For Anne

> There is no reason why a tour of Normandy and Brittany should not take place, in agreeable conditions, at any time from the middle of April to the end of October.

Cook's Travelers Handbook, Normandy and Brittany (1930) (emphasis supplied). After reading this description last June, I sent in the application, confident the conditions would be agreeable.

St. Quentin En Yvelines, 1227K to Go

Brad, Kevin and I had come to the PBP to have a great time. Brother No. 4 is home in Seattle. While he could find a rainbow trout in rose bush, he has yet to see the romance of the PBP. Or as Ron says, "I understand the who, what, when, and where. It's the why I don't get." When you do something stupid in Britain and get killed in the process, the coroner calls it "death by misadventure." Ron calls this "life by misadventure."

Things get off to a swimming start when Kevin's bicycle is lost by the airlines. Those of you in the Mercure are probably familiar with this story. We went through all the well-recognized stages of bicycle-airline grieving: anger, denial, anger, bargaining, anger, bewilderment, anger, finger-pointing, anger, and springing for a new bike. A bike box is 30 cubic feet. They are hard to lose. The beauty of this, however, was that it trashed Brad's plan to go climb Alp d'Huez on the Friday before the start of the ride. Instead, we—and our buddy, Don Smith—spent the day in Paris and at Mondovelo shopping for bikes. Saturday came, no bike in sight, and finally Kevin pulled the trigger on a new Scott bike, with a brand new Brooks saddle and a low gear of 39 by 25 (a third again harder than my 30 x 26). He always needed two bikes. That's what I say.

Amie Pieper Prepares to Take a Picture of
Mark Thomas, RUSA President, on Saturday, Paul Johnson Directing:

I. Night Falls for the First Day

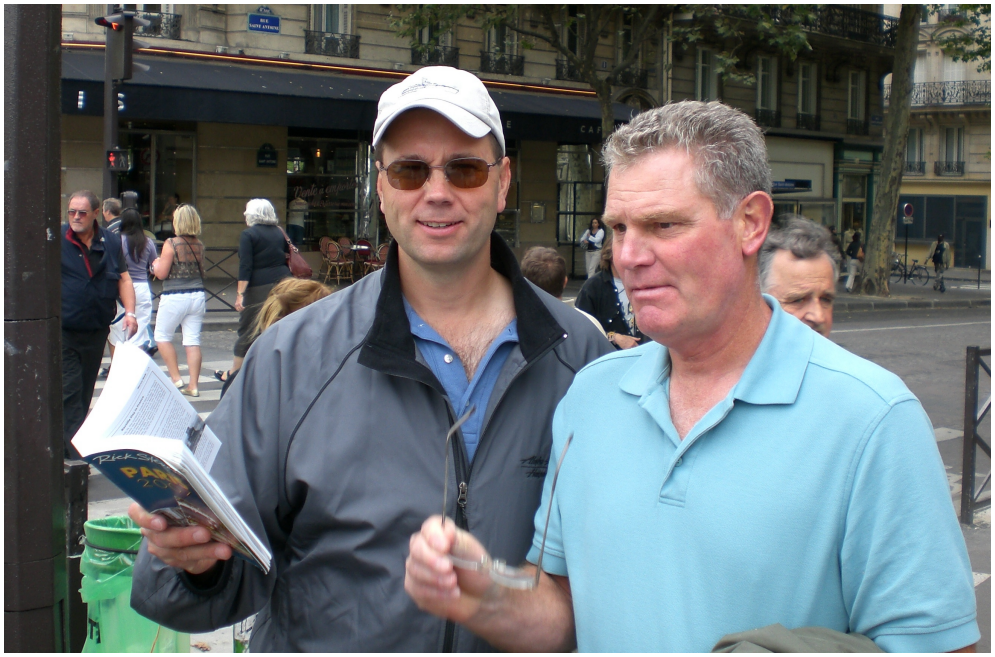
We arrive at the Gymnasium of the Rights of Man about 8:30. There is revolution in the air. We are treated better than we deserve by Bonnie and Elana Dussler and Sulima Cruz and her daughter, Andrea Orinion. A light mist is falling. We move into the stadium with Don Smith, and Ray McFall. The first wave launches at 9:30 to fireworks. The rain increases in intensity and the intervening time gives us the chance to put on rain jackets, then knee warmers, and finally booties. We are in line next to Damon Peacock of the Southport Cycling Club (UK) who gives us a lengthy list of the merits of Southport over Willesden, within earshot of a number of the latter. Damon lived to tell about it.

We are in the fourth wave. It is 10:30 p.m. Fireworks. It is our turn. We ride into the maw of the PBP. But for the night, bikes and jerseys must look like 5,000 brightly-colored guppies expelled from a fire hose. It is raining hard, and the peloton is flowing powerfully, like the Volga in the spring. A bicycle is an amazing machine, capable of collapsing a vast distance and discharging the artifact of a remote culture—me—into a distant place—Paris. Maybe. We'll see.

Given the geography of Northwestern France, we must cover 48.3 million inches of territory to get back to Paris. Our wheels are 85 inches in circumference. By our count, that's 567,886 revolutions. And so we start to count . . . . It's not, after all, like we are otherwise occupied. The SIRs have made use of this fact, too: the club jeweler has engraved on each of our wheels prayers in 2-point type, that will each be heard half a million times. Mostly prayers about getting to the finish line. Or for money.

For some reason, lost in the recesses of time, someone decreed that the PBP should start late at night. As we all woke up this morning about 7 a.m., the common sense of this idea is breathtaking. We ride through the night, much of the time with Clare Jensen and Lonnie Wolff, from Utah, a retired ski bum and state wildlife director. Dream jobs. In future years there will be a lot of talk about the weather in 2007. Make no mistake, it was bad. In fairness to the truth, however, it did not rain between midnight and 5 a.m. Clouds were low. Rain was eminent. You could smell the ozone. Somewhere, way ahead, Don Smith has flown up the road, St. Elmo 's Fire crackling on his handlebars. Don counts his net worth in terms of bicycles, like a Mongolian herder counting his goats. He's the creator of the "Don Smith Classic," the most prestigious, invitation-only ride in Washington. The entry fee is high, but Don has been known to waive it for all but the most indigent. In all events, he is long-gone. It is pitch black. I spend several hours riding with Clare Jensen and Lonnie Wolff, two buddies from Utah, but then look up and find myself alone, fore and aft. *!^¶§*@!z. Lost after 50 miles! How could this be? A few meters ahead, I crest a small hill and find hundreds of cyclists in front of me, lights dancing like fireflies. I had been in a slight depression.

Brad and Don Lost in Paris:
Pardonez-Moi. Is This the Way to the Moulin Rouge?



Mortagne Au Perche, 1084 K to Go

The rain returns before daybreak. I put on my Seattle wool jersey. A total stranger passes, sees the name, and yells "I bet you are loving this." Such shallow wisecracks in cycling circles pass as devastating wisdom and the ripest of wit. I, too, am guilty. We pull into Mortagne au Perche. I wonder what this town's name means. Mordred? Morte? Dead fish? Die or perish?

Various fragments of the medieval town walls are apparently exposed in Mortagne, but I confess that I did not take the time to look for them, either in 2003 or 2007. The town has a beautiful garden as well, lying behind the Hotel de Ville:

> [It] consists of a fine terrace leading down to a spacious formal parterre, usually brilliant with flowers, bordered on either side by avenues of pleached limes. The garden is on the edge of steep decline, so that from the terrace one looks across the intricate geometry of the beds to a wide and distant prospect closed by misty blue hills lying beyond the confines of Normandy. I know a few towns in France whose gardens can rival in beauty this modest acre at Mortagne.

R. Dutton, *Normandy and Brittany* (1953), at 100. No doubt this is true, but I've missed the garden, too. Perhaps next time.

Not everyone agrees about Mortagne's virtues. Writing in 1895, Augustus Hare dismissed Mortagne in remarkable fashion, at least viewed through the eyes of a Seattleite living in a town with no buildings from prior to 1880-something:

> The town, on a height one and one-half K from the station, is utterly uninteresting. It has a very large featureless church of XV.C, and XVI.C.

A. Hare, *North-Western France*, at 148. It is something how a man can just blow off a 400-year old church, but there you have it.

I have a quick breakfast in Mortagne of mashed potatoes and an omelet with Brad, Kevin, Ray, and Chris Hanson, of the Redondo Beach Hansons. Then back out into the rain. I am struck by the same sense of queasiness you experience on mounting a camel for the first time.

Villaines La Juhel, 1002 K to Go

By my count, it is 55 miles of hills from Mortagne to Villaines La Juhel (Jewel Thief?). I ride much of the way with Mitchell Schoenfeld, a strong rider who named his bike Mary Ann. Conflicted for years by Gilligan's Island, Mitch finally pulled the trigger. We arrive a little after 9:00 in the morning, and catch up with Owen Richards. Owen has the disturbing habit of riding faster than I, but not so much faster than I'm not constantly reminded that he is ahead of me at most controls. Owen will speed up in 2011. He and his architect friend, Andy Akard from Georgia, will team up with Cristo to wrap the PBP in 381 miles of saffron linen. As it happens, saffron is the color of the Orange Blossom Special. Orange is the fastest bicycle color anyway, but with 381 miles of saffron, the effect ought to be like greasing the skids.

