a time, passing road signs that seem to point in different directions yet constantly direct me to the same village, as though I am riding in a huge circle around it. Where am I?

While I ponder this I am suddenly reminded of the mistake I made in Brest, which was not to eat a meal. From Brest to Carhaix is 85 km and that’s simply too far to go on pain au chocolat, so now my energy level is crashing. I am drying again so I pull off the road and fish out a Lara bar, which I wash down with water from the Camelbak, and then I eat a gel. All this time riders pass in a steady, if interrupted, stream. One asks if I am OK. I swing my leg back over the saddle and start off again, hoping the food will do me some good. Perhaps I will be able to get another sandwich in Huelgoat- the pastry was delicious- and buoyed with that thought I carry on. This is the trick of riding such distances, to focus only on the next town or at most, next control, and to choose some pleasure- a meal, a sleep, a tarte abricot- that one expects to find there. Eventually I am in Sizun.

Somewhere after Sizun, perhaps at the ominous-sounding Ty Douar, starts the long climb to Roc Trevezel. The sun is out in fits again, the road is dry, and the warmth is back as I begin the long ascent. I climb steadily in 42x24 and am no longer surprised to gradually catch then pass a long line of riders on the road ahead, although I am surprised when from time to time a faster one passes me. Somewhere on these lower slopes I catch him again: the apparition, I mean. This time I suspect something. The first time, he could have been real. But twice in one ride? Traveling the route along with us? There he is, huffing slowly up the climb on that monster of a bike, three speeds at best, the braid of onions and all- and there is the frame number! Unbelievable! To do this ride, in costume on that outrageous bike! I ride off shaking my head. Is he really French, I wonder, or just some psycho American?

I know the road, it's still fresh in my memory from this morning, as we climb on and on through the trees, a steeper climb up this side, and into clearing as we approach the top. I stop at a crossroads to pee and to open my rain jacket for maximum ventilation, but I still don't bother to remove it. Then I am back on the road again, still climbing toward the distant twin peaks of rock that jut from their grassy surrounding, across the bare terrain at the crest and following the road as it veers left in a broad arc to pass around the rocks rather than over them. Near the top I see a sign advertising a Col-de-something off to my left- it's very Tour- then I am on the plateau and beginning to descend the other side, toward Huelgoat. It's a long way down but not especially fast, for the grade is not steep, and soon I am back in the forest. On and on the road tracks, riders pass me and I pass them, I make mental comments now long forgotten on road signs, telephone poles, vegetation, and other bikes, until eventually I am passing where Huelgoat should be. Somehow, though, they have changed the route again and we pass well south of the town- I glance at my watch and it is 18:15, so the patisserie is no doubt closed anyway. I am not as disappointed as I should be, having kept the reward of food in my mind so long, but there is still a pang of regret. I'll just have to make it back to Carhaix.

The rolling, curving alpine road I enjoyed this morning is gone- I am on a much less interesting stretch for the return. It winds on. The wind is not unfavorable, although it is no great help either. I try to remember the control in Carhaix- it seems to me I will go down a long hill into the town. I do all the calculations in my head, over and over: the time I expect to be in Carhaix, how long I can spend there, the time I will have to be back on the road to Loudeac. It goes on forever, and the closer one comes to a control the more time expands, the longer each kilometer becomes. Finally I am on a long hill which may or may not look familiar, then I begin to see the Carhaix-Plouguer signs and I drop down into the town, following the signs and riders through the roundabouts, wiggling through the side streets, then seeing the long line of parked support cars and vans on both sides of the road that marks the last few hundred metres, past the waving flagman monotonously announcing "controle...controle...controle", past the barricades and finally, walking the last steps to the bike parking. Find a place, open the saddlebag, remove the pouch, head for the controle line-up.

As usual, the room is stuffy and close after the breezes of the open road. We clomp along toward the control table, where the septuagenarians accept the swipe card, stamp the

book and write in the arrival time. Then I am free and out the other side to search for a meal. All the table talk is of “worst weather in fifty years” and the persistent rumour that extra time has been added at all the controls just to keep the attrition rate down. I hear that twenty-five percent of the riders have abandoned. I finish up and begin the search for the bike again, but this time I’ve parked it close to the entry to the bike park and it is uncommonly easy to find. Fill up the bottle, stow the pouch, take the ibuprofen, close up the saddlebag...walk the bike away from the park, dodging incoming riders and walkers...and just as I swing my leg over the bike and clip into the pedal, it starts to rain again. This is too much: I dismount and lean the bike against the nearby bike-repair tent, then shelter under a covered walk which runs between buildings of the sport complex. I sit on the concrete and wait- if it’s like most of the showers on the ride, it won’t last long.

After a few minutes I begin to wonder if the bike tent, which I am sitting opposite, has booties. Everybody else seems to be wearing them- unaccountably, I left mine at home. Perhaps I thought it would be summer here. Anyway, I walk the few steps through the rain into the tent, and ask for shoe covers. But of course! The harried employee leaves one customer to mull a purchase and darts into the van/warehouse which is parked along one side of the tent, emerging with a large Rubbermaid container. He pulls out two kinds- a nylon Adidas set and a neoprene Look set. Which are better for the rain, I enquire? The neoprene, he assures! I take a pair and try them on, whence comes a sepulchral German-accented voice from behind: “Of course, neezer will keep your feet really dry in ze rains.” Well, danke, Fritz, for that gem of wisdom...you can always count on a Kraut for a cheery thought...but I part with my E 30 happily all the same. Even if my feet are wet they will at least be warm. (To be fair to Germans, I’m not that good with accents. The gloom behind me could have emanated from a Dane or a Dutchman. Feel free to substitute my slur with one of your own, like “cheesehead” or “pot-smoking bastard”.)

I return to the shelter of the walkway and put on my new booties. In ten minutes or so the rain stops, as I knew it would. I wipe the pools off my saddle and remount. I am off on wet roads to Loudeac.

From Carhaix to Loudeac is 76 kilometers. I’ve run the numbers through my fuzzy head repeatedly: at 20 kph, not quite four hours, rounding up, so I should be there at perhaps midnight. That’s not too bad. I cannot stay as long as last time, but if I sleep three hours and eat, that will be roughly a five hour stop. A five hour stop will have me back on the road at 5 am, which is not bad at all, because after an hour of riding the dawn will come. It seems like a very satisfactory schedule.

The Third Night

The first town of any size one comes to is Mael-Carhaix, which I remember primarily because of the irritation it caused me on the way in. I sneer. It’s behind me soon enough. I’m waiting for the hedgerows, which I remember as the peaceful, pleasant stretch outbound where the sun first began to peek through the clouds, but when I eventually encounter the place most of the charm has worn off: the sky is grey, darkness is gathering, and the road is damp and littered with the plastic tubes Euro-gels come in. The

hills begin again as darkness falls, around 10 pm. At first it goes reasonably well. The long line of scattered red lights stretches off into the distance making the route easy to follow. The road is more difficult, especially on the descents, where I tend to cling to the white center stripe for guidance. Then the rain comes again.

Now misery takes firm hold. Each descent strips me of body heat, while the rain stings my face. Soon the downhill becomes treacherous, not because the road surface is slippery but because I am shivering so violently it is hard to hold the bike in a straight line. There is nothing I can do but brake harder and harder, until eventually I am crawling down hills at about 20 kph in the dark, trying to keep to the center line and still keep track of the turns ahead. At the bottom of each hill I am breathing hard, partly from the exertion of braking, partly from fear, partly from general exhaustion, and as my speed slackens and I can release the brakes I am thankful that another uphill must begin at any second. On the climbs my body heat is restored...and this cycle of freezing and thawing, braking and climbing, occurs dozens of times on the stretch of road. I have ridden up into a scattered group and one woman's voice, an American voice with a Southern inflection, is a sort of aural beacon I follow in the darkness, although I have no idea what she is saying. No doubt it would be the same if we were married.

The rain is running down my face. Where the #@!\$ is Loudeac? Relax, I tell myself, it's nowhere near. You will see the signs when you get close. The rain tapers off to a drizzle. I am climbing, climbing, following the red ants. At one turn I have trouble seeing the arrow and go straight instead of right, but realize my mistake in seconds- there is an "X" sign if you go the wrong way- and turn back onto the route. Through a village or two, with the same families applauding by the roadside, or just watching in silence, but no place in particular to eat or stop. Where is Loudeac? Without my computer it's hard to know if I've traveled 10 kilometres or just one since I last asked the question. There is a glow on the far horizon- is that it? The glow looks too small, and 20 minutes later I see why as we pass through yet another small village and out into the dark. Now there are two glows on the far horizon, and no doubt these will disappoint me as well. But where is it?

It starts to rain again, harder, lashing my face. Back on the brakes...a bit of speed wobble this time, or is it just me shaking? Brake harder, knees against the top tube, until I reach the bottom and then begin to climb again. This is insane, I'm going slower down the hills than up them. I know Loudeac can't be too far, but how far? Ten kilometers? Twenty? An answer will inevitably disappoint me: too many times already I've hoped to be in the last 5 km or so to a control to hear one rider comment to another, "Twenty to go now" or "Fifteen more". We are nearing the next glow, the rain is falling harder, if I am going to die on this ride it could well be soon...

