

BANGLADESH ON THE ROAD TO THE WORLD
SERISE

SEATTLE TO D.C.

Seattle to D.C.
on a Bicycle

Bangladesh on the Road to the World Series

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on a Bicycle

MUNTASIR MAMUN

ILISH BOOKS







For
Sarah Morison
Suzy Becker
Asharafuzzaman Uzzal



Acknowledgements

A journey like this looks, from the outside, like it belongs to the two people on the bicycle. It doesn't. From Seattle to Washington, D.C., the road kept reminding us how little we managed alone. This book carries the generosity of everyone who helped us before we left, while we rode, and when the road turned difficult.

My deepest thanks go to Ashrafuzzaman Uzzal, Ujjal bhai, who shared the tandem with me — the same heat, headwinds, climbs, hunger, wrong turns, mechanical failures, cheap motels and long silences, for more than two months. There is no travelling independently on a tandem; every pedal stroke depends on the other person. This journey is as much his as mine.

In New York, Pritam, Konok bhai and Hasan Tarek gave us their time before departure, and Rick Gunn, a long-distance cyclist himself, gave us the right introductions — including to David at Bfold, who prepared the tandem and remained, long after we left, a phone call away whenever a part failed somewhere in the country. In Seattle, Saikat bhai collected two travellers and an unreasonable amount of luggage from the airport and stood there when the first pedal stroke began. Some people help a journey along; others make it possible to begin at all.

Some of the finest gifts came from people who owed us nothing. David Fisher and Linda, near Spokane, opened their home to two cyclists they'd never met. Peter, working a night shift outside Missoula, gave two wet strangers shelter, coffee and eventually a ride to a broken-down bicycle. I have forgotten many roads since. I have not forgotten that night.

In Missoula, Greg Siple and the Adventure Cycling Association welcomed us into a larger fraternity of people who believe the world can be understood from a bicycle saddle. At Alder, Ed and Gani turned a windbound stop into one of the warmest episodes of the trip, moving us from a tent into a cabin and opening their kitchen. The road had a way of handing us hardship first and kindness right behind it.

Dr. Shafiqur Rahman and his family brought Bangladesh rushing back to us in a small Nebraska town — a motel room, a meal, food for the road, and their plain insistence that we were among our own.

Nebraska also brought the moment the journey nearly came apart, when our money ran dangerously low. I wrote to Suzy Becker, Sam bhai and a few others, and their help arrived almost immediately — putting more road under our wheels, and reassuring us that people behind us wanted this journey to continue. My gratitude to Suzy runs deeper still: her own bicycle journeys had long been part of the store of courage ours drew from, so her showing up when we needed her meant twice as much.

Farther east, the Bangladeshi community gathered around us almost on its own. Ragib Hasan connected us to people along the route. Professor Ali Riaz received our parts, arranged accommodation, and welcomed us into his home with a generosity out of all proportion to anything we'd earned. My college friend Imranul and his wife met us in Champaign, fed us, and pulled together an evening with Bangladeshi students — the kind of night that reminds you a journey can cross thousands of miles and still land in a room that feels like home.

My debt to Masud bhai and Abha apa goes back further than this trip; this time they rearranged their routes to give us rest and family exactly when we needed both. Dolon bhai did the same in Virginia, coming for our call the moment the tandem broke down. I still remember the meal at his mother's home — by then I'd been away long enough that another man's mother could make me ache for my own.

Near the end, Ishtiaq gave us our last home of the crossing, in Ashburn. Tasvir Imam Swakkhar, Adnan Zillur Morshed and friends from Drishtipat turned our arrival in Arlington into a celebration. Tanvir bhai, a friend since my earliest days in Scouting, hosted one of the last gatherings, and Joydeep, Wahid and Hasan Tareq came down from New York just to be there. Wahid's last question — where will you go next? — closed the journey better than anything I could have written myself.