We are off again and it is mid-day Tuesday, somewhere short of Fougeres. The rain is pelting us. Exhilarated, Brad yells "this is what I love about randonneuring! There are 5,000 people here, we have 600 miles to go, the weather is horrible, and no one is turning around." It's a fair point, and oft-remarked. The Hollywood image of a randonneuer is rakish, muscular and self-deprecating. I am so tired of this stereotype. In point of fact, it's simply not true. We're not so much "rakish," as "boyishly good-looking." Except for the randonneusses, each of whom is a vision. As Ken Krichman says, bicyclists represent dynamism, passion, mythic aura, and the hold the past has over the present. He calls us "bicyclists" to differentiate us from the unicyclists.

We sail through Lassey les Chateaux, a beautiful place with a fairy tale chateaux on the right by a small lake. It might have been a castle, but for the town's name, which is a dead giveaway. Of all the pretty little villages in France from which Catherine Deneuve does not hail, this one most seems like she does. The chateaux was built by the Marquis de Lassay to receive "La Grande Mademoiselle and those of the Priory of S. Arnoult," founded in the 11th Century. The guidebook apparently thought that would be enough information for me, but I do not know who they are.

The rain has brought out in force one aspect of French wildlife I had not anticipated: the banana slug. These are everywhere, thousands of them. Many are now in pieces, given the passage of the riders, but hundreds or thousands more are still alive on the road, reflecting the effort of every one of us to try and avoid them. I wonder whether the banana slug is going to be the mascot for the ride. I wonder, too, how close a cousin the slug is to France's national randonneuring delicacy, the escargot. For what it's worth, having eaten a few escargot, I hope the answer is not very. I think I'm going to be disappointed on this one, however.

There will be times ahead, soon actually, when I feel tired and pathetic. But not yet. Now, Brad and Kevin and I are flying. We are a perfect fusion of man's two greatest discoveries, fire and the wheel. Our bikes are well-oiled. We prepared them with one eye clearly on the weather. Anticipating mud, leaves, banana slug parts, and other French detritus, we have lubricated our chains with the same homemade concoction of mandrake root, Abyssinian dates, bay rum, and camel urine used by the Discovery team. Don't ask me where Kevin gets this stuff.

Fougeres, 914 K to Go

It is mid-afternoon, Tuesday. Ray McFall and I ride the last 25 miles or so into Fougeres, the rain finally lightening up as we pull into town. A few miles outside of town, Ray turns to me through the drizzle: "I think it's cleansing us." Some Scottish purification ritual, no doubt. Ray was part of a fleche team with Don Smith and me in the spring. Don and I had to buy out his contract from another team for $74 and some tubes, but it was worth it. He's a great partner.

I arrive at the control and find that Brad and Kevin have already bought lunch, a kindness they repeat at several controls. It saves me at least half an hour over the course of the ride. In a chapel in Fougeres, the hearts of General Du Lariboisiere and his son, killed in the Battle of Moscow in 1812, are preserved. I wonder if they could move them to the control for 2011 so we could see them? After a quick meal, we are out into the rain again. Like sharks, we must all keep moving or we will die.

Kevin and Don Preparing to Flirt with a French Waitress:

Tinteniac, 859 K to Go

It's only 33 miles to the next control, and we are in Tinteniac before you know it. We meet Amie Pieper, awaiting the arrival of her husband, Robin. Amie and Robin both finished in '03. Robin took the 84-hour start this morning. Notwithstanding the fact we are only 220 miles out, we will see him arrive in a few minutes. I vote we put a governor on his bicycle. Robin and Amie met 27 years ago when the Asylum for Female Cyclists threw a sock hop for the Institute for Corrigible Boys. They were later married, the bride in a stunning dress of Reynolds 853 steel, with a train of 650 Swiss Revolution 17-gauge spokes, hand-made by Kent Peterson of Kensington. The wedding pictures, taken with a Nikon AK-48 flash, are electric. Robin thereafter abandoned his career as a pediatrician to go to work for Boeing in the Wind Tunnel Test lab. The tunnel, located in Farnborough, England, gives Robin ample after-hours access, to perfect his cycling form. Of course, being in England, Robin and Amie have limited opportunities to ride with SIR. They now ride with their local club, the Spandex-Clad Tea Sippers.

Somewhere, far ahead, toil Peter Beeson and Max Maxon, on their red tandem, the Kate Smith and the Kate Spade. Peter, a glittering member of West Seattle rando-café society, recently finished the Transcon, at an average speed of something like 20 miles an hour. Peter and Max ride so fast it's hard to hear each other on the tandem. To solve this problem, they've installed one of those department-store pneumatic tubes in their top tube to communicate back and forth. Peter was raised in West Seattle. Gypsy Rose Lee was raised in West Seattle. It could be a coincidence.

We are in Brittany now, which Pliny called "the ghost-like peninsula of the ocean." It is the home of St. Yves of Kermartin, the patron saint of lawyers (look, there had to be one). The original Bretons were driven from England in 560 A.D. by Anglo-Saxon invaders. Their language was Celtic, and so was their music. Brittany has a tiny independence movement, but takes its distinctive personality seriously. Apparently, there are no road signs to Paris in Brittany, but for the Retour signs for us. Maybe no one in Brittany wants to go to Paris. In all events, you have to reach Normandy before the first Paris signs crop up.

We proceed on. The relationship between highway and village is different in Europe than in America, at least the American West. Our towns are all astride our highways. Nowhere is the road forced to play second fiddle to the village. In Normandy and Brittany, by contrast, the towns predate the auto by hundreds and hundreds of years. Two thousand years in the case of Carhaix. This causes us to wind through every single little village on the route, bypassing nothing, each with a boulangerie and café. I wonder how many of these roads were originally Roman. The first conqueror of France gave his name to July; his adopted son to August. Looking off the road into the forest, completely impenetrable in 50 A.D., you get a clear sense what Rome brought to the table. We should have more bike trails in America, but we don't. Someone decided 80 years ago the automobile was going to replace the bicycle. It will never happen. These are the same people who thought television would replace books.

I recall no corn in 2003, but corn is everywhere this year, the result of ethanol subsidies we expect. We pass an apple orchard and our thoughts turned immediately to original sin. Of course, when we pass potato fields, our thoughts turn immediately to original vodka.

The PBP has been a five-year plan for me. I first heard about it in 2002 when Greg Cox mentioned it to me on a chance meeting. What first captivated me about it at the time was the unbridled sense of excess. How long is the PBP? Well, if you were reading Madame Bovary and each word were a kilometer, you would not reach the end of the PBP until somewhere on page four. Maybe that doesn't capture it. William Blake said "The Road of Excess Leads to the Palace of Wisdom." I am not sure what that means, but I don't think that's quite it, either. Greg is a spectacular person. He and his wife, Mary, in fact, are so wonderful his neighbors named their town after the Coxes: Covington. True, they can't spell, but Greg has been too nice to bring it up. Greg usually rides with Bill Dussler, whose wife and daughter saw us off in the rain at the start. It was Bill who imparted the wisdom of randonneuring to me about four years ago on a cold and wet 300K in Granite Falls. About midnight, as he was about to leave me in the dust (mud, actually), Bill took hold of my arm, turned me towards the wall of the mini-mart so no one could hear, and whispered:

"Grasshopper, you must pedal harder."

Words to live by.

II. Night Falls for the Second Day

Brad and I are headed to Loudeac, and approaching the 24-hour mark. Kevin is ahead of us; we are making good time. Your mind has a lot of time to wander on a bike. I wonder as we cruise through the night why bicycles don't emit some high pitched noise that animals can hear. I've come upon enough of them by surprise, it's clear they don't. Still, it's remarkable that of all the sounds metal-on-metal can make, bicycles appear to only make sounds within the range of the human ear. Amazing, really. We ride with a couple of Germans who have a small sound system on one of their bikes. Great addition. By my count, we are 15 miles due south of Yffiniac, Bernard Hinault's home town. Speaking only for myself, I do not seem to be channeling Hinault. I wonder if he has a sister. The Milky Way is moving at 1.3 million miles an hour; the solar system is moving at 540,000 miles an hour; the earth is moving around the sun at 60,000 miles an hour; and the earth is spinning at 1,100 miles per hour. I'm going less than 15 miles per hour. Of all these statistics, the last is the only one that matters to me. Einstein I am not. It's still raining. We are at the same longitude as Timbuktu. What a difference a few degrees of latitude makes. If knowledge equals power, are smarter riders faster? I have temporarily lost track of Ray. It was Ray who first pointed out that the top and down tubes were the perfect place to install nunchuks. These fill an important hole in his tactical defenses. Be prepared, that's our motto.

As we approach Loudeac, Brad and I, along with four or five of our new best friends, get lost. Oops. We stop a car at an intersection. Long discussion in French. I understand nothing, but the car reverses course and we follow it, at about 14 miles an hour, as it leads us several miles on back roads to rejoin the ride. Spectacular hospitality, at midnight.