We enter another dismal-looking one-streetlight village. Maybe it's Grace-Uzel. On the left is a tent serving food- it's a good time for a stop. Soup would be perfect, or coffee. I lean the bike on the canvas wall, pull out my money and duck in from the downpour. There is soup. It appears the tent is being catered by a brasserie across the street, as a woman keeps replenishing supplies by carrying containers back and forth. There are a

number of damp picnic tables under the tent and serving tables at the back- food is strewn across them, a loaf of crusty bread and a knife, a stainless tub of cooked sausages- as I strain to see the menu board. When my turn comes I ask for soup, but no, the last bowl has just been ladled out...I study the board. Casse-croute, what's that? "Q'est que ce 'casse croute'?" "Sausage sandwich". It does not sound promising, but I say « OK » and the proprietor grabs a sausage with his bare hand, places it on a slice of bread and hands it to me, sans plate or anything else. I get a coffee in the inevitable plastic bowl and take it to a table where I put my food on the wet wood. A small contingent of Germans surrounds me. They talk and one of them, finishing an alcoholic cider declares it good. I sit in my wet clothing, chew on the cold rubbery sausage, sip the coffee and listen to the sound of German. It's like a trench scene from *All Quiet On The Western Front*, which was, after all, only a few hundred k from here. I imagine myself caked in mud from head to toe, cringing at the sound of exploding shells and fingering my bayonet nervously- well, at least it would all be over soon, not like this debacle... The Germans depart. I am finished eating, but looking for an excuse to stay. The cold rain streaks down under the streetlight and blows across the pavement in ripples as cyclists pass by in ones and twos; neon rain jackets and reflective vests glow incandescent and then, just as suddenly, are extinguished. I can't stay here. Regretfully I stand, walk out into the rain, rub the puddles off my saddle with my gloved hand and mount up once more. I'm worried about the soaking my saddle is taking, since Brooks saddles don't stand up well to the wet, and I think about what Napoleon's brother Prince Jerome said at Waterloo: "Is it possible he will not seek death at the head of his troops? He will never find a more glorious grave." Well, a Brooks saddle can find no more glorious fate than to be destroyed in Paris-Brest-Paris. Off I go.

I'm getting used to this now. I know the first few minutes will be the worst, until I can generate heat. Where is a hill? I need a hill! I am shaking violently and gasping from the shaking, it's like having a seizure. In time a hill comes. The red dots are farther apart now, harder to see and to navigate by. I head toward the next glow on the horizon...after an age I come to it. Another village. I head for a bigger glow. Loudeac? No. Perhaps this is "outer Loudeac", some kind of suburb? You can tell when you enter a larger town by the kind of buildings that surround it, wealthier houses, smarter cars, businesses like building contractors and small factories surrounded by chain link fences that simply don't exist in the small villages. A sign says "Zone Industriel", that's a very good sign. And after a small gap of a few hundred metres, down a hill and under a bridge, then streetlights! Finally, finally, Loudeac. Finally, thank God.

I follow the arrows through the roundabouts, through the streets, past the shops and then at last to the long lines of parked cars and vans. It looks vaguely familiar, only remotely, even though I started my day's journey here some nineteen or twenty hours ago. There are the barriers, there is the man waving us in...through the long rows of barriers that characterize this control, twisting, slippery in the wet. There is the bike park under the lights, it seems there are even more bikes than last time, there must be five hundred! Some bikes are lying on the ground, their owners having despaired of finding a space on a rack. I eventually find a small space and wiggle mine between several others. The same routine: I have to unplug the front light, turn off the rear- it's surprising how many riders

just leave the lights on- open the saddlebag, extract the pouch, then off to the control desk- up the steps, in the door, wait in line in the sudden heat- swipe the card, collect the precious book, back in the pouch, out the door. How long is the line for a bed? No line at all! I am terrified this means they are full up...I find my bike, unhook the saddle bag, walk to the awning, find my drop bag and carry both to the dortoir. Someone comes out. I step in. They are still open, thank Christ! But in the small space there is a traffic jam, eventually riders come in behind and the semblance of a line is lost, it threatens to become a free-for-all. A woman behind me restores order and I concur: "It's that guy, then him, then me, then her, then you." Nods all round and an apology from one guy- but I notice an Italian has edged past while we were getting sorted. Oh, well, Italians.

Eventually I make it to the front, purchase my three hours and thirty minutes of mattress and follow the flashlight into the darkened room. It's slightly easier this time. I would like to collapse on the bed but I am too wet, first I have to undergo the laborious process of peeling off layers of wet nylon and spandex and then spreading my wet things along both sides of the mattress, to facilitate the drying which of course can't occur in only three hours of dark and damp. With my wet clothes off, I put on a dry shirt, eject my contact lenses onto the floor, pull the blanket over my head, and in time, among the snoring, rustling and continual clip-clop of riders coming-and-going in cleated shoes, I fall asleep.

The Third Day

This time I awaken before they can find me. I look at the blue glow of my watch and try to make the numbers come into focus: 4:30 am. Well, I've had three hours, that should do...I begin to organize my clothes, all still soaking wet. Both my pairs of biogel shorts are wet, I'll have to use the third "ordinary" pair and submit to the inevitable chafing. I hear what sounds like a barrage, a frenzied drumming on the steel roof of the gym. Marvellous! It's pouring rain! And then, just as it did the previous night, comes the inevitable, irresistible need to urinate; but I am quicker this time. I remember the spare water bottle in the drop bag, and quickly unscrewing the cap, I fill it half way. I wonder if I will ever drink from that bottle again...ah well, on a ride like this, everything is expendable.

I stumble, blind, from the dortoir. It's not raining after all, or it's just stopped- the pavement is still wet, if indeed it has ever dried since Monday. I know the drill. Off to the shower, explain that I want to wash my hands, be directed to the change room; spread my stuff out, wash, insert contact lenses; able to see, replenish my saddle bag from the drop bag; collect belongings, depart the steamy shower-hall into the cold damp darkness. Replace the drop bag under the awning, spend 10 minutes finding a red Marinoni, struggle to clip the saddlebag on. Take the pouch, off to the dining hall. Step over the bodies, stand in the line, collect the yogurt, iced tea, fish and puree, water and coffee...pay and delicately balance the overloaded tray, spilling the coffee nonetheless...find a space near a familiar face, an American. We commiserate while I shovel food into my face. The one exchange I recall is that some riders would gladly accept another day of rain for a tailwind, while I myself would brave a stiff headwind for

dry roads...and then I stand and make my standard remark, "Well, off to throw myself at the road again!"

It's good to escape the overheated dining hall. I replace the sacred pouch in the saddlebag, plug my front lights in and lube the chain, swallow my ibuprofen, wipe the water off the saddle, clip into the pedals and ride away. On the slippery twisting laneway of barriers there is a short up-ramp and the rider I am following stops suddenly short...I say, "don't stop NOW", but it's too late, and the woman in front of him, for whom he has stopped, crashes down. As I pass I hear her say, "I think it's my arm again" with a tone of terrible, or perhaps thankful, finality. She will abandon, no doubt. I wonder if she deliberately threw herself at that barrier. But now I am at the sortie, the big arrow points to Paris, and I am off into the darkness again.

There are 450 km left in the ride now, and 85 km to Tinteniach. A fine drizzle wets my face and the dark treetops are still lashing in the wind. I wait for my knee to loosen up. It's not too long until dawn and I always feel better after some sleep and a meal. In half an hour I am in Cheesy, then out the far side and onto a long climb. I seem to be benefiting from a tail-cross wind: not what I'd hoped for, but better than nothing. In an hour I've cleared Plummy and am climbing another endless set of hills, which at least I can see in the grey morning. I vaguely remember hurtling down these in the big ring, bound for Loudeac in the dusk on day one. Half-an-hour after that I've reached Maniac, where I stop at the roadside across from the church for a cup of instant coffee and a large slab of custard-flan-on-napkin. And there are Dick, Cary and Rolf! It seems that every time I forget them, they appear at my elbow again. I enter into chat with a Brit- telling the story of my visit to the train station looking for a trip into the country to occupy the coming weekend, which ends with the punch line, "What was I thinking? If I never see another French village in my entire life it will be too soon!" He laughs. Too soon, also, I am on my way.

I had remembered that on the way into Loudeac on Tuesday, the road seemed to drop constantly for kilometers prior to the control, so I had some dread of the return leg. By Meneac, though, the climbing seems to be behind me. Now I settle onto long stretches of more-or-less gentle rollers. It is grey but drying, there is some tailwind. I settle on the drops. I pass Saint Meen le Grand and strike back into -ac country: Quedillac, Medreac, and eventually see the signs for Becherel. I think of sauce again, even though it's still béchamel sauce. It's been hours: where the #\$@! Is Tinteniach? But Tinteniach is nowhere in sight, and as a punishment for even thinking about the next control, the road rears up again. Up, and up...and then, eventually, inevitably, down and down. The clouds show some signs of breaking as finally, finally, I reach the outskirts of Tinteniach, sometime after 10 am.

Same old, same old. Park the bike, take the sacred pouch, leave the rest behind. Get in line, hand over the card and book, merci, merci, out the door. But as I pass the medical room, I have an idea: maybe they can do something for my knee. I enter and stand beside a seated Russian who is apparently having the same problem, until the opportunity comes to explain to one of the staff. No problem, your control book please, lie down here please.

A man asks which knee, one or both, then squirts some thick linament (“Voltarene”) from a white tube and begins to massage it in. It’s a gentle massage but thorough, it hurts in bits but mostly that seems to be my stiff sore legs rather than the knee itself. Then my book is returned, I pull up my leg warmers and am released, merci beaucoup, da rien, out the door.

Stow the pouch, take the pills, dodge the incoming riders, past the scattering of applause at exit (“Bon route!”) and back on the road. This is the short leg, only 55 km to Fougères. Outbound, I tried to make time on these roads; returning, I will be happy to just keep rolling. The roads are flatter, the wind is favourable. First I pass through Dingy after half-an-hour, dimly remembered from the inbound leg; Feins, Sens de Bretagne, Vieux-Vy. “View-vie? What’s a view-vie?” Sometimes there are riders around me, sometimes not, although, increasingly spread out as we are, I am far from alone here. I maintain a steady pace in 42 x 19 or so, the 52 being almost impossible to get due to the accumulated crud on the chain and front changer- it takes all my force and several tries to get the big ring when I need it for downhills, so I mostly try to do without. I pass the usual procession of recumbents and tandems, and they pass me on descents, so at times it seems I’ll see these same bikes all the way back to Paris. I pass the strange row-cycle again, making its repetitive gasping noise. On and on...somewhere around Saint Hilaire I begin to wonder, as always, “Where the #\$#! is Fougères?” and I try to remember landmarks that will let me know when I am close.