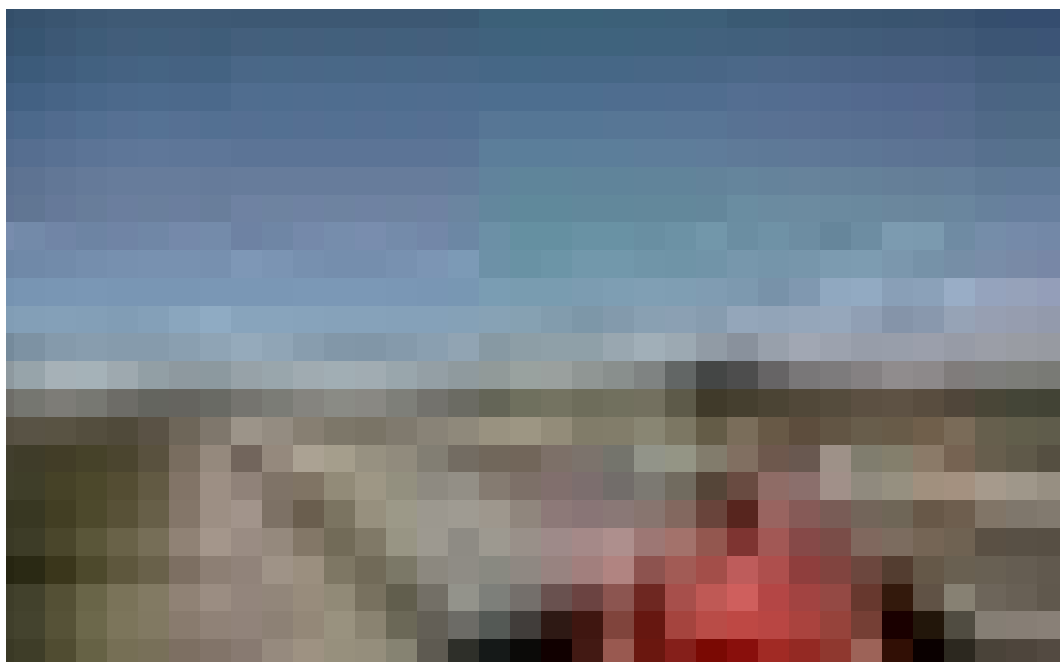
Albert helped build the Trashmaniac app that let us log roadside litter as we rode, and Patrick Runkel later analysed that data on his own.

And then the people who passed through for a moment and left something behind anyway: Martin at Lake White, who pressed twenty dollars into our hands simply because he wanted to help; an elderly couple in Lost Nation, Iowa, whose names I've since lost, who found two strangers in a park and offered beds, dinner, breakfast and sandwiches for the road; Frank, Randy, Kim, Roger, Jim and the other cyclists who shared pieces of the road with us.

There were police officers with directions, motel owners who quietly reduced a bill, families who filled our water bottles unasked, and strangers who simply stood by the road and wished us well. Many names I never learned; some I've since forgotten.

To all of them, this book is my delayed thank-you.

The bicycle carried two people across America. The journey itself was carried by many more.



The urge to cycle in America is an old one. For a long time I had wanted to go and understand the American Dream. People who go to America, the land of dreams, do not want to return; I had long wanted to taste that flavour. And why would they want to return? There are so many countries in the world! Small countries, large countries, countries of mountains, countries of seas. Countries of clouds, countries of sand, and, to many, countries from which there is no return. But America is America. Why? The answer is complicated.

For centuries, people have gone to the country across the Atlantic, whether for a livelihood or in search of fortune. They settled there. They built an entirely different state — a state whose residents became residents by first becoming immigrants. America is therefore the most familiar country in the whole world. It is also a country that beckons to the uprooted. Even on the chars of the Jamuna, it would be difficult to find someone who has never heard its name. My restless mind, too, sometimes becomes unconsciously caught in this fairy tale.

Cycling is like life. Just as life is not always the same, the act of pushing bicycle pedals is also nearly the same — different every time.

At least to me. Whether life is easy or difficult depends to some extent on our personal perception and circumstances. In that sense, my road might have been somewhat easier had I followed the conventional path. But then life dug in its heels with that romanticism of “I want to see the earth”! I had to leave my job out of the desire to see the world. I have always been hopeless at the calculus of making the numbers add up. So my heart was more willing to cross America by bicycle than to go to America as an engineer. To hell with sixteen years of formidable book learning. Sail on, little boat — to America!