Loudeac, 773 K to Go

No worse for the delay, we wheel into Loudeac. As nearly as we can tell, this adds six or seven miles to the trip and subtracts half an hour from the bed. We are on time, kind of, and given the weather, happy with where we stand. We grab our bags from Claus, head to the Hotel de France, a shower and a bed. Kevin and Don Smith are already sacked out. Four controls down; 10 to go. We are slowly unbuttoning the kimono of the PBP.

We get up after two and a half or three hours, having had varying degrees of sleep (to include none), breakfast at the hotel and are out on the road. It is raining off and on. The wind is steady, and against us. No problem, we say. My dream is to be back from Brest and into Loudeac by midnight. I will narrowly miss this goal by four and one-half hours. This stretch of the ride is "hilly." America is a new country, but France has had 15 centuries to iron out the these hills. What have they been doing with their time?

Carhaix, 696 K to Go

We reach a secret control in Corlay. Corlay has a large number of megalithic Stonehenge-like menhirs. Some people think they were used by the druids for human sacrifice; others as territorial markers or calendars. The menhirs have been dated to 6,000 or 7,000 years ago. We know almost nothing about the people who erected them other than the fact they buried their dead, knew agriculture, and made pottery. They also knew how to move really large rocks 200 miles.

We arrive in Carhaix late morning. Carhaix was created in 50 B.C. by the Romans, named Vorgium, and made the administrative capital of the area. It boasts a 15-mile long aqueduct. Kevin is a bigwig with Cosmogalactica, an international water company. He has always been interested in all things aqua—aqueducts (the racetrack and the canals), aquamarine (the color and the gem), aquariums (saltwater or freshwater), aqualung (the machine and the song), Aquavit (the restaurant and the drink), you name it, and has come to Carhaix to tour the aqueducts and is off on a frolic and detour. There is a spectacular website on this subject, http://perso.orange.fr/vorgium/accueil.htm. It's in French, but the pictures are great.

The French Name a Creperie After my Wife:

Carhaix also contains an old church dedicated to Saint Tremorus, who was canonized in spite of dying as a child. The son of Count Conmore and his wife, Saint Triphina, who was murdered by the count before her baby was born. Saint Gildas resurrected her, in order to give birth to Tremorus, who was turned over to the monks for upbringing. The count tracked him down and decapitated him. I am not making this up. Maybe someone else did, but not me. The 16th century doors on the west front of the church in Carhaix are sculpted with scenes from the life of St. Tremorus: he is ordained, he is martyred, he kneels before Count Conmore, he picks up his head, an angel guides him to heaven with

his head in his hands . . . . It apparently happened 1500 years ago. But history is alive in Europe. I love it.

The SIRs are the largest bicycle club in the world named after an Indian Chief. We were content to live lives of relative anonymity until outed by Lulu in her chart-topping 1967 ode to randonneuring: To SIR With Love. We take strict vows: sleep with the lights off, be polite to members of the opposite sex, falconry is expressly permitted. The organization was created by a Papal Bull in 1139. Among our members, we count Genovese, Lombards, and Saracens. No SIR has ever suffered from ED. A lot of members join just for the extra protection. Our current fundraiser is a joint SIR-IRS project, headed by Jon Muellner, called CYCLOPS. I think it has something to do with the Grateful Dead. Jon's got some great other fundraising ideas. He's hoping to recruit three or four Estonians into the club and then maybe eBay will buy us for $4.1 billion. Like most randonneuring clubs, we honor Leon Trotsky. Trotsky, a strong cyclist and founder of RUSA, was the first randonneur to advocate permanent revolution. Matt and Shane Balkovetz are responsible for SIR dogma and enforcing conformity in matters of cycling belief (without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement). They have taken this up with a vengeance. I, for one, am expecting a purge.

Allison Bailey (Center) Flaunts the Dress Code:

I Pass Jon Muellner at the Precise Moment He Takes a Picture:

We leave Carhaix, into a sharp wind, and labor up the Roc Trevezel. Mark Thomas, if that's his real name, and Peter McKay come flying down, in the opposite direction. They are at least 40 miles ahead of us, Mark astride his favorite bicycle, the Cotton Mather. For his part, Peter tilts his head back and squeezes from his bottle an unknown clear fluid, unmistakably the color of gin. We are at the far northwest corner of France. At the exact opposite corner of the country, the Rolling Stones entered the basement of Villa Nellcote in Cap Ferrat in the summer of 1971 and created the defining album of Peter's and my childhood. But that's not what he's listening to now. From the roll of his shoulders and the bounce of his head, I am pretty sure he's listening to the bootleg of the Stones' October 1973 Brussels show. I could be mistaken. Well, no.

Mark was given a John Prine album in college and, transfixed by the lyrics ("if dreams are lightning, thunder is desire"), moved to Alabama. He became one of the few northern men to successfully extract a Southern girl from the South. Mark realized at the age of 3 that he was doomed to a life of randonneuring when he asked his mother "Is my middle name, 'Ulysses,' the Latin form of 'Odysseus?'" His mother wept. Mark has been on the road ever since. He, more than anyone, is responsible for the success of SIR over the last decade. While much of this is due to hard work and attention to detail, Mark really broke things open in 2002, when he sponsored 52 days of games at the Redmond Hippodrome to celebrate the circumcision of his son. Mark's ascent to the top of RUSA has not been without benefits for the SIR rank and file, too. The Great Unwashed all got a free trip to Paris aboard the RUSA jet, and he's promised to take us skeet shooting in Royal Albert Hall. He encouraged several of us to abandon our Schmidt hubs in favor of army surplus night vision goggles manufactured by Halliburton. Mark's speed is all the more amazing when you realize that, as President, he's cycling in a Kevlar suit.

Mark, and his wife, Chris, are responsible for one other wonderful gift to SIR members. Owners of the cunningly named Sammamish Valley Cycles, a wonderful bicycle store, they have offered a free bike frame to every PBP finisher. Just give them a ring. They'd love to hear from you. Sammamish Valley Cycles is the exclusive distributor of bicycles from the British East India Company and sells an incredible variety: bikes with pistons in the downtube, chains and pulleys, levers and fulcrums, frames with iridescent sapphire peacock coloring, headsets of amber, lapis, garnet the color of cheap merlot, headsets with airbags, lugs with Catholic iconography, wheels by Zildjan with Ernie Ball Super Slinky spokes, components made by Mont Blanc, Chrono Swiss, and a 45-jewel derailleur made by Omega, Tony Lama gatorskin tires, hubs with music boxes that play the Marseilles (I'd cycle faster but my musical integrity won't permit it) and lapidaries, and an antique Motobecane once owned by Emma Peel named the "Frame Fatale."

But we were on the Roc. It's still going up. Fifty-four years ago, Roc Trevezel looked pretty much the same:

> This country to the south of Huelgoat is gentle and radiant, but to the north-west it develops an austere, rugged grandeur. There the adamantine granite line beneath the greater part of the peninsula rises to sharp rocky ridges and breaks through the pockets of topsoil which brings fertility to some parts of the province. These uplands, which lie round the Roc Traversel, are of an uncompromising bleakness. They rise to a height of nearly 1,200 feet in fierce granite crags, like rows of giant teeth, while the gums, to pursue the rather unpleasing simile, are formed of black sour peat, so sterile that nothing but a thin coating of grass can draw sufficient sustenance for life. On rough days the winds tear and scream across these black satanic heights, and even gentle breezes moan and sigh through the sparse stems of the grass and amongst the fissures of the rocks. . . .

R. Dutton, *Normandy and Brittany* (1953). For the record, Dutton was in a car.

When cycling in France, I routinely consult Bernard Newman's Cycling in France (Northern) published by Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1st Ed. (1936). I pull my copy from my carradice. Since we left Loudeac, I had been waiting with bated breath to see whether we got in trouble with the Breton clergy over our cycling shorts. Newman confronted exactly this difficulty in 1936:

> I had previously mentioned the disapproval of shorts on the part of the Breton clergy. The Bishop of Vannes went so far as to forbid his choir boys to wear shorts when playing football! I entered into fierce argument with a priest, he upholding his bishop, I my shorts. "It is wrong to expose the flesh, even the knees," he argued. "It is the sight of

> flesh which impels thoughts of sex and other impure things." [True.]
>
> I saw a way to settle the argument: a girl in local costume came down the street, healthy and intelligent.
>
> "Excuse me, mademoiselle," I said. "Would you settle an argument? Please tell me, do you object to the sight of my knees?"
>
> She gave them the penetrating glance of the connoisseur.
>
> "On the contrary," she replied, "they are very fine knees."
>
> I knew she was intelligent: I have a very fine pair of knees. My nurse used to say that if only my face were like my knees I would be a handsome man.
>
> "If ever I have a husband," she continued, "I hope he will have knees like yours."
>
> I turned to the priest, but he was jubilant.
>
> "There you are!" he cried. "Immediately she thought of sex."

Newman at 115-16. No mademoiselles have complimented my knees.

Newman, also the author of Albanian Back Door, treats the Roc more gently:

> There is a good road via Carhaix and Loudeac over the Breton highlands. The hills are not high and the roads are quite adequate, but the variety of scene is surprising, and includes great forests in which wild boar still roam. The villages, too, are far more primitive—you are now well off the tourist track—and your evenings in the village inns will be among your most piquant recollections.