For some inexplicable reason, coming into Fougères I experience a blip of energy. As we enter a roundabout I see a few riders ahead, a Dane most distant, and I accelerate to catch them before the control. I pretend to myself that I am coming into a stage finish, and as the roads twist and turn I do catch him...but I’m still a kilometer or so from the control. Well, on to the next victim. Now the road plunges down a steep hill and I know what I am in for: the other side of the same wall they made me climb first time into Fougères. Bastards! There has absolutely, positively got to be a way into this town that does not involve these back roads, and there is absolutely positively a way that does not involve this hill! But I am still in Tour mode, so I gallop up the hill in 30 x 24 (not that anyone in the Tour would use such a gear) and I reel in a few more riders...then into the last stretch, catching a few more, exhausted and peeved by the climb, no doubt. And then it’s past the caravan, through the gate, and into the parking lot of the Fougères control.

Park the bike, find the pouch, dodge the riders, get in line...at some point I must have eaten, I have a dim recollection of pasta with meat sauce, it may have been at Fougères. I sit at the table in the cafeteria and look at the others- more and more are sleeping, lying on the floor, or simply staring off into space. I stare at the control book, doing the calculations in my head for the hundredth time: “If this is Fougères there are 85 k to Villaines...at 20 kph that’s four and a quarter hours, round it up to five...leave here at 3 and I’ll be there by 8...an hour there and it’s 9...then it’s 80 k to Mortagne...” I certainly go to the medical room, which was so effective last time, to have the knee massaged with Voltarene. Then on with the clothes, out the door, find the bike, take the pills, fill the bottle, and back on the road to Paris. It’s kind of a bleak place, Fougères, although the postcard they gave me at the control shows a nice medieval castle somewhere nearby.

Off again: look for the big arrow pointing to Paris and ride that direction. A smattering of applause as I leave. The messages are subtly changing now, less “bon route!” and more “bon courage!” That’s what I need, all right. Bon courage.

Leaving Fougères is mostly up for the first 10 kilometers to Mont Romain. Climb, climb...the wind is better, and the sky begins to break up again. There are patches of blue, and it grows warmer. But something is wrong with me. I feel drowsy, but not the same feeling of sleepiness I’ve had from time to time before. This is different: I can’t seem to focus my eyes, I’m seeing double. I look up the road and try to will myself to snap out of it. It’s hard. “So this is sleep deprivation” I say to myself. “I wondered how it would affect me.” I ride along on the drops and work on focusing, not to run into riders around me. Funny, I can keep them in peripheral vision OK, but I can’t make my eyes focus.

This is strange. I begin to worry. Maybe I had better take a nap before I ride off the road altogether...I look for a likely spot. In a kilometer or two, I see a sign for a picnic area ahead, and when I reach it I pull off. A man and woman who might be Swedes also pull off, so I continue a bit farther on the parallel road to find a spot alone. The tables have been removed, leaving concrete pads under the trees, but near the end of the area there is a patch of uncovered landscaping fabric surrounded by moss, and that looks promising. I lean the bike against a tree, set my wristwatch alarm for 30 minutes, and close my eyes.

You would think that in a state of exhaustion you would fall asleep instantly, but I never do. It’s noisy, for a start; the main road is about 15 metres away, slightly above me, and the stream of riders passes continuously, chatting and whirring. On top of this I am worried about waking up again, even with the alarm set. So after 10 minutes I nod into a fitful twenty-minute nap.

I wake and sit up. Back onto the bike. It’s warm and partly sunny as I climb out of the lane and back onto the road. After ten minutes I realize the nap really didn’t help; I’m having as much trouble focusing as before.

That, more than anything, prompts my decision to pull over about 25 kilometers out of Fougères, at a kind of tent/counter that has been erected at roadside. I’ve passed a few of these on the ride, but only stopped at the larger ones in villages- I assume this one’s the same, so I pull out my money. There’s quite a crowd at this one. While I wait, I notice I am waiting with Michael Thomson, who’s with another Canadian that I don’t know but whom Michael introduces as Mark Beaver. Oh! Mark is the President (I think) of Nova Scotia Randonneurs, as well as the fellow who arranged the Canada jerseys- I’ve spoken with him on the phone.

While we chat, a Brit sidles up behind. “Best part of PBP, this is, the best part!” he says. I peer past the riders in front and see an old man, two women and a girl, cooking up crepes on a stove and serving them up with coffee as fast as they can. My turn comes: “Crepe et café, s’il vous plait!” and the woman spins around with a hot crepe. “Avec confiture? Ou

sucre?” she asks. “Confiture!” I reply. There it is: a hot crepe with jam and a coffee. I try to pay: “Combien?” “Non monsieur!” and Michael at my shoulder says, “It’s free.” Free? These people stay out here for three days cooking up free crepes? I’m beginning to see what the Brit was getting at. I turn away but the old man picks up a container of paper slips and pushes it at me. “Take one” says Michael. I oblige. “They want a postcard, that’s all” he says. Postcard? I look at the slip of paper, which says:

ROGUE PAUL ET JEANNINE
16 RUE DE BRETAGNE
LA TANNIERE
53220 ST BERTHEVIN LA TANNIERE
FRANCE

I stand eating my crepe, which is delicious. It’s moving; I am almost in tears. These people are utterly incredible: the ones who stand out all night in the rain, the kids running alongside trying to hand up bonbons and biscuits, the tables at roadside with water and coffee, children shouting out of their windows at bedtime: “Allez! Allez!” and the women serving coffee and pain au chocolat for 1 E each: “Bon courage”. You can never forget them.

I take a moment to talk with Michael. He’s riding a new bike: it turns out to be a beautiful lugged frame made out of the new stainless Reynolds 953 tubing, which Mark Beaver himself has built. Beautiful! I tell him about my dazed-ness and inability to focus, which mysteriously and un-noticed by me has disappeared while I am standing. He replies that there’s no worry, lots of time, and I will be fine. We all ride off together and it occurs to me that it’s a mystery that he’s here at all- Michael is usually faster than I am over the road, and I’ve been taking long rests in Loudeac- but I hear afterward that he’s simply decided to enjoy the ride, to the extent it can be enjoyed, rather than killing himself. Unfortunately I soon leave the two of them behind on a long hill, in spite of myself, and more unfortunately, within minutes, my difficulty with focus re-emerges. What is going on?

The road unfolds. There are lots of riders around now. The sun comes and goes and we greet it with grim humour: at one point I see my shadow and shout “My god! What is that thing on the road?” and the rider next to me laughs. Later I fall in with two Brits on nice Roberts bikes, lugged steel but quite new, and I admire them. One replies that they are made of Columbus Nivacrom, to which I reply “Mine too”. “Really” he says, but before we can get in to the fine points we are separated...

Not too long later, in the town of Gorrion, I stop again. The Gorrionais love their cycling. A small supermarket is still open and I head in for a can of iced tea, and while I sit on the curb I eat a banana I’ve been carrying as well. A man comes up and enters into a sort of conversation, between his English and my French, to the effect that he is a cyclist, that there are many Gorrionais on the PBP (I’ve seen the sign!), and isn’t it hilly around here! Mais oui! Thanking him, I ride off again. Ruban Granitier, I think: the granite ribbon. It’s the name of a race here in Brittany. These are the roads of the Ruban Granitier, the Tour

of Brittany. It's a race the Gorronais help organize. Now I am riding on my own ribbon of granite. I pass a boy at roadside handing up cookies, and I snag one as I go by.

Ambieres, Lassay-les-Chateaux...the sun is getting low now. Through Le Ribay there is climbing but then in the direction of Loupfougeres the road flattens out again. It's quite pleasant now, and I am alone with the coming dusk and my strange inability to look more than a few metres down the road. I imagine myself out on a club ride at home, explaining my day: "Well, I got up early and went out for an 85 k ride. And that was fine, so then I did another 55 k ride. So I had something to eat, then I went out for another 85 or so after lunch...and when I'm finished that one, I'll, you know, have dinner or something, then I think I'll go for another 85 k. That should do it for today I think." Really makes it sound like something, four "normal" rides on one day; far more impressive, or crazy-sounding, than the simple statement "I did three hundred and ten kilometers on Thursday." And three hundred and thirty on Wednesday, and four hundred and fifty back on Tuesday, and I'm capping it off with a short one hundred and forty- just a doddle really- on Friday...

I suffer the last 15 kilometers as always, cursing and wondering "where the #\$@! Is Villaines" and wondering how the French, who invented the damn things, ended up with longer kilometers than anybody else in the whole world. I remind myself of how short 15 k feels on a training ride at home and I remember the roads I always take and that it only takes me 35 minutes, on average, to cover those short 15 k. Here it seems to take about an hour and a half...but eventually I am in Villaines. It looks like an old friend. Here's the place I left my bike on the first morning! But the stairs to the control are unaccountably more steep and painful to climb: my knee doesn't take well to stairs.