My life as a cyclist began with my savings and the burden of loans from friends on my shoulders. Country, foreign country, continent — as far as my means allowed, I kept trying to see the world on two wheels. Seven full years after that first beginning, this time it was to be a bicycle journey across America, from the West Coast to the East Coast. The story of getting the visa is a long one. It is much like the story of many of us. Better not to begin it. At last, in 2011, an invitation came to present a poster at a conference. I received the visa. And with it came the opportunity. I was going to America.



1

LEAVING



01

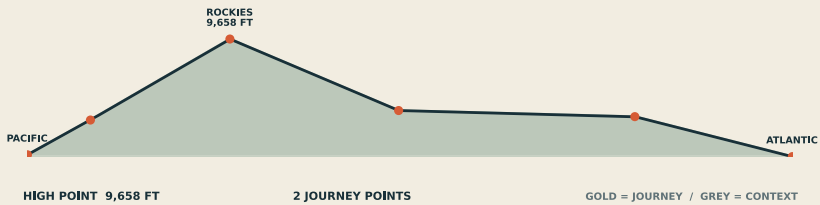
LEAVING

NEW YORK / NEW JERSEY / SEATTLE



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



A Fruit Stall on the Way to New Jersey

I woke early — 7:30 by the clock. As much as possible, the luggage had been packed the night before. Before that, I still had to bring the bicycle box over from my friend Pritam's place, and once it arrived I spent an hour stuffing the last of my things into the newly bought Ortlieb duffel, watching the thing grow heavier and heavier under my hands and thinking, not for the first time, that I had brought too much. There was not much work left for today, mostly sitting around. The previous night had passed in a long adda with Konok bhai and the others.

As planned, Hasan Tarek and I came to York Street station to meet Konok bhai and the group. In front of the station I saw a fruit stall, and from a distance I could tell the shopkeeper was one of our own — probably Bangladeshi. These pavement stalls, nothing extraordinary in themselves, are one of the main sources of livelihood for a large section of New York's Bangladeshi community — the same pushcarts you'd see all over Dhaka, except this city is New York, and tidy. We stood nearby a while, just watching. The customers came in a steady trickle, some buying enough fruit for the week, others only what they could eat walking down the block — in this country, it turned out, people did both.

"How well do shops like these do?" I asked Hasan, who had been here three years and had gone to school with me back home, close enough that our friendship had survived the distance without much effort.

"Location is the real thing here, bhai. If the location is good, the business is bound to be good."

By his estimate, there were at least twenty thousand such street vendors across New York's five boroughs — a business nearly two hundred years old and now inseparable from the city's life. Most of it is fast food: hot dogs, and the gyro, born of a mixture of West and Persia and now an iconic New York dish. Small pieces of lamb or chicken spread over rice like pilaf, with raw vegetables and a few kinds of sauce. "Lamb over rice" or "chicken over rice" — those two lines tell

you exactly what you're getting, a filling meal for five dollars. Small businesspeople start it with little capital; some, over the years, have become quite successful — among stall owners who now run several carts, millionaires are not unheard of. Because of America's ongoing wars abroad, a fair number of former soldiers work these carts too, known here simply as veterans, or vets. What variety of people end up standing behind the same cart. But fortune doesn't smile on every stallholder equally — working every day in every kind of weather stops being enjoyable fairly quickly, and there are always people, here as anywhere, who look down their noses at the ones doing it.

By staying rooted to the same spot for a livelihood, day after day regardless of season, a person can start to feel almost like a fixture rather than a man — irritation, disappointment, and worry all folded into the single outward posture of simply standing there, waiting for the next customer, for the sake of some better future that keeps receding. Many first-generation immigrants pass through this occupation, first as employees and later, if things go well, as owners of the cart itself. The laws here are strict, and vendors don't always follow every one of them, so the police keep up regular patrols; there's friction there, and outright harassment too, under "quality of life" crackdowns meant to keep the