Id. at 114. Let me just say this about that: the Roc is a gentle slope, but it does go on for quite some time. I have seen no wild boar, and while I have no doubt that I could spend a piquant evening in a village inn (if someone told me what that meant), we seem to be in a hurry. I note for the record that portions of this experience can be had in the U.S. Lisa Butkus is ahead of me somewhere, riding The Paul W. Bryant, with a great story about her ex-husband hitting a wild boar in West Palm Beach. You can't make this stuff up. Lisa is from Mobile; Bill Halama (whose bike is the color of a Mossad ID card) is from Birmingham, Brad, Kevin, and I are from Huntsville. That's five Alabamians in the ride. And if you count Hank Aaron, Hank Williams and Helen Keller (whose best friends all called her "Hank") it makes eight. Mark Thomas is reading this sentence waiting to see

if he qualifies as an Alabamian either by virtue of: (a) living in Montgomery for one year; or (b) marrying a girl from Alabama. No. Like the PBP, it's designed to be hard.

For what I believe is the 10,000th year in a row, the world currently finds itself in a religious struggle of sorts. The truth is most people absorb their religion, hook, line, and sinker, from their parents. Baptist children rarely become Muslim; Hindu children rarely become Jews. And why is it that the European tradition is Christian? Because in 732, Charlemagne's granddad halted the Muslim incursion into Europe 100 miles southeast of the Roc on a field near Portiers. I wonder what things would look like now if the other side had won.

The Christians observe that whether looking down on a bicycle or from the front, it forms the shape of a crucifix. My bicycle has two triangles and six angles, or transepts, one fewer than the Cathedral at Chartres. Christians believe the triangle emphasizes the primacy of the Trinity. Jews maintain the bicycle's central structure involves two triangles, the ingredients in the Star of David. Islam counters that its perfect, regular geometry, coupled with a total absence of representational art proves its Muslim heritage. The Buddhists believe we are all bound upon the wheel. The Wiccans say it's a hexagram. No one agreed. Ever. And so the wars came. For 15 centuries, up and down the width and breadth of Europe. The War of the Roses, The War of the Bourbon Accession, The Thirty Gears War, the Siege of La Rochelle, the St. Valentines Day Massacre, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Our ancestors, or those of the rider next to me, pounded their brains out over bicycle purity.

An understanding of the European bicycle wars is made more difficult by the myriad array of bicycle sects. To be sure, advocates of steel have no one to blame but themselves. The Pope's practice of selling indulgences—largely to fund the velodrome at the Vatican—inspired disgust. Why should a medieval village, itself without a velodrome, ship money to Rome to fund the personal velodrome of the Popes, a group of people that had not placed well in criteriums since 815 A.D.?

And so the break was made—steel, on the one hand, and the schismatics on the other, aluminum, the Klaproths, and carbon, all of whom developed rabid followings. While each of the schismatics promised its own form of comfort and cycling nirvana, it's readily apparent none has any advantage over steel. Steel has captured the imagination like nothing else. Emerson said our hearts vibrate to an iron string. Iron. Superman? The man of steel.

The carbonics were first. If God had wanted mankind to ride a carbon bike, Santa Claus wouldn't hand out coal to bad children. Would Eddy Merckx have been called "le Cannibal" if rode a bituminous bicycle? To ask the question is to answer it. He'd just as soon ride an air mattress. What possible purpose could there be for a carbon bicycle—besides slipping it through airport security? And don't tell me diamond is "carbon." We both know if you rode to the grocery store on a diamond bike, you'd never have children.

The aluminum heresy first arrived on the scene in 1108. Whatever else you say about them, these people are impractical. Look, if they ever drop the big one, a steel frame can be beaten into swords or plowshares. We can reinvent the modern world from our

bicycles. What are you going to do with an aluminum bicycle? Roll it out and make foil? Wrap a tuna fish sandwich? Good going. See you in the 5th Century (B.C.).

The Klaproths are of the most recent origin, but hardest to understand. Titanium was discovered in 1791 and named by Heinrich Klaproth. The Klaproth sect, now centered in Chattanooga, Tennessee, has taken hold more successfully than the carbonics or the alums. While its adherents tout the fact that Klaproth has the highest strength-to-weight ratio of any metal, I think the price to pay for riding a Klaproth is simply too high. Who in their right mind would ride a bicycle named after the Titans. There were 12 of them, six sons and six daughters. They "lay down" with each other and then castrated their father. This is not a group of people who ought to be honored with a bicycle. For what it's worth, Klaproth did not invent cubic zirconium. The rumor to the contrary is simply untrue.

I cannot believe the French approve of this. France is ground zero in the history of cycling. The land of France is the altar of bicycling. And while the most common French nickname for a bike is "velo," the most lavish and enduring is this: "The Chemin de Fer," the iron horse. If you ask me, we've got it backwards. When some whiz kid figures out how to build a three-ounce frame from spider webbing and Burma Shave, what are we going to do—let people ride it on the PBP? We're going in the wrong direction. Here's an idea for a new bicycle material: bronze.

Personally, I have never strayed from steel. My very first bike was a cap-and-ball Schwinn. Fast as lightning, though slow to load. Davidson built the Orange Blossom Special for me seven years ago. It is a Ticonderoga class bike, called the Peacemaker, but I don't know why. Most Davidsons are cast with the lost wax method, like a Rodin. Not mine. The Orange Blossom Special is solid steel, hand-carved by steel masons, from spare parts of the Vulcan, in a vault 270 feet beneath Pike Street. Steve Earle, in Nashville, has the only other one like mine. Of course, this is just a theory. Others believe the Peacemaker is the larval stage of a Saturn 5. Someone should look into this. Davidson makes less practical bikes as well, hand-carved out of teak, walnut inlaid with mother of pearl, one made out of old tortoise shells from the bar in the Raffles Hotel for the Sultan of Brunei, but it's the Peacemaker that will be featured in the new James Bond movie.

Anonymous Orange Steel Davidson

I hesitate to wade into the Campagnolo-Shimano debate, knowing the tempest this unleashes, but I do note two things: (a) Campagnolo invented the quick release and the derailleur; and (b) Shimano makes fishing tackle. See www.fish.shimano.com.

I have been daydreaming, but finally make it into Sizun. Brad is ahead of me at the Creperie and has ordered three crepes. In theory, that would be one for each of Brad, Kevin, and me. Kevin, however, is ahead of us, so the question is, do we save it for him or eat it? One and a half crepes later (each), we are out on the road. Brad's got on his iPod and is listening to "Wheelsucker Blues" by Blind Willie Johnson. Johnson not only wrote "John the Revelator," he was the best blind cyclist of his generation. Brad gets to the Brest bridge first and waits for me. He takes the time to call his wife, Danielle, and his three daughters, Moonbeam, Borsheim, and Insinuata. All four of them worship Brad—though they think he should get a fixed gear—and I think it's probably pretty great living at Brad's house. We ride into Brest, across the really cool Albert bridge, with Noel Hawes, astride the Wylde Thynge. Noel's mojo is working nicely and he will be remaining in France for a couple of weeks with his wife after the ride, while I go back to work.

Moonbeam, Borsheim, and Insinuata:

Brest, 610 K to Go

The most amazing thing happens in Brest. We turn east. We are halfway home. When you throw a boomerang, all you want to know is will it come back to where it started? We are going to find out. On reflection, this is only the second most amazing thing that occurs in Brest. The most amazing thing is that the headwind that has been in our faces for 100 miles remains in our faces even when we change direction. What are the odds of this? Actually, they are a lot higher than you think. I ride around Lake Washington a lot and circular wind seems to be a mainstay of cycling, as nearly as I can tell.

We notice, too, in Brest is that we have no protection from attack by sea. The entire worldwide, long distance cycling fraternity could be wiped out in a single stroke. Who would do such a thing? Besides the unicyclists.

We spend very little time at the control: we have a plan. There is a McDonald's just out of town on the return route, at Landerneau. I, helpfully, recall the distance at about two miles from 2003. It's closer to 15. My popularity is skyrocketing. We arrive with Matt Dalton, riding his favorite bicycle, the Willis Marie Van Schaack. The Van Schaack is a fine bicycle, prized for its stamina, speed, and gentle disposition. One by one, we walk up to the window and say things like "I would like one Big Mac, two hamburgers, one milkshake, two sundaes, large fries, two apple pies, one espresso, and three bottles of water," a sly reference to the fact we are starving. Much has been written about how unhealthy American fast food is. It's true. But if you actually confront a week in which you need to eat 50,000 calories, there's no place you'd rather be.

I've tried impressing the locals with my French, but it is not working. The French language buffaloes me, I confess. But I am not alone. It buffaloed Newman, too: the French for tyre is "pneu," but the French for "valve" is "valve." The French for "lamp" is "lampe" but the French for "lamp bulb" is "ampoule." What the hell is going on? See Newman at 36-7. It gets worse: "gorge" and "gorgeous" come from the same French root. When you think about it, though, an amazing array of spellbinding words are French: agent provocateur, a la mode, après ski, brunette, guillotine, au pair, bon vivant, coup d'etat, décolletage, double entendre, force majure, rendezvous, tour de force, massacre, gangrene, ambition, lingerie. What a great language.