The control is both more and less crowded. There are far fewer riders than the last time I was here, but a higher percentage are sprawled on the floor, making it difficult to walk. With my card stamped- the control volunteer gives me a Villaines postcard- I decide to cross the street in search of food, since only coffee and pastry are served in the control hall. First I find the washroom, then search for the cafeteria ("Self serve" the sign says) hoping the line will be short. I round a corner. The line is long. I stop in my tracks, roll my eyes, and turn away. A lady in line sees me. Curious- there are no cyclists in line, just volunteers. The lady beckons me, waving me toward her. Me? Yes. I take a few steps and the line parts, as if by magic- I am almost propelled bodily toward the front. I'm stunned. Clearly the coureurs are kings here. At the place where the trays are stacked I stand for a moment, not quite in line; a man sees me and motions to his wife who with a smile gives me her tray, complete with napkin and cutlery...merci, merci...and then I am behind the last cyclist and in front of the first volunteer, waiting for my food. I am shaking my head in disbelief. Who *are* these people? When my tray is loaded I slowly make my way to the cashier, pay and...a boy of about 9 years runs up and rattles off something in French at me. Again, I stand like an idiot; the cashier says "Eee want to help you, monsieur!" I give the boy the tray and he sets off with me in tow...the crowd parts...more French, which I decipher- where would I like to sit? "Si vous voulez!" I manage...and I am seated, while the boy races off to help another rider. I wonder if they compete to see how many trays they can carry. I try not to cry.

German riders come and sit around me- I seem to attract Germans like flies, it must be my timing. When I am done I leave the huge, crowded dining hall, which is a gymnasium filled with rows of tables, and go to look for the medical room, which is in the control building across the street. This time they are short on volunteers, and one, who is going on dinner break, instructs another, who for some reason looks like an aging firefighter to me and has clearly never done a massage before, what to do. So I am a guinea pig, but he proves to be able to rub a knee as well as anybody- it's good. Around me the mortification of the flesh is on full display; to my left a man lies on his belly, getting his feet rubbed with cream- the skin on both soles is white, dead and about to fall off in sheets if I am any judge. After the Voltarene treatment I emerge into the foyer, and stop for a moment to look at the tourism video playing endlessly on the television. Helicopter shots...sunny skies...the ocean...ruined castles...playing children. Seized by a spasm of my unfortunate and not quite dead sense of humour I accost a teenaged girl and a man (probably her father) working the tourism table- no one else is going to speak with them, anyway- and I point at the screen and say, "Beaucoup de soleil! Ou est le soleil?" They are slightly taken aback, of course, but in a moment the girl manages, in English, "In our imagination!" and gives the kind of shrug and grimace only a 16-year-old girl could possibly give at the end of a long rainy summer. I laugh. Then I go back to my bike. No more laughing now.

The Fourth Night

It's growing dark, perhaps around 9 pm. I put on my vest and lights. From Villaines la Juhel to Mortagne au Perche is about 82 kilometers. It should take under 4 hours, but right now I am allowing five. I should still be there before 2 am...I have done the calculations while at the control, for the millionth time...three hours sleep, plus organizing time, out by 6 am Friday with 140 km to go...140 km at 20 kph is 7 hours, plus an hour for Dreux control, is 8...6 am plus 8 hours is a finish in St Quentin at 2 pm...still over an hour to spare, plus an hour and a half allowance for the late start (my opening control time is stamped 10:50 pm)...all good. So, I should be there well before 2 am. I am heading out into the dark because the alternative is to sleep a while here, leave at midnight and ride all through the night straight through to St Quentin, which is not appealing. So, I will tough it out. I congratulate myself on my fortitude and ride into the coming night.

At first all goes well. I come upon a small group of French riders in just a few kilometers, and one starts up a conversation with me in English. Would I like to ride with them, to be together at night? It sounds good. His name is Alain, he looks to be in his early thirties, and this is his first PBP. His companions are older and don't speak English. I am Canadian? And I don't speak French? I explain that I am Anglo-Canadian. From what city? Toronto. They've never heard of it. For a Frenchman, all Canadians are from Montreal and all speak French, and some mountains and moose are at the background of their imagination...but this interlude is doomed like all the others. After a few kilometers I begin to feel guilty and decide to do a turn at the front, which coincides with a bit of a climb. When I look over my shoulder I am alone again.

Now it is dark, and three very unfortunate things happen in close succession. First, I realize that since I cannot hold my head up and see the road, I am having a real problem on sweeping descents. Second, I realize my batteries must be low, because my light output is almost nil. Finally, it starts to rain again. Shit! There is a streetlight at a church ahead, and I pull over. There's also a telephone booth. I climb in. In a series of excursions into the pouring rain, I pull off my front battery pack and rear light, take them into the phone booth, go out to extract fresh batteries from my bag, return into the booth to install them, and go back out to reconnect both lights. Off into the rain. It doesn't help me stay any drier but at least the batteries are not immersed in a pool of water. Shit, shit, shit.

The light helps, the rain stops, my neck is no better. This is really dangerous- it was bad during the day but impossible at night. I go up and down some hills, and going down I have to hug the center stripe to be sure of staying on the road. Not good, not good if there is an oncoming car. What am I going to do? I must sleep again, I didn't want to, but I must, even for only half an hour. I've been holding it off but now my moment of crisis is here: I am wet and cold and exhausted and I can't raise my head to see the road, and for all the times I've told myself that it's impossible to quit after spending four years and who knows how much money pursuing this peculiar dream, I have to admit that dying in a ditch is also not an option. I can't sleep now and carry on in the morning because I can't cover 240 km between dawn and 3 pm. I have to carry on somehow. But how can I? I have no idea.

Here is another village, St Paul le Gaultier. There are two motorcycle escorts in yellow rain suits, stopped at the side of the road. I must ask them for help. I need to sleep, right now...is there anywhere here I can sleep for a few minutes? They look at each other. There is a man two doors down, he's leaning out his window looking at the passing riders. What is the problem, he asks. The moto guys explain the situation. There is only the garage...but a garage sounds very good to me. Monsieur is about 35, wearing a bathrobe- it's getting late, the kids are in bed- and in a moment Madame appears beside him, also in a bathrobe. The one moto guy laughs and says something to me in French, which even without translation I recognize as, "They will put you up but don't get any ideas about Madame here" and I laugh, which makes him laugh harder because he was sure I wouldn't understand, and I say "Je comprend" even though I am not sure I do. Well, aren't we all good funny fellows! And then Monsieur is dressed and comes out and leads me to the garage, which I should have realized is in another building altogether, around the corner.

He opens the door and puts on the light. The garage is surprisingly large, but with a dirt floor. There's a spotless blue Renault and the usual collection of stuff found in a garage: a bike, garden equipment. The man pulls out a ladder and climbs up to the loft. Why am I putting these people through all this? The crepes must have gone to my head: I'm starting to believe any person along the route will do anything I ask. Loan me a hundred Euros? Mais oui, monsieur! Oh, and I need your car...just for a few hours...and have you got a goat here by chance? And size 45 rubber boots. That's all I need, really. Just leave the goat by the door and go away.

The man is down from the loft again, with a mattress which he puts out on the floor along with a blanket. He shows me where the light switch is and how to bolt the door from the inside. The moto rider tells me the owner will return to wake me in a half hour, as requested, then both depart. I bolt the door, turn out the light, and use my helmet light to find the bed and set my watch alarm; then I lie down and wait for sleep. I hear a rustle: mice, or rats. The thought of a rat taking a good bite out of me does not induce sleep, but after the usual ten minutes I nod off and get another 20-minute nap. My alarm goes off. I look myself over for rat bites.

I get up, wheel my bike out, and see the owner heading up the street toward me. It's what, midnight or later, and this guy has waited up to make sure I don't sleep too long. He's another saint in a nation of saints: Rene, or whatever his name is, patron saint of cyclists. Really, I don't know what to say except "merci beaucoup" over and over. He says, in English, "I will see you in four years." I haven't got the nerve or the French to tell him he'll probably see me in hell first. "Bon courage" he says. I sigh. I am off again.

Speaking of saints, about 800 kilometers south-east of here, in 1244, ten thousand saint-loving crusaders destroyed the remnants of the Cathars at Montsegur. Burned most of them in a bon-fire, in fact. The Cathari were a funny bunch: they were a religious sect with the simple belief that everything of the spirit was pure (the name "Cathari" means "the pure") and everything of the flesh was evil. By implication, food and sex were evil, and since you couldn't go on too long without *those*, the Cathari developed a scheme of last-minute salvation. On their death-beds they took the consolamentum, a kind of last rite in which they renounced the earthly to prepare their spirit, and since obviously the purified spirit couldn't be sullied with earthly things, they settled in to wait for death without food or other earthly comfort, a sometimes-long wait called the endura. It has not escaped me that PBP is my endura, a kind of dress-rehearsal for an eventual suffering-unto-death. Perhaps this too is behind self-inflicted suffering- an unconscious desire to creep up to the edge of the precipice to look at the road which lies ahead, one which we will all ride soon enough.

The middle-ages were busy times for the Holy crusader. There were all kinds of heretical movements to stamp out. Self-flagellation- that is, whipping or beating oneself in a quest for spiritual purity and repentance from sin- went viral in the mid-1200's, when packs of flagellants started to appear in the wake of the Black Death. It reached its peak in the mid-1300's when the sheer momentum of the movement, with mass-self-beatings of 10,000 participants or more, began to threaten the authority of the Catholic Church which, previously, had no particular problem with the concept. Now, with mobs of flagellants in every city chanting and whacking, the Church declared it heresy and put it down in the magnanimous and culturally sensitive manner which later came to be known as the Spanish Inquisition. For a short while, though, it flourished, with striking similarities to randonneuring, to wit:

- Mass flagellation, like so many cycling innovations, originated in Italy;
- Some of the original groups required potential members to prove that they had permission from their wife and could pay for their own food;
- In 1399, a group of flagellants known as the Bianchi formed in defiance of the Pope, but were crushed by Benedict XI. Nice bikes, though...