Newman, a cycling connoisseur, had firm opinions how a tour should be conducted:

> Cut down your mileage. At home the scenes and people are familiar; France will call for continuous halts. A daily average of about 60 miles is admirable—good riding, with ample time to see things and meet people. . . . You will be "training-in" as you go, and by the second week will be on the top of your form.

Newman at 29. I have no doubt Newman is right about this. Unfortunately, we have to finish half way through the first week. He had a keen eye for the local delicacies, too:

> Brittany's specialties are sardines, oysters, and a whole variety of sea fish, strawberries and strawberry jam, cherries (but look out for the grubs in them), pate de courre'e: mashed pork, and crepes au ble'noir: pancakes made of "black" flour. Normandy's specialties are: tripes ala mode de Caen: if you like tripe, try the Caen fashion in cooking it, saucisses en gele'e: the famous Norman sausages, and Camembert.

Newman at 31. We opt for McDonald's.

Sixty-three years ago this week, probably on this same road, the 6th Armored Division of Patton's 3rd Army raced for Brest. Brest, along with Saint-Nazaire and La Rochelle were home to the German submarine fleet. On D-Day there were 17 submarines at Brest. When the allies landed in Northern France, most came inland and turned east. A small force turned west, headed for the German submarine pens at Brest. The 6th Armored Division traveled directly through Loudeac, turning north just before reaching Carhaix. Other portions came south of Carhaix and came north through Huelgoat and Sizun. They joined forces somewhere near Landerneau.

To ensure the safety of the local population, the German general, Ramcke, ordered the French civilians out of Brest on August 21, before the battle. I'm guessing many of them left on the road we're on. The allies reclaimed Brest and turned it over to the French on September 20. General Ramcke, one of the German generals most highly respected by the allies, served out the rest of the war in a POW camp in Mississippi, only a few hours' drive from Mark Thomas' future in-laws. When the war ended and Americans

discovered the poor treatment of their own prisoners in German POW camps, privileges of German POWs were cut. Ramcke understood his rights under the Geneva Convention, escaped from camp and traveled to Jackson, Mississippi. There he bought postage stamps and mailed a letter of complaint to an American congressman, thereafter returning to camp without the guards having ever known he'd left. When the uncensored letter reached D.C., there was an uproar, but better treatment was restored to the Germans.

I don't know much about how you measure the size of a battle, but 270,000 105mm and 119,000 155mm Howitzer shells were used by the Allies at Brest.

Somewhere, not far from here, a little east is all, our grandfather, then a boy, spent 1918 on the Western Front. Tireder, hungrier, colder, and more sleep-deprived than I. The bloodiest day in the history of British warfare occurred near Amiens, again just east of here, 90 years ago next summer. 100 million people died in two World Wars right here. We all must be related to them. The ghosts are alive in France. And the dead are not powerless. Newman toured France on his bicycle between the World Wars and made the same point:

> The most casual reading of French history will give you thrill after thrill as you tour this fascinating country. Yet your longest memories will not be drawn from the dim realms of history, but from vivid memories of your own times. Here is a land where history was made; here was staged the greatest drama in the world's long history [World War I]; here lay the bones of some of the men who played in it a principal part. I will promise you this: you may tour Europe from end to end, and you will never find an area so rich in associations and dramatic memories; certainly you will never find a place which will give you so furiously to think. If it is humanly possible, it is even your duty to journey through the war area; not merely to do honor to the men who died, but to see how they died, and to think out why. Then your thoughts will inevitably stray in a healthy direction—you will wonder why all this should be, and if it is really necessary to do it all over again.

Newman at 104-05. Newman was writing in 1936. Apparently it was necessary to do over again.

We head back through Sizun, Brad and Kevin again arriving before me. We've gone at least 12 miles since the meal at McDonald's, so it's time to eat. After some cookies on the lawn in front of the Sizun church arches, we head off to Carhaix.

III. Night Falls for the Third Day

Carhaix, 529 K to Go

We arrive in Carhaix at I forget what time, but we leave while it's still light. One more control and we'll be two-thirds of the way home. Objectively, my performance is ugly. The PBP makes time stand still. No, that's not it, the PBP makes space stand still. Fifty miles from Loudeac, 49, 48. Then 40, 39, 35, 30. Slower than a Moyer fastball. I stop somewhere along the way at a smoke-filled tavern selling café au lait thick as pea soup, and then labor on toward Loudeac. After an eternity, we hit 25 miles, Corlay. Where I live, 25 miles is called the "South End of the Lake." It is the ride you do when you have no time, effortless even in the freezing rain. It is the smallest unit of bicycle currency. A penny. But the penny lies before me like the Alps.

We pedal on. I am with Stephen Dart, from Exeter, and fellow SIR Thai Nguyen, whom we have just picked up at the vegetable soup stand. Actually, that last sentence is just untrue. It was Thai who picked me up. He is a much faster rider than I and would be in Tinteniac now but for a remarkable succession of mechanical bicycle mishaps that have had him riding a single speed for the last 250 miles or so. It is raining hard, pitch black, and I am weaving all over the road. They both know I am falling asleep every 100 yards. I have unzipped my jersey to stay awake. They stay with me. It passes after I don't know how many miles. You can see nothing in the night, through the rain, but for the faint glow from your own headlight and the spectacular electric display of red taillights that pulse fuzzily like some steroidal Van Gogh painting. You can't tell how many bikes you're looking at, how many taillights they have, whether they are stopped in the middle of the road, nothing. Like a red kaleidoscope, but worse.

Loudeac, 452 K to Go

But make it to Loudeac we do. I find Ray who, as always, is happy. We have a brief debate about where he's going to sleep that night, Ray rejects an offer of the hotel floor. I get back to the hotel at 4:30. Brad and Kevin are asleep when I arrive. I take a shower, lie in bed until 6:15, wake up Brad and Kevin, and we prepare to start again. Owen and Andy are downstairs eating and about ready to shove off. They look strong. I am able to eat almost nothing at breakfast, though I know this will be a problem shortly. Kevin and I leave at 7:00 and, like clockwork, the rain increases from a drizzle to a downpour. Kevin notes, and I agree, that this is actually a bonus and will help wake us up. He takes a couple of pills. I ask "Are those gonna work?" Kevin says "Don't know. Right now I'd be happy with a really effective placebo."

More things happened in Loudeac, but it's all based on malicious gossip, harmful to others' reputations. Nonetheless, Brad and Kevin won't let me put it in. We do, near Loudeac, see road signs to Carnac, maybe 50 miles to the south. Carnac contains an enormous collection of standing menhir stones. There are 52 at Stonehenge; 2,813 at Carnac. Once there were apparently over 12,000. See www.megalithia.com/brittany/carnac/.

I DNF'd on the return in Loudeac in '03. I am tired, but looking forward to seeing the part of the PBP I have never seen before. The next 25 miles, however, turn out to be the most worrisome of the ride. I am on my bike, but going very slow. I stop at the first boulangerie that is open and have a quick hot chocolate (powdered) and buy two pain au chocolat. I can't really chew the first one, but I break it into pieces and hold them in my mouth while they dissolve. The second I just can't get down. I stop at the next town in a continued effort to find calories that will stick. I buy two tiny apple sauces, two tiny yogurts, and a quart of milk. I eat both apple sauces, one yogurt, and drink about a third of the milk. I'm thinking I have had maybe 500 calories this morning, max, and this could be ugly. I start to fall asleep on the bike. This happened last night, too, but it is daylight now and my circadian rhythms, or whatever, ought to be working. If a butterfly flapping its wings in Bangladesh can cause a hurricane in Louisiana, you'd think it could speed me up. A few miles up the road, I am forced to pull over and lie down on a small concrete bridge, my head maybe 18 inches away from the whizzing of the wheels of the other bicycles. I am not asleep, but I am not awake. I can hear the bikes and it's nice. I get up after maybe 10 minutes, get on my bike and ask someone how far we've come since Loudeac, three hours ago. 25 miles. No matter how you do the math, this is a bad sign. Miraculously, though, I pick up speed.

I get to St. Meen le Grand, a beautiful town, and find Brad at a café. I go in to use the restroom, exit and find that a rider has just left the café with a large mound of uneaten frittes left on his plate. His timing is perfect. I grab them with my left hand without breaking stride, offer half to Brad, and we are on our bikes.

We gimbal and gyre through town, flying across the cobblestones and flying through streets drenched in time. I know little French history, but you can feel it everywhere. We are a few hundred miles west of the Battle of Waterloo, an hour south of the stream where Robert the Devil saw Arlette the tanner's daughter washing clothes in a stream, convinced her to become his mistress, and together, they conceived William the Bastard, later William the Conqueror. History is written by winners. We are in the country of the Bourbons, Bonaparte and Bardot, Joan of Arc, Marie Antoinette, and Milady de Winter, Danton, Robespierre, Scaramouche, two Napoleons and two dozen Louises, Lancelot, Voltaire, Hugo. I am having a blast.

Most of all, though, we are in the country of Anne. Every little town we go through has a rue named after Anne, a young woman who is the central historical figure in the history of Brittany. Forced by fate twice to marry a French King, she did so, but demanded promises in return still kept to this day. Her father died when she was 14, leaving her the Duchess of Brittany. While the French structure precluded a female ruler, the Breton one did not. Anne became the wealthiest woman in Europe. Anne was nothing, if not strong-willed. Orphaned at 14, she realized she would need to confront the French and, to augment the Treasury, pawned jewelry, her communion service, and other of her possessions. That same year, she fought off a suitor, who had arrived with an army, declaring she would "rather die a nun." She charged her would-be husband at the head of her archers, putting him to flight. Anne eventually realized, however, that her tiny kingdom would be no match for the French and that no one else could be trusted to come to their aid. She concluded that it was the will of God that she should save Brittany by sacrificing herself. With the French army at her gate, she agreed to marry Charles VIII,

with limited independence retained for Brittany. Her prenuptial agreement with Charles provided that, should she outlive him, she would retain Brittany and Brittany would retain its independence. Her odds were 50-50. She demonstrated remarkable willpower for a 14-year old, bringing two beds with her to the marriage.

Anne desired to build a castle at St. Malo, but the bishop objected. She then asked to build a "four-wheeled carriage," which request was granted. Stone towers began to rise and the bishop asked her what was up. Anne showed him the plans for a fortress resembling the four wheels of a carriage. The bishop screamed bloody murder, but Anne continued construction, placing on one of the towers the words:

> Grumble who will
> So shall it be
> As pleases me.

Charles VIII died seven years later, with Anne now 21. No longer a girl, she confronted the same problem as at 14. Anne married the new French king, Louis XII, with a prenuptial contract that set in stone Brittany's rights into the future. While Francis turned out to be a superior husband to Charles, the fact remained that it was vitally important to France to secure its position in Brittany. To secure Anne's commitment to marry, the French took a hostage: Fougeres.

Anne died in 1514 at age 27, having borne 11 children, only two of whom survived childbirth. Her funeral lasted 40 days, setting the stage for royal funerals going forward. Her will made no mention of the location of her body after death, but provided that her heart be placed in a gold reliquary and returned to Brittany. It was. While they emptied the contents during the French revolution, the gold reliquary is still in Brittany in a castle in Nantes.

Anne was a young girl who had little control over her destiny but exercised all the power she could muster. Among them, Anne demanded that no Breton ever pay a toll on a Breton road. And they don't. If my great granddaughter comes a hundred years from now to ride the PBP, she will not pay a toll. Neither will anyone else. It was Anne, too, who started the tradition that brides wear white (at least in Europe; the Japanese and Chinese came to it independently). You've got to love a country that honors its promise five centuries later. We know Anne was here, and always will. Henry Ford said history is bunk. Robert E. Lee was closer to the mark: it is history that teaches us to weep.

Tinteniac, 366 K to Go

I pull into Tinteniac some time around noon. Brad and Kevin are there waiting for me and we need to move immediately. I still feel like eating nothing, but they are selling little apricot-flavored yogurts in squeeze tubes. I get about eight and we're back out on the road. One after another, I eat them, doing everything but cutting them open to lick the insides. We are picking up speed and my spirits lift. I have always been amazed that you can feel stronger after the 225th mile than after the 175th, stronger after the 350th mile than the 300th, or stronger after the 550th mile than the 500th. I have known since some time yesterday that I would be "riding through" tonight, along with everyone else around

me. Of all the euphemisms in cycling, this is the greatest. "Riding through" sounds like something you might do in a convertible, with a woman in a sundress, and a picnic lunch in the back seat. What are you doing today? Oh, we're "riding through!", as if you were going to the Kentucky Derby. Fifty years ago, if you needed an actress to "ride through," you would have picked Grace Kelly or Ingrid Bergman. Actually, "riding through" means you are too slow to get to some place in time to rest and, instead, are forced to stay on your bike all night. Well, if anyone's surprised I'm riding through, it's not me.

So why are we all here? I am not sure. Medieval monks, Tibetan ascetics, Micronesian firewalkers, all believe that mortification of the flesh leads to something healthy and good. At first blush, it seems stupid. Maybe not. St. Simeon sat on a pillar in Syria for 37 years. This is different in degree from sitting on a bicycle for 67 hours, but it may not be different in kind. I wonder. In all events, the Stylites would have made fine randonneurs. For what it's worth, I seem to be fasting as well, but it is a fast of sleep, and not food.

But I don't think it's about mortification of the flesh. It's something else. When we are out there it feels like what we were born to do. Not born to do like win the Nobel Prize or make a billion dollars, but born to do like a kangaroo is born to jump. Like a fire burns. I am a person This is what we do. It is not something we have to learn, except briefly. It requires no study, like playing piano or performing surgery. The bicycle makes visible something obscured by desks and cars and beds and all of the other content of our lives. We are animals. Period. The bicycle shows us what a human being is. It reveals us like a window reveals a room, or an anvil reveals a hammer. Here is the proof: while all of us will finish exhausted, few of us will actually hurt. Name something else you can do for 90 hours and not hurt. Human beings were built to ride.

I love the swoosh and the sway and the zoom of bicycling. I love to fly, to corner like a gyroscope. It's primitive and it's simple and it's elegant and it's graceful and it's powerful. The abject skilllessness of bicycling is its greatest virtue. It requires nothing. A four-year old can master it. A little balance, not much, far less than, say, being a spider. We know this as children, but we forget. We already have everything we need. The PBP is not the NFL. It is, instead, an incandescent union of form and function. Of past and present. Uniting us not with our grandparents as much as some animal 400 million years ago. Bicycling is primordial. We come from an unbroken line of winners, stretching back to the first day we crawled up out of the mud. Every one of our ancestors, all the way back, kept going long enough to beat predators, disease, starvation. Long enough to have a child. With really only the skill it takes to ride a bike. Like the rest of my species, I hale from Africa, and I was born to run through the woods. Or bike, if the woods are paved. A brevet is a race, after all. The human race.

Fougeres, 311 K to Go

I arrive in Fougeres, much improved. Art Cruz is on his way out. His wife is at the finish line. I find Brad, Kevin, Ray and Dr. Codfish himself, Paul Johnson. We reek, but are unaware of it, like fish that don't know they are wet. We have been marinated in our own sweat. Paul saw a café on the way into Fougeres 370 miles ago and has had his mind's eye on it for two days. He leads us there and we sit down to an outdoor picnic

table feast of sausage crepes, heavy on the mustard, and frittes, heavy on the ketchup. As we finish, Paul launches into what may be the second greatest pep talk ever. I cannot do it justice, but the gist was

- We are in France, riding the PBP, and we are the luckiest people God ever made
- We are in the homestretch and can taste it
- This is an epic adventure
- Life is precious
- We will remember it forever
- It will mark us

It was unbelievable. Paul said "Alright boys, pep talk." Then he just started in. It was amazing. And it couldn't have happened in a better place. We are just down the road from the greatest pep talk ever, given 592 years ago, a little east of here. At the Battle of Agincourt, Henry IV whipped a vastly superior French force six times larger, by virtue of yew bows and a spectacular speech: "we few, we happy few, we band of brothers." Perhaps he was a randonneur at heart.

People ask me what we think about on the bike. It's a good question. Often you have an active inner life, thinking a million things, many of them swings you wish you had over. Much of the time, though, I don't believe any thinking is going on. It's peaceful. Howell Raines says you go fishing to hear the Sigh of the Eternal. To be in the Zone. The Church of the Rolling Mass. I don't know. I do know I left Fougeres and arrived in Villaines la Juhel. I'm not sure what happened in between. I talked to Paul, Ray, Kevin and Brad. I talked to a great guy from Zimbabwe who had moved to Ireland. I met a French boy, 15, who was riding effortlessly. But mostly I was out of it. Somewhere along the way, a man fell off his bike and died. I fell off mine and lived. I missed it all. If I didn't know the Trotsky story was true, I'd believe RUSA was founded by the Whirling Dervishes, who believe that an ecstatic trancelike state of universal love could be induced by the practice of spinning around and around, like all celestial bodies.

We did pass through Gorron, for the second time. Ten people from Gorron are on the PBP and their names are listed on an enormous banner going into town. This is an astonishingly dense participation. I don't know how big Gorron is, but from looking at it, it appears to me to be about the size of Yelm. At 2,000 riders, the per capita participation in the PBP of the French is about 20 times that of the Americans. The participation of the residents of Gorron, however, puts this to shame. If 25,000 people live in Gorron, a number I just made up, you'd need over 25,000 riders in the PBP, from France alone, to equal their enthusiasm. Put another way, we'd need 200 from Wyoming. I bet Gorron is going to have a big party when it is over.

It is an urban myth that the modern champagne glass was designed by Marie Antoinette and molded after her breasts, although I have apparently been wrong about this for a decade. Go ahead. Google it.