Now, here we are, in the worldly, secular, supposedly enlightened year of 2007, still mortifying the flesh. Good times! When we overcome one challenge we invariably find one even more extreme: greater distance, bigger mountains, a fixed gear... The well-known Toronto Bicycle Network long-distance ride bears a medieval name, the "Hairshirt". Yet our mortification of the flesh is not mere loopiness- I hope the word "medieval" is not synonymous with "backward" to you, for the medievals were at least our equals in philosophy, art and commerce. For them suffering was a means of reconnecting with the spiritual. The vast majority of riders on the road with me have no idea they are part of this age-old tradition of course, they are simply obedient to an unspoken inner call to try, to strive, to suffer. It occurs to me that the good-evil spirit-body thing the Cathars had going was right on the money all along, that the inner voice which tells me to stop riding is the voice of my body, of caution, self-preservation, comfort, while the voice which commands me to go on is the voice of my spirit, restless, unconcerned with material things, searching...

Much of our symbolism, in fact much of our being, pivots on suffering. Whether or not we are Christians or even believers the image of Jesus suffering on the cross for the sins of mankind is a central one in our culture. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and atheists are all familiar with that image and its meaning. But what is less obvious is that we *choose* suffering. Jesus chose to suffer, it was his duty and his destiny. The Buddha chose suffering. Odin hung himself on a tree for nine nights, a sacrifice to himself. The concept of the mythic quest, in which the hero endures trials and pain to win wisdom, features in every great story from Don Quixote to Star Wars. Something compels us to ride that same road, to find within ourselves that same heroism. Where we err is to believe we are trying to escape suffering. I know I have chosen it; I could have done all kinds of things to ease the misery of this ride, such as not doing it at all, or riding a 1000 or 1200 beforehand to learn what this distance would do to me. "A great part of courage is the courage of having done the thing before", the practical Emerson wrote. I deliberately chose a harder road by making this my first 1200, so I'll just have to try to find courage out here somewhere.

The pitch-dark road is drying and the terrain is flatter, again. The number of riders around me has decreased; I must be nearly the last one on the road by now... 4,000 riders all ahead of me somewhere. How many are in their hotel in St Quentin right now? Lots, I bet. I use the center stripe to navigate the dark road. Off in the distance are the puddles of light of other villages. But still I can barely lift my head to see the road, and still I have to force my trunk upward with my lower back muscles while locking my arms on the tops of the bars to raise my head. I can't go on like this and the nap didn't help, just as the nap before it didn't help; what is the matter with me?

Quite suddenly it comes to me. It's my neck! My neck has given out! There's a name for this, I read it in one of the on-line forums, but I don't remember it. I have to take weight off my helmet. The helmet light has to go. By now I've reached the next village, perhaps only 20 km out from Villaines; if I keep stopping like this it's going to be a long night. Despite the fact it's the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere, there are, as usual, spectators, and I stop next to one. "Excusez moi, avez-vous, uh, scissors? Or a knife?" He pauses. I point to the strap on my helmet. "Ciseaux ou un couteau?" Ah yes, that's the French for knife, couteau. "Oui, oui" I say. "Un moment" he replies, and scurries off to look in the trunk of his car. Too bad- I was betting he lived in at the house we are standing in front of- but he comes back and says something to his companion, who does in fact run into the nearby house. While I wait I look up and- miracle- I see stars! Witlessly I exclaim, "les oreilles!" and then remember too late that the word I want is "etoiles". Fantastic- I've just looked into the night sky and announced "Look! Ears!" to everybody in proximity. They must really think I've lost it...although, best case, the sounds I'm making just resemble the chattering gibberish raccoons make climbing into your garbage at 2 am. In a minute scissors appear, made-in-China scissors with orange plastic grips just like the pair I have at home. Made in China is everywhere, even France... I set to work cutting off the zip ties that secure my helmet light, cram the light into my bag, return the scissors, merci merci and set out again. The helmet is quite a bit lighter- I hope this will help.

It does, but again, only for twenty or thirty minutes, and then my neck is again as useless as a wet noodle. This is indeed going to be a very long night.

The next village is Fresnay-sur-Sarthe, at almost 30 km out from Villaines or put another way, 50 km still to go to Mortagne. There is a bar open here; bikes lean everywhere and riders mill about under the lights like giant moths. I pull over and find wall space for my bike. The place is rocking- riders occupy the tables and are all along the bar, music is playing, the proprietor is pulling espressos as fast as the machine will go. A young guy with an American accent is beside me, and we try to guess where the other is from, I guess California but the right answer is apparently Ohio; you're from Canada, oh, well if you'd dropped "oot" and "aboot" I would have guessed, says he. I've never, ever heard any Canadian from anywhere say "oot" or "aboot", but rather than tell this clown he's a hoser I just manage a weak smile, which he probably takes for a gas pain. I order a cappuccino. It's quite good. The bedlam continues around me. I wrench myself away.

On the bike again. Will it be dawn soon? Ever? Red lights around me, long straight roads under shadowy trees, occasional shapes of riders mummified in space blankets along the sides...the glowing center stripe marked in the French style with turn arrows every 50 m or so, what are those for? I suppose to mean that it's safe to pass here. My head is down and I follow the line. In time I come to a crossroads with a highway and train tracks, which I recognize from Day One when I was feeling strong and joking with the Welsh. It's mildly encouraging to see a familiar spot, to realize where I am. I remind myself, every pedal stroke is one closer to home. It doesn't matter how slow I go as long as I keep going. That sounds like a mantra, and somehow that makes me think of the Code in Pirates of the Caribbean: if you fall behind you're left behind. Fortunately I am quite

alone and there is nobody to leave me behind...so I can re-write the code to suit myself. I decide on "It doesn't matter how slow I go, as long as I keep pedaling."

Time is the currency of PBP. If you speed up on the road to save time you are able to buy a little more sleep. The symmetry is appealing: in the months before the ride I spent my time to buy fitness, and now I am spending my fitness- letting the road ruin my body and grind me into pulp- to buy time. Then I spend the time I purchased so dearly on rest, which allows me to continue. I come to another village, maybe it's Mamers, with another bar open in the middle of the night, another mob scene. I pull in immediately. I shouldn't keep stopping like this, but stopping is what is keeping me going.

I go in for another cappuccino. Again, the counter is the scene of frenetic activity, coins thrown every which way and cups of steaming frothy coffee and espresso pushed in the other direction, with a din of voices and the non-stop hissing of the espresso machine as accompaniment. The bar is jammed and riders push in as others try to leave. The difference here is the staff, who seem especially jovial, kidding each other while Madame runs around alternately serving, cleaning tables and taking pictures. I take my coffee and sit in a corner, propping my head up against a wall, absorbing the chaos. Madame's last photo hasn't worked out, the riders are wearing all kinds of reflective stripes which ruin the flash photos. The orders are stacking up; the owner shouts "Ca marche!" and laughs along with the other servers. "Ca marche!" I laugh too, thinking of the British TV comedy, *Chef*, a favourite of mine; Chef Gareth is always bellowing "Ca marche" at the kitchen staff. From what I can tell it means something like, "listen up!" or "here we go!"

Somehow I force myself back out into the night. I take a couple of ibuprofen just because I'm off the bike, then I swing my leg over the saddle again. At this rate I'll be in Mortagne by noon... This may be the longest night of my life. My knee is stiff, I'm cold and exhausted, I can't lift my head and I can't do anything about it. The road ahead swims in my peripheral vision, as my eyes are rolled up as far in my head as they can go just to look at the pavement ahead. How far to go? Forty kilometers now? Thirty? I have no idea. Two hours? That's sounds like far too long, as though I have a choice. Struggle on, keep to the code, it doesn't matter how slow I go, every pedal stroke takes me closer. Crawl if you need to. Stop at a few more bars if you need to. Keep to the code. Just finish. I try to think of names for this ride: "the long dark night of the soul" comes to mind, but not only is that a cliché, it's meant to be a metaphor. This is reality, more or less. This is the long dark corridor you walk in nightmares. "L'enfer du ouest" could be a good name. I follow the white stripe. The White Stripes, there's a great band. I try to play "Seven Nation Army" in my head. Or what about "Hardest Button to Button":

I had opinions,
That didn't matter
I had a brain that felt like pancake batter.
I have a back yard
With nothing in it
Except a stick, a dog, and a box with something in it...

Still, the music I am most likely to hear is Three Dog Night:

Mama told me not to come
Mama told me not to come
She said, "That ain't the way to have fun, son
That ain't the way to have fun"

Well, it could be worse. It could always start to rain again...

Eventually I come to the GMA, the Greater Mortagne Area, centre of the Perche. Sounds like a kind of fish. First there is the glow up ahead, then the signs, then the usual period of wondering where the #\$\$@! Mortagne is, having seen the glow and passed the signs long ago. Then there are the streetlights, then the roundabouts, then the arrows, then the long long, line of cars and vans. I try to visualize the control but I've never been there since Mortagne was the "feeding control" on the way out, where I cowered in the Squirrel Bank entrance and watched the teeming rain. It seems like a hundred years ago. All I saw that night was rain and a tent, where this time we will be going to a building. And then somehow I am there. It is almost 4 am. It has taken me nearly seven hours to cover 82 kilometers.

Park the bike, turn off the lights, get the card signed, find the dortoir, pay for a bed. One and a half hours, I tell them, and they find me a space up against a wall in yet another vast gymnasium. Pull off the shoe covers and shoes, fish around for a dry shirt and socks, put them on, try to go to sleep amid the snores, rustling, clomp-clomp of cycling shoes. In one hour I am awake again. Re-organize, re-pack, dress, find a washroom. To put in my contact lenses I have to confront myself in a mirror, and it's jarring: the face that looks back at me is utterly haggard, unshaven, under a mop of filthy hair, but most surprisingly has large puffy circles under each eye, not dark with lack of sleep but almost white and swollen. Oh well...must find some food. Stumble around filthy, damp, half-asleep. It's coming up to 6 am. The cafeteria is hot and there is a stench which may come from the unwashed riders or just from me. The entry way is strewn with bodies and I have to step over several just to enter. Oh! That's Rolf Hauckwitz I'm stepping over...he, still unconscious, opens an eye half-way.

I get a big plate of puree with meat sauce over it. It looks vile, like vomit on a plate. I force it down and try not to look at it. Riders are slumped over tables, staring off into the distance with thousand-yard stares or eating mechanically. I am doing all three. I try to do the calculation one more time: 6:30 start, 140 to go, 73 km to Dreux. To do 73 k at 20 kph is...what? I can't think. Let's call it four hours. That's 10:30 am. Allow an hour in Dreux, 11:30, then 68 k or so to St Quentin. Sixty-eight k, at 20 kph, that's...what? Three and a half? OK, three and a half hours from 11:30, that's 3 pm. Just in time, still 15 minutes before the nominal closing time and one hour forty-five allowing for my 10:50 start time. It's possible. Just.

The Fourth Day

Out into the dark, find the bike, clip on the bag, stow the pouch, take the pills. Turn on the lights. Do I have enough chain lube for one more try? Yes, drip the precious drips and watch a rainbow slick form on the wet pavement under the chain. The bike is utterly filthy, caked with dirt and grass, and the chain, normally silver, looks like a thick black rope. Now I'm really sore, not just my knee but my crotch, which I've again wiped with an alcohol wipe and smeared with chamois grease. Groan...follow the arrow toward Paris. The dawn is coming and it's not so cold, more of a warmish damp. We climb a steep hill, I am using the 30 chainring. The few riders near me and I seem to have made a wrong turn, they stop and look down the hill at those following behind. It was a left turn, we've gone straight, covered an extra 50 meters of climbing...turn around and follow the others. The river of Monday night is reduced to a trickle now, but it still runs inexorably toward Paris as though by gravity. Paris, not Rome, should be the Eternal City: it certainly takes an eternity to get there.

Some people argue that conflict is the natural lot of mankind, but fatigue trumps strife every time. Even a war only lasts until everyone is tired of it. It's when infants are sick and tired of crawling that they haul themselves onto their feet, when teens are worn out by dealing with their parents that they leave home to become adults, and when adults can't face another day that they hop on the bus to St Peter's Gate. The thunderbolts are nice for show, but when God wants results, He just bores the life out of you. Yet fatigue is a curious thing: by Friday morning on PBP, the mere possibility of getting the whole fucking thing over and done with transforms exhaustion from a brake into a spur. That's where I am right now, just knackered enough to want to pick up speed. I need to get a grip. Keep to the code...

Daylight comes. I encounter the first of a series of long, steep climbs. The first is through a village. I cannot lift my head, though. This is completely impossible, climbing when you can't look ahead. I stop by a long wall and try to figure out what to do. What have I got to support my head? Later I will see pictures of riders with water bottles propped under their chins, riders with neck braces. I don't think of those things. I have some zip ties and Velcro straps. Maybe if I run a strap around my head and zip-tie to my Camelbak...I rummage around in the saddlebag and put it together, it takes an age of fumbling to hook the zip tie behind my head. It's something...it helps more than what I've tried so far. I keep going.

Long, long climbs in 30 x 24, staring down at the ground with riders ahead swimming into my peripheral vision as I catch them. Swing around them, keep going. You see a "switchback" sign on the road with a caption, 1000 m or 1200 m, and you know how long the climb or descent will be. In this case, they are climbs. It's great climbing country. Keep to the code, just keep pedaling, it doesn't matter how slowly. Just keep swimming, just keep swimming...after a while we emerge into a flatter, but still forested area, like a giant park with a sign that says "Foret Domeniale de Where-ever". I catch up to a small clutch of Brits. One woman is complaining, I recognize her voice...I was standing in a control line with her last year, or yesterday. She has bright red dyed hair.

The man says, “Don’t even think of quitting. You’re doing fine. We have bags of time. Don’t let me hear you say that again.” She retorts, “Well, sandals with socks look dreadful.” I look at her feet: she is indeed wearing Shimano cycling sandals and black socks. She continues, “My bottom looks like a baboon’s, and I would sell my mother into slavery just to finish this ride.”

I’ve been sitting on, and I’m not sure they even realize I’m there, but I say “I realize this is a private conversation, but if you don’t mind me eavesdropping...” “No, no” says the man, “all opinions are welcome.” “Well,” I reply, “I think the socks and sandals are quite stylish, your bottom in no way resembles a baboon’s, and how much do you want for your mother?” Only with Brits could I venture such a comment without being thought rude or insane, although I am of course both. They laugh. The Brits on this ride are relentlessly cheerful and good-humoured; it’s hard for me to admit, but there it is. The woman says, “For twenty quid my mum’ll be waiting by the bypass Monday morning.”

I decide to stick with them a while. There is another woman, who shortly lets on that this is her eighteenth birthday, to the general approbation of her mates. They begin to discuss the post-ride party. This is staggering; I think of Alex at home. Can you imagine my son doing a 1200 kilometer ride on his birthday? Or any other time? Then the first woman makes another negative, yet still bantering, comment about something. “Would you like cheering up?” I ask. “Get behind me and take a look and you’ll see that I have a zip tie holding my head up. My neck’s given out and I can only ride looking at the ground.” She allows that it is a bit extreme, but that she is considerably cheered up, and says “I’ve heard tell of people using inner tubes to hold their head up, but I’ve never seen it.”

Inner tubes! That’s it!

A few minutes later I let them go, with some regret, and swing off the road again. I pull out one of my spare tubes. My idea is to wrap it around my arms and behind my back the way Fausto Coppi used to carry his spare, but with a loop over my forehead. It’s very tight, and somehow the valve stem ends up by my forehead, so I arrange it to point forward, making me a particularly pathetic sort of unicorn. I test it out. After about one k I realize it’s not the answer. Think for a bit. My saddlebag has a pair of nylon D-rings at the top...perhaps I could loop the tube around there. Get off, try it. Now I have to get on the saddle, stretch the tube over my back and around my forehead. Still tight...ride away. Much better. Much, much better. I think I’m on to something. I stop to adjust the length. Better still: I can see the road, and the tube has a nice elasticity which means bumps are not too jarring. I think this is going to work! The feeling of elation I have at this point is hard to describe. I’ve been worried about not finishing: now nothing can stop me. Nothing could ever have stopped me. Allons y! On les aura! Let’s go! With your shield or on it!

We leave the forest and ride onto a broad plain. I can see the road for kilometers ahead: there are clumps of riders, in threes, fours and fives, as far as I can see. This must be the Beauce plain, that I crossed by car a week ago on the way to Chartres; now the signs on the southbound roads point to Chartres again. We’re finally getting close! But plains are

deceptive: it now seems to take forever to get anywhere, simply because I can see everything far off into the distance. The road makes a long curve to the right; that's probably two kilometers away. There is a town behind those woods; it takes twenty minutes to get there. La Ferte-Vidame. I am about to pay for my over-confidence of a few minutes ago; I push a bit up a smaller hill, and my left knee suddenly begins to hurt, a sharp pain running down to the front of the shin. This is magnificent! Both knees buggered! And the neck as well! What next, kidney failure? Oh well, on a ride like this, everything is expendable. I can just cut out a non-functional kidney and drop it in the ditch, to save weight.

The plain stretches on, the road winds on. Brezolles, a desolate, deserted-looking place. There is some tailwind, the riding is easy, and I can gear up. Laons. Where the #\$@! is Dreux? It's the same story, I think the same thoughts. My legs keep turning. I am a clockwork man. I don't know how they turn, I don't control them, they just turn. The muscles don't hurt particularly, whatever is happening with the knees. They turn. My seat is getting raw; I try to rise off the saddle to ease it and the tube snaps me back down. That's one drawback. I can't climb hills out of the saddle, which is another. The tube is starting to give me a headache, yet another. Where the flying @#\$! is Dreux? Now I am hearing Led Zeppelin:

There is a train that leaves the station heading for your destination,
But the price you pay to nowhere has increased a dollar more.
And if you walk you're gonna get there, though it takes a little longer,
And when you see it in the distance you will wring your hands and moan.

The road winds across the plain. There is another wood in the distance, and behind it is Allainville. If I had my route sheet out I could see there are 6 km to go. Eventually I encounter a sign, "Dreux 4". Almost there! But where is it? I can't see a town ahead. Then there is one, but it's signed Vernouillet. Vernouillet? What the @#\$! is Vernouillet? Where the @#\$! is Dreux? I recite my lengthy mental list of curse words and try to think of some new ones. Here is a huge stack of hay bales on the flat field. Intersection, turn left. Intersection, turn right. We drop down a hill. Then, there it is, hidden in a valley: Dreux. Finally! But I am still several k away...

Eventually I near the gymnasium; I see the signs and the cars. I ride past some apartments. There is an underpass, where I encounter a rider in a yellow Audax Scotland jersey wearing a neck brace. Another great idea! "Where did you get that", I ask. He is a morose and disconsolate Scot, which, since we share the same condition, is not unexpected. He sounds like a Glaswegian Eeyore. "In a pharmacy", he answers bleakly. Of course! Where else? I resolve to ask for the address of a pharmacy at the control. Then I am at the Palais des Sports- always such grand names, it was the Gymnasee des droits de l'homme back in St Quentin- park the bike, get the sacred pouch, walk to the control, get in line, stamp the card... and now there are only 67 km to go. It's inconceivable that I cannot ride another 67 km; it's too early to celebrate, but I know I can get home.

The sky is still grey but I can feel the sun straining to get through as I enter the gym. After going through the control I head over to the cafeteria for an iced tea, a pastry and an orange. More riders are napping at the tables and on the floor, a risk I would dare not take so close to the finish. What if you slept for 3 hours instead of thirty minutes? Some guy begins an accordion serenade. Perhaps the irritation will do me good. When I'm finished my snack I head for the exit, only to see, yet again, Dick Felton, Cary and Rolf at a table. We chat a bit. And here's a surprise, only a few feet away sits Thien Tran! The last time I saw him he was a couple of hours ahead of me, leaving Brest as I was riding toward it. Stomach trouble, he says, and sore feet. See you in Paris, says I. Passing by the information desk I enquire if the rumour I've been hearing since yesterday noon is true, that the organizers are adding two hours to each control closing time due to the high drop out rate; the lady assures me that it is true for Dreux, and was for Mortagne, but she does not know about the rest. It's academic anyway, since the final closing time in St Quentin is unchanged, so having had two extra hours to get to Dreux means nothing. However she also confirms that there are over 1300 abandons so far, fully thirty percent of the starters, a staggering yet unsurprising number given the conditions. Off I go to the medical room.

They are busy here, as medics are in war-zones all over the globe. I wait a minute and then explain to a woman that I need a pharmacy to obtain a neck brace. Oh no, we can take care of you! She refers me to an older gentleman who takes a kind of home-made number off a shelf, which turns out to be cardboard wrapped with newspaper wrapped with gauze, and tapes it around my neck. This could work! I imagine a roomful of volunteers sitting around a table two nights ago, drinking coffee, listening to the radio and whipping up a supply of these little home-made neck braces. Probably there's a whole roomful of cardboard and duct-tape coffins stored just around back, and a walk-in freezer full of pathetic spandex-clad corpses. Away I go...find the bike, replace the pouch, take the pills, wade through the crowd. I hear a man offer a woman ibuprofen, and she declines, citing some article she read that told her taking Vitamin I in a state of dehydration can lead to liver damage. Screw liver damage- I'd take cyanide if I could.

Naturally we have to climb through the city up a steep-ish hill, then turn left, right, left. The city streets are potholed and patched, and the pounding hurts nearly every part of my body. We descend a twisty, busy road leading out of town, emerging into something that looks like a suburb, where we begin to climb again, zig-zagging up minor streets behind rows of houses, climbing gradually but unceasingly. The rain jacket has become far too hot. We climb and climb and pretty soon I am soaked with sweat, so I pull off near the top and take a drastic step: I stow the rain jacket and pull on my new PBP jersey, which I had been saving for my triumphant re-entry into St Quentin. I have in fact spent quite a bit of time imagining myself pulling up the zipper and taking off my glasses for the benefit of the finish-line photographers. If the weather had been rainy I was going to wait until the last 5 k or so before putting it on, but there's no sign of rain now...

We are back on the broad plain again, a tail-wind pushing us toward home. The road is more congested with cyclists than it has been for a long time, and I guess we are the last-gaspers, the demographic bulge of near-ninety-hour riders all making our last push together. There are lots of wheels to ride on and I get on the back of a group of about a

dozen, including two Audax Japan riders and several young-ish Americans. The road is reminiscent of the Holland Marsh, with farm fields coming right up to the road shoulders, and lots of dried mud from truck and tractor wheels on the road surface. Then, on the right, there is Thien, poor bugger, pedaling with only his left leg and moving his unclipped right foot in circles, but I want to stay with my group and we pass him by. The next group we catch is mostly Italians, maybe 5 or 6 riding together... karma bites me, for the faster riders of my group swing around the Italians leaving me trapped on the inside and, unwilling to attempt a hard acceleration to get back on, I regretfully watch them go. Groups merge, split, re-join. Cyclists on training rides come toward us, a pair, a group of three... one of them shouts "You are champions! You are the real champions!"

What does he mean? Am I meant to take that literally, that we of PBP are more heroic than racers in general? Or is it a reflection on the doping debacle that threatens to destroy the Tour? In 1924 journalist Albert Londres dubbed Tour de France riders "Forcats de la route" or "convicts of the road". In the old days the riders laboured under torturous physical conditions; today they are slaves to their own ambition and to the pervasive culture of commercialism and doping in which they are immersed. Even so, the luster of participation in "the world's greatest bicycle race" is not fully diminished. The domestique of today is a journeyman, but a journeyman of distinction: one must be selected for the Tour from among the team's pool of racers. Canada's Michael Barry, a fine racer, has failed for years to make that cut. The cameras don't capture the domestiques, but under the eyes of team management every pedal stroke is a performance evaluation. Under that kind of pressure, and cloaked by obscurity, it's easy to meet dark expectations: one takes drugs to recover faster, to be stronger, to haul one's aging butt up the mountains, all the while ruining one's body (to say nothing of one's soul) merely to keep a job and maintain a dubious status: "I rode the Tour."

We PBP riders are scarcely convicts. My participation here is the ultimate expression of freedom and affluence: I can afford the bicycle, the equipment, the air tickets (four, so my family can come for vacation), the hotel at E 129 per night, and I can also afford to rearrange my own work, not just for the two weeks but for years so I could train and ride qualifying brevets. The wealth and leisure of the modern middle-class puts me on an equal footing with princes of old. I am not compelled to be here to preserve my livelihood, in fact, I am probably putting my livelihood at risk by devoting so much time to this "non-productive" pursuit. I am not scrutinized, I can ride or not ride as I wish, I can quit at any time if I want. There is no drug testing, so if I wanted I could probably build myself up with steroids or keep myself awake with amphetamines. I settled for whey powder and coffee. So at a glance I am no convict of the road, I am a gentleman amateur participating in the best tradition of sport for nothing but the satisfaction and honour attached to this ancient and noble event. I am part of a mass celebration of cycling and a test of endurance organized as a simple expression of the love of the organizers and participants for the bicycle in particular and sport in general. Paris Brest Paris is everything the Tour de France could be, if you simply subtracted from the Tour everything venal, corrupt or dubious, which is to say, money. I am here to live my dream, supported by the effort of others, but not taking from them anything they themselves did not wish to give freely. The whole thing is so pure I might as well be riding on a carpet of

rose petals. Except... except that I have made a convict of myself, by sentencing myself to the suffering that is the lot of PBP and Tour riders alike. I thank the volunteers not because they made my ride possible, but because they made my suffering possible.

After a time, especially after the town of Gambais, the road changes again, the hills and villages re-appear and the groups split up. These were the villages of the first night, full of applause and music then, grey and quiet now. Einstein would tell you that as you approach the speed of light, time slows down. PBP refutes this neatly. In fact the *slower* you go, the slower time passes; on the last day of PBP 60 seconds require approximately 5 minutes of normal time to pass. It's approaching the City of Light, not the speed of light that seems to do the trick of reversing relativity.

I read a story once, about a team of Norwegian commandos trained by the British in World War Two. Everything went wrong from the time they tried to land; most were killed or captured but one, named Jan, escaped cross-country and was smuggled from house to house by the resistance as they tried to spirit him across the frontier into Sweden. At one point he was left for four weeks on a plateau, in a snow cave just big enough to conceal him; the resistance couldn't get to him due to winter storms and German patrols. The mind abhors a vacuum, though, and expands to fill the available time. The author describes it this way: "In general, oddly enough, he had no impression of being bored. Once when somebody asked him how he had passed the time, he said he had never been so busy in his life." That's how it is on PBP, the mind is always busy, whether one is alone or not. But of course our suffering is only recreational suffering compared to the thousands, if not millions, who experience untold misery daily. Jan himself suffered from frostbite in the cave, and had to amputate his gangrenous toes, alone, with his pocket knife; later he tried to kill himself but, near starvation, was too weak to pull the trigger of his service revolver. Yet even Jan chose to suffer, or at least, he chose to put himself in a position where suffering was likely, if not inevitable, and that is something we have in common. I wonder what I would do if I had a gun.

I would not wish you to think my suffering extreme even among the amateur sufferers of PBP. When the ride ended, all the reports were posted on the internet. Emily O'Brien, the "fixie girl" I met back near Carhaix, tells of riding with a Canadian who was near delirium: he seemed to think he was on a qualifying brevet which he had to finish so he could enter PBP, and kept asking where Canada was. One Russell Seaton had seven flat tires and hypoglycemia from his diabetes to deal with. The rider I passed crumpled on the ground on the hill of Brest survived, but he suffered a ruptured spleen, broken collarbone, head trauma, multiple contusions, and torn knee cartilage. His spleen was removed in hospital in Brest, before he returned to a hospital closer to home for further surgery. His sister reported "my brother's greatest regret is not finishing." But my prize goes to Ohio's Todd Williams, who, riding to a better than 55-hour pace, ran into the wall of dark, cold, and wet past Mortagne au Perche on Wednesday night. I'll let Todd take it from here:

"The wind had increased to about 30 mph. The temperature dropped to what felt like the low to mid 40's. I was getting cold. I started shivering so badly I could barely control

the bicycle. It was dark and I was alone. I started to become confused. Then things went blank.

I remember little from the rest of the night. I remember talking to a horse during the night. I remember thinking that the rain felt like it was getting warmer and that I could just lay down there and would be ok. And I remember thinking that this must just be a wild dream.

At about 8:00 the next morning the local gendarmes found me walking in circles around a very tiny French village of about 8 houses. I did not know where I was, who I was or what I was doing. I was mumbling incoherently. And, worst of all, I was without my bike. They put me in the police van and called an ambulance.

The ambulance came and took my temperature and ran an EKG. My body temperature was very low and my heart was having significant arrhythmias. They were very concerned and called another ambulance with a physician on board. While waiting they were attempting to warm me up. As I warmed up I had a startling thought, where was my bicycle? The gendarmes searched the village and did not locate the bike. They looked along the road and could not find it. It was nowhere to be found.

The physician arrived and he told me they were taking me to the hospital. I told them they were not and that I was going to continue the ride. They asked how I was going to do that without a bicycle. Good point....

Soon the cell phone of the gendarme rang. There was an animated discussion. The gendarme turned to me and said, "We think we found your bicycle. It is in a barn 5 kilometers away." But it gets worse. Apparently, after I became cold I started walking. Away from the route! At some point I came upon a farmhouse and broke a window to open a door to get into the barn and put my bicycle there. I then continued walking another 3 miles. Fortunately the farmer found the bicycle that morning. I'm not really a thief. I am more like Santa Claus. I leave expensive bicycles for French farmers!

I felt terrible about breaking into someplace and leaving my bicycle. I offered to the gendarmes to arrest me but they said, "No, you were crazy in the head last night." I felt even worse when I saw the farmer wheeling my bicycle up the road. He had a sack with him. In it he had two bottles of lemonade and a box of shortbread cookies. For me even after I had broken into his barn! I talked to him and apologized and offered to pay for any damages. He laughed. Everyone around - by now the whole village had assembled - was having a great time as I continued to warm. I drank both lemonades and ate the box of cookies.

The physician said the hospital was all ready for me and that we were about to leave. I said I did not want to and asked if there was any way to continue the ride. He said that I may die. I said that we have a saying in the U.S., "Finish or die trying." He asked if it was worth dying for. I said it was. I had trained for this for 4 years and didn't want to stop now. I pleaded as hard as I ever had. At that point I truly rather be dead than have

a DNF. He seemed to understand. He said he would make me a deal, he would follow me for 10 kilometers. If I could ride straight he would let me proceed. But if I weaved the slightest amount he would pull me from the course. And he instructed me to see the medical personnel at the next controle.

So I put my wet socks back on and off I went back to the route at a pretty good clip mainly to get my body warmed up more. I didn't weave and they waved me on after 10 kilometers. I blew off the instructions to see the medical personnel at the next to last controle. I hammered it in for a total time of 66 hours. It appears that my time was in the top 200 out of 5300 total. Not great but not bad considering my adventure."

Great stuff! Echoes of Tom Simpson, killed on the climb of the Ventoux in the 1967 Tour by alcohol, amphetamines and pride: his reported last words were "Put me back on my bike." He suffered!

Suddenly, it seems, we have come back to hill country, somewhere to the north of Rambouillet. And what hills! Down a long winding descent into a forest, then up and up; down again and up a steeper one, maybe 500 m long. I hear what sounds like a bell in the distance, as I climb in 30 x 24 with my head down. A bell? By now everything is so surreal that nothing surprises. There he is, a man on the shoulder, ringing a bell for each passing rider and shouting encouragement, a lunatic last-lap accompaniment to the sound of gasping, groaning riders and the clash of gears being shifted into bottom. The madness of it gives me a lift, although at the same time I remind myself that we're much too far out to take a "last lap" bell seriously. Somewhere nearby we see a road-side sign that tells us there are 50 km to the finish.

More villages. I bump through the roundabouts, over the cobbled strips across the road at pedestrian crossings, and up the short, steeper hills. The neck brace has proven ineffective, although I still wear it, and I am back to the inner tube, which is giving me a headache again. At a bar in a village I see the usual three or four bikes leaning against a wall, so I stop, go in for lemonade, and rest my neck and forehead for a while. No sooner do I begin to ride but it begins to rain again. Well, why shouldn't it end as it started?

The showers stop and start again. I rehearse again how I will apologize to ET for leaving him on the first night and causing him to abandon the ride. I wonder how angry his wife will be with me. I look for landmarks. Eventually we come to the historic chateau I recall from the first night, but I've no idea how far from the finish it is and I am afraid to find out. Maybe thirty k, I think. Soon a man at the roadside shouts "Vingt kilometers!" which I naturally dismiss as over-optimistic. I'm right; at the town of Montfort two or three k down the road is a sign that says we still have 25 kilometers to go. And even those are French kilometers.

We have come to the last hilly part of the ride. In and out of villages, up and down, steepish hills that immediately have me on the 30 chainring. Half-way up one I stop to take a picture of other riders climbing past, not because the hill is unusual but because it is so typical. Typical of the bastards who designed the course, to put a bunch of these ball-

breakers in when we've already covered 1200 km or more! We wind back and forth, up and down, until I convince myself that the increased frequency of villages means we are finally entering the greater St Quentin area. I am waiting for the long main street we departed on so long ago, a wide boulevard with rows of trees, so I can make my final kick, or more accurately, final twitch. Where the #\$\$@! is it, anyway? Where the flying #\$\$@! is #\$\$@!ing St Quentin?

We are there. We snake under an overpass and come to the place I never thought I would see again, the long boulevard which will take us into the heart of St Quentin. All the St Quentin cues are there, especially the PBP posters on every bus shelter and signboard. This is Elancourt, the first of the "agglomerated towns" that make up the city. The entry into St Quentin is not marked by cheering crowds, for I have the feeling the average passer-by is getting nearly as tired of the whole thing as we are. We have become afterthoughts and irritants, just more obstacles to traffic. No, the entry into St Quentin is marked by a fresh rain shower. Now I am good and wet. We speed up, all of us. There are probably twenty or so riders in my immediate vicinity. The rain stops again and we ride wet roads and dodge the worst puddles. And now comes the final hurdle, a series of red lights that we hit at 100 metre intervals...foot down, wait, green light, accelerate, red light, stop, foot down...

A right and a left over the train tracks and into downtown. Suddenly I know exactly where we are: we are on the road the Ontario riders took to the start on Monday night, maybe only two km from it now. You can almost hear the angels blowing their horns...then everything grinds to a halt. Road construction has triggered a traffic jam of cars and the impatient mob of riders who are all getting a little too close to 3 pm and who are all sick to death of bicycles, roads, and nearly everything PBP. The horns I heard were Renaults and Citroens. Yet we prevail, creeping around the construction, making the right turn before the train station, then two lights straight on and a right turn to the finish. I've tidied myself up and dispensed once more with the inner tube for the victory photo, but this just forces me to hold my head up with my left hand- like Rodin's Thinker on two wheels- so I can see the road and avoid the dozens of riders all around me.

We are there. Right turn onto the last roundabout, the crowd pressed up against the barriers, the weak applause of friends and family who are really just waiting for one rider, their rider, their husband, brother or father, and who are tired of cheering for someone else but manage to eke out a few claps, who are losing hope that they will see their rider before time runs out. I pass under the inflatable start/finish arch and am directed up a ramp across the square...I see I will have to follow the path down to the stadium and the gym to get to the final control. It's all very anti-climactic, and there are no photographers anywhere. There is only the weariness, the weariness of refugees lining up for a plate of gruel at the camp, of migrant farm-workers heaving themselves into the truck at the end of the day. There are no signs of celebration. But I have finished.

I park the bike for the last time, pull out the sacred pouch for the last time. There are three steps to climb up from the running track into the gym, and they seem un-naturally high, or perhaps I've shrunk in the rain; a Swede and I grimace at each other as we

stagger up them and through the door. It must be 30 C or more inside. The control line is very, very long and I am jammed in with a hundred or more riders, each shuffling in slow motion to the control desk. The stench is unbelievable, almost nauseating. There is a Spaniard in front of me, who is recognized and welcomed by what appears to be a television crew. He stops to be interviewed, which makes me very impatient. I look at my watch- it's about 3:05. Little by little I shuffle forward, sitting on the tables at my side in between steps, and finally I have my card swiped at 3:08 pm. Had I been in the 9:30 wave on Monday, I would have finished with only seven minutes to spare, but since I was stamped 10:50 my time is...I try to do the calculations through the fatigue...close to 88 hours 30 minutes. Good enough.

You might expect me to laugh or cry at this point, or to kneel down and thank God, or something; but there is nothing to do. I look for Canadians and find none. I wander over to the Maindru Photo desk and wait my turn to look at my photos. Eventually I choose the two that make me look most heroic- it takes a long time to find two like that- and part with E 19 for the privilege. I circle back to the French Cyclotourism Federation desk and buy a reflective leg band for E 2. I'm just killing time; the necessary gesture to conclude an epic journey is missing, and I'm wandering around the gym hoping to find it. I suppose I need someone to high five, or hug. In the end I remember how much I want to shower and slide between clean sheets, so I head for the door. At the exit I see newspaper clippings on a bulletin board, and I stop: they focus on the rain and misery, except for the one from a Brest paper which shows a grinning rider at the half-way mark and reads "600 kilometres avec une sourire". To nobody in particular I remark, "Sure, 600 with a sourire, but you don't see any sourire at 1200, do you". There is a snort and a chuckle from the Brit on my right. I can tell by his accent of his laugh.

The following week, this description will appear on the Paris Brest Paris web site- here is my inadequate translation: "*The 16th PBP is complete. For the participants, one of the hardest ever. We must talk about the climactic conditions. More than 20 hours of violent rain. A headwind, going and returning. Many problems (numerous falls). The cold and the damp on the body, for hour after hour. Many problems seen on arrival: tendonitis, bloody crotches, cramps, blisters, feet covered in white dead skin...One rider who was in his 6th PBP said: "Je souffert comme je n'ai jamais souffert." "I suffered like I have never suffered before."*

I leave the gym. All that is left is to grip the envelope containing the photos in my teeth- I hope it will not rain again and ruin them- then plant my swollen crotch on the saddle, force my stiff sore legs to turn once more, and ride the 6 or 7 km of agonizing roundabouts and speed bumps back to the hotel.

Je souffert comme je n'ai jamais souffert. Mission accomplished.