IV. Night Falls for the Fourth Day

Villaines La Juhel, 223 K to Go

We fly in to VLJ after a brief encounter with what the French call a chicaine (broken front brake; both wheels fine). SIR has identified a network of doctors throughout the countryside willing to administer bicycle-intensive medical care without alerting the proper authorities. Fortunately, I am unhurt. We are moving fast, haunted by the lyrics to Bob Dylan's masterful 1965 ode to randonneuring, Love Minus Zero/No Limit:

> The bridge at midnight trembles
> The wind howls like a hammer
> The night blows cold and rainy
> My love she's like some raven
> At my window with a broken wing

Thanks to Paul, we had eaten pretty well at Fougeres, but it is important it happen again at Villaines la Juhel. After checking in, we go across the street to the food. They serve a spectacular local paella, with chicken and fish and shrimp, mounded over rice and sauce, all dished out by a large number of wonderful women about my age. I was frankly unable to eat the fish or the shrimp, but wolfed down the rest of it, with Brad, Kevin, Ray, Andy and Ted from Florida. We would have loved to stay at VLJ, because the food was great, the ladies were very nice to us, and we were exhausted. But the PBP is a brutal form of catch and release. As soon as you find something you like, you have to let it go.

Ray McFall Wiping Rolling Thunder for Fingerprints.
This is Why People Love to Ride with Ray:

It is midnight. Cold. Dark. Wet. We are exhausted. The entire PBP boils down to one question: can we stay awake to pedal to Mortagne? Not even pedal fast. Just pedal. To paraphrase the sailors, past Brest there is no law; past Villaines la Juhel there is no God. If you are looking for proof that God is a God of infinite mercy, you will not find it here.

Like probably everyone who has ever ridden the PBP, I am forced to think something about the thousands of French people dotting the countryside who watch us, and stand watch over us, 24 hours a day. This year largely in the rain. It is impossible to envision this happening in America. Something is different here. There is an unspoken pact between us: they will stand out there all day and all night long, if we will finish the ride. These are small towns in France, some of them really small. If you grow up in Carhaix who do you believe you are? What defines your place in the world? Maybe you think "my town was the center of the Roman empire in northwestern France 2000 years ago, the birthplace of Saint Tremorus 1400 years ago, and has been on the PBP route for 100 years." Maybe that's who you are if you are from Carhaix. I don't know what they think, but I know they are not just standing there watching us. It's about them, too.

The proof of this is in the economics of the ride. Children run coffee stands exactly like children in America run lemonade stands, but with one difference: it's free. It's possible that capitalism just hasn't come to rural, northwestern France, but I doubt it. They are helping us to finish, participating in the grand spectacle that helps define them. I'm amazed by the price of a café au lait or sausage at 2:00 in the morning in Corlay. I don't

know what the market price of either is, because the French did not force me to find out. They charged far less than I—or anyone else—would have gladly paid. The truth is they're not interested in the money. They want to do what they can to help as many people as possible finish the ride. We have a job. They have a job. They're doing theirs. We have to do ours. The bond between us is almost tangible.

I like the adults who look you in the eye and yell "Bon Courage" and the children who yell "Allez, Allez." I think the people I like the most, though, are the ones who stand silent, often alone, quiet sentinels, mute witnesses, as we join our history with the history of the French people. In truth, not every Frenchman is out in the streets as the ride goes through. But it must be very hard not to watch.

Ninety years after one world war and 70 years after another, Germans, French, British, Scots, Italians, Irish, Swiss, Danes, Norwegians, Spaniards, Bulgarians, Russians and Poles have all forgotten what side they were on. Or maybe realized we're all on the same side: trying to get to Paris, moving slowly, like a faucet drips, across the face of France. Five thousand people from 42 countries in one place for one purpose is pretty great. Several hundred from Britain. Newman, himself English, had a great take on this:

> William the Norman successfully invaded England; there is no reason why we should not successfully invade Normandy.

Newman at 83.

I'm struck by another thing in France that I hesitate to bring up, because I know at some point this may be read by a friend in Canada, the UK, the rest of Europe or elsewhere. I mean no harm, but I think it needs to be said. If you believe the newspaper, there is tension in the relationship between France and America. Maybe there is. Here's all I know. I apparently look British, or Danish or German or Dutch or Norwegian. These were the initial guesses of two dozen separate Frenchmen along the route. Each time I replied "No, American," their faces exploded with delight. Every time. Like clockwork. I don't have any wisdom how we play in Paris, but they love us in Normandy and Brittany. Don't believe everything you read. I know no French and they know no English. But here's what I would have liked to say: Thank you for General Lafayette. All across America we have named towns after him. I once had a girlfriend from a town named Fayette. Thank you for the ships at Yorktown. Your timing was excellent. And thank you for the Statue of Liberty, which was funded by public donations. I love the Statue of Liberty. Viva La France.

This is the hardest part. Some time between 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning. We have just left a café, Brad and Ray behind me. I have no idea what I look like, but they were both sleeping heads down on the table. I figure I am doing okay. Nonetheless, they pass me in short order. I thought I was moving fast. We get to the next town. I feel magnificent, but the Orange Blossom Special is exhausted. I lay her down on the sidewalk under one of the few streetlights for a few minutes. I rest too. We get up, take off, go about a mile, and I realize my glasses are back on the pavement. I do a quick cost-benefit analysis and then watch in amazement as I go back and get them.

I don't have a computer on the bike, but I have a rough sense of where I am and for the thousandth time do a calculation of my distance and time to Mortagne. I have plenty of time to make it, assuming I can stay upright on the bicycle. It's a pretty low hurdle, but one I'm having trouble stepping over. I have ridden three 600Ks in the last six months getting ready for this one night. Experience is what you have left when everything else is gone. I am determined not to be gobsmacked by this last night I will have to ride through. Upon being elected President of RUSA, Mark's first act was to obtain a private audience with the Dalai Lama. Since that meeting, Mark's stewardship has radiated pure harmony, kumbaya, and the silky spirit of aloha. But that aside, Mark was elected to ease our suffering. That was his platform, that's what he ran on, that's why we voted for him. Big disappointment. Calling it suffering, though, creates a misimpression. It's not that I want to stop riding. I want to fall asleep. Like everyone around me, I have been awake for almost all of the last 90-something hours. But the cost would be quite high. I spray water through my helmet and down my back, ride with my jersey unzipped, anything to stay awake. Mostly, though, I think of every reason in the world not to stop and lie down. My brothers with me. My brothers and sisters and parents and countless friends who are checking the website, perhaps this minute. I sing aloud in the rain. I try and name the 42 countries in the ride. I try and name all the Blue Shirts in the ride. I think about Allison Bailey. Allison played with Super Extreme Barbie Cyclist as a child and never got over it. She will finish the PBP notwithstanding being sick the entire ride. I think about the four SIR riders on fixed gears or single speeds, Bob Brudvik, Kevin Humphreys, Erik Anderson, Duane Wright. Erik saved my bacon with a bottle of water on a 600 in June. Most people ride a bike by pedaling, right, left, right, left. Not Brudvik. Bob's style is radical and oblique, not unlike barking at the moon. Duane's trip to the PBP interrupted his one-marathon-a-week schedule. Unfazed by the fixed-gear experience, Kevin will show up in 2011 with a cinderblock strapped on his rear rack.

Ken Krichman, riding The Belgian Promise, 64 now, 68 in 2011. Ken is the SIR closest in age to D.B. Cooper. Narayan Krishamoorthy, who qualified for PBP but isn't here because of a red-tape visa error. Narayan's grandparents are from the one country in the world with a wheel on its flag. It's just unfair. Eric Vigoren, famous for contracting Cycling Syndrome in 2006 and refusing to seek treatment for it. Peg Winczewski, my frequent riding partner, who rode the PBP in '03 and chose to ride four series this year instead. Peg's maternal grandmother was the first woman to join the French Foreign Legion. Frank Cordell, who expects to be here in 2011. Incidentally, I am aware of no evidence that Frank heads a Montenegran crime family. I don't know how these rumors get started. Frank's wife, Lesley, has quit her job as a teacher to operate a tavern across the street from school called the Chalk & Awe. The SIR from Olympia in the Federal Witness Protection Program. And the two SIRs confronting the timeless rando question: how do you bicycle 762 miles with an ankle bracelet on your left leg? (Beeson and Brudvik say the only effective solution is to get another one and wear it on the right, for balance.) I think of Thai, somewhere ahead of me, whose bicycle has malfunctioned a dozen ways and will shorten his chain and ride the last 500 miles on a single speed. Everyone else I know in the ride and everyone I don't. Those who won't finish, but will return in 2011. Joseph Delalande, who will finish his 11th PBP today at age 80, later today. We are all in this together. And while many of them feel better than I do, many

feel worse. They're not stopping either. It's a wonderful feeling to be joined at the hip with 3,500 people you have not met. But we know something each other. A lot.

Most of all though, I think of my wife and sons back home. I don't actually think about them, I just see their faces in my head. And you know that what they most want is for you not to get off the bike, lay down and go to sleep. People often tell us our spouses must be great to let us spend so much time training. They are. But the truth is that if they knew what we thought about at the 80th hour, when the doors in your brain are slammed shut, when your thinking is reduced to its reptilian core, when you are only capable of thinking about maybe two things, the truth is, if they could see directly into us at times like this, they'd make us go.

We're maybe 10 or 15 miles from Mortagne in the town before. Another rider and I miss a turn and labor a couple blocks uphill before some riders behind yell out to us. In some language I don't know, the guy I am with yells *@¶! It's a universal language. For me, I'm just glad they caught us. Another block and he and I would have been over the hill and who knows where. There is a church on top of the hill, doubtless dedicated to the Madonna of the Last Gasp, Our Lady of Perpetual Motion. We turn around and cruise through the remainder of town. It is about 5:30 a.m. Having left in the fourth wave, I have to get to Mortagne by 6:30 a.m. My speed picks up, as does that of all around me. I can't see their faces, but I know they left the stadium at 10:30 on Monday and all of our watches are synchronized. It may only be a move from 10 miles an hour to 12, but we pick up the pace and head through the darkness into Mortagne.

Some people think Leonardo da Vinci designed the bicycle. It's not true. See users.aol.com/pryordodge/Leonardo_da_vinci.html. Besides, everyone knows there are bicycles painted on the walls of the caves in Dordogne. Even if Leonardo had, however, I would not be surprised. What is surprising, is that 56 years before the first PBP, 120 years before I was born, and 172 years before Brad and Kevin and I arrive in France, Tennyson knew exactly what it would feel like to fly into Mortagne:

> Comes a vapor from the margin
> Rising over heath and holt
> Cramming all the blast before it
> In its breast a thunderbolt.

I arrive in a stretch of maybe 50 riders. We have made it. All of us.

Mortagne Au Perche, 141 K

We eat and leave. Brad, Kevin, Paul, Ray and I enter the home stretch. While our ability to feel elation at this point in the ride is fairly limited, we can smell the finish. There are a series of hills in the first 10 miles south of Mortagne and we are on the last one. It is steep here, and most of us are out of the saddle, gripping the handlebars, staring down, like Hamlet holding Yorick's skull with both hands. Standing on 175 mm cranks—the Hammers of the Gods—I hear a loud noise and I slam down on the top tube. I think my cleat has merely slipped out, but it is not to be. My pedal has sheared off, at the crank. Paul was an eyewitness to this and tells the story better than I can. Google the Dr.

Codfish Chronicles. I hitchhike back to Mortagne with a wonderful French woman who knows no English and who I don't believe was otherwise going to Mortagne. I had a high level of confidence on the way in that my problems would be solved with a new pedal, a new set of pedals and cleats, some big bar screwed in the crank, or—failing anything else—leaving my bike and renting some townperson's bike for the day for the 100 Euros I had in my wallet. None of these came to pass, including a wonderful offer by Jon Muellner to trade pedals with me, an offer we were unable to implement.

I note in the process that Brad has left me a voicemail and I call him to give him a report. Instead, Brad says "Jeff, it's no problem. I have a pedal." I misunderstand him and, through the fog, and ask "you brought spare pedals on the ride?" (Brad does not ride with seven year old Look pedals in all events, but that point failed to occur to me at the time.) He said "no, I have a bike!" It finally dawned on me what he was proposing. I don't know what to say about this. Brad was 1100 km into the ride, loves the PBP, and could smell the finish. He was fine. He had one PBP finish under his belt, however, and I have none. (No fault of Brad's I might add.) My brother's plan was to equalize this ratio at 1:1. Counting Kevin, it's 1:1:1. I agreed. We made a collective decision that total family happiness would increase if we swapped bikes. I've spent some time since then thinking I shouldn't have done it, frankly. I wouldn't have taken a bike from anyone else other than my brother. I don't know what to say about it besides this: It's the best gift I have ever received. When you're a child, you have infinite wants. The lead-up to Christmas is excruciating. At 52 I have very few wants. I want my wife and children and to outlive me. I want my brothers and sisters to outlive me. I want everyone else to be happy. I'd like a koi pond. And I really want to finish the PBP. That's about it. My sense is Brad's story has made it around the world on the internet, which is how it should be.

The one other thing that shouldn't go unremarked here is a kindness of Alain Lepertel in this effort. Alain is the son of Robert Lepertel, who has played a key role in the evolution of the PBP over the last 40 years. Alain is only a few years younger than me. I needed a ride back out to the course, saw a truck with a sleeping teenager in it, went up and knocked on the window. Through largely sign language (although he knew some English), I made my request clear. He gave me a "one moment" sign with his finger and ran in the building. Alain was managing the PBP in Mortagne; the next thing I knew he was driving me out. I'm sure he had better things to do. I had been off the bike three hours. Mr. Lepertel made a notation in my book giving me an extra 2.5.

Honor compels me to note:

Brad's bicycle is a carbon Trek, equipped with Shimano DuraAce components.

Oh well, it's important to stick with your principles. The one principle I am sticking with is that I'm going to finish the ride, and I am not about to screw this up now that my brother has abandoned a certain finish in favor of me. I am about to find myself at the finish line. Brad has accomplished a miracle. Two more and he can be a saint.

About a third of the way towards Dreux, we pass 10 miles south of the town of L'Aigle where, in 1803, 3,000 meteorites fell from the sky at once. Prior to the L'Aigle meteorite

fall, there was no scientific support for the idea that rocks came from outerspace and landed on Earth. Few people believed it possible.

Dreux, 69 K to Go

I keep going. I arrive in Dreux. Somewhere not too far from here, Rollo the Walker arrived from Scandinavia. In 985, Rollo had been part of the Viking fleet that besieged Paris under Sigfred. The Norsemen won. Twenty-something years later, Rollo returned with his men, having apparently decided that Northern France was a better place to live. In return for being granted a section of Normandy, Rollo swore allegiance to the king and converted to Christianity. Rollo was the great, great grandfather of William the Conqueror and, as a result, a direct ancestor of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Charles. While France gave Rollo and his men a place to live, a culture, a language, and a religion, Rollo offered one thing in return, a name: Normandy. As nearly as I can tell, Dreux is the closest point on the ride, maybe 50 miles south, of the Old Market Square at Rouen, where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake at the age of 19. The Patron Saint of France, Joan united France and decisively turned the 100 Years War in favor of France and against the English.

Virtually all the riders I know well are with the Seattle club. We come from all sorts of backgrounds and all walks of life, united really by one thing: a common approach to adversity. You get to the PBP and you realize it's true of thousands of riders from across the country and around the world. People I'm just beginning to meet, Lisa Butkus, Stephen Dart, Andy Akard, Chris Hanson. Three Japanese riders I repeatedly play leap frog with Thursday, with whom I apparently share a one-word common language: "Go." If the earth ever gets destroyed and we have to draw lots to move to a different planet, most of these people are going to be first-round draft choices. I belong to a lot of groups, and the truth is that, with respect to most of them, I give more than I receive. I have never felt this way about being a Blue Shirt. You can tell a lot about people by who they hang around with. I hope.

The ride from Dreux to the finish was significant for only a few things. One, out of fuel, I stopped at a patisserie. I ordered a couple of those round, swirlish raisin things and a Paris-Brest-Paris. I had had one of the latter in Montreal years ago. I forget what I didn't like about it, but it wasn't good. This one was unbelievable, and perfect cycling food. It had about a cup of some molasses-thick praline cream filling, the primary ingredient in which appeared to be fat. I bit into it and, like a balloon, a huge amount squirted out on the other side. On the bike, with no other option, I stored the blob on Brad's handlebars, where it sat securely, until I ate it. Second, I was the recipient of a tremendous effort by two Frenchmen, a man and a woman, to drag me into Paris. I rode by them as they were taking a break, but they caught up in short order and, streaming by me, motioned to jump on. It would have been a great way to arrive, but I could not hang on. Third, about 25 miles out, the sun has finally, 88 hours into the ride, elected to come out. It is humid, warm, the fields redolent in, among other things, the smell of cow manure. I start to fall asleep on the bike and pull over and lie down for what is intended to be five minutes. After about one minute, a car with a French family stops and frantically urges me to get on the bike and keep going. I try and tell them in English that I have almost two hours to go 25 miles, but they're having none of it. So I get on the bike and head out in exactly

the direction my bike was pointed when I put it down. This turned out to be back where I came from. Two miles wasted. Luminous idiocy.

St. Quentin En Yvelines, 0 K to Go

The arrival into SQY is something. The Normandy farmland (flat by PBP standards) gives way to leafy parks/suburbs, and finally to the streets of San Quentin which we recognize from prior rides. You are five miles out, then four. Three. You see the SQY Mall in the distance. Stoplights. I'm with a guy from Scotland, and introduce myself with the sole goal of trying to remember his name. He tells me, but it's gone in an eyeblink. We see the finish line. Brad is there with a huge smile on his face. High five. Don Smith. A bunch of other SIRs over to the left. I walk into the building and they are in the middle of the awards ceremony. There is a spectacular spread of food laid out (for the dignitaries, not for us). The food is under the watchful eye of several minders, who are jostling ladles, rearranging tomatoes, etc. I walk by a pastry and spontaneously grab it thinking, after 762 miles, what are they going to do to me? An enormous man barks at me, but with a big smile, as if to say, after 762 miles . . . . you are bulletproof.

Seedy Parisian Cycling Subculture:

V. Night Falls for the Fifth Day

And on the sixth day we rested. All of us.

France beloved of every soul that loves its fellow kind.

Rudyard Kipling, 1913.

See you in 2011.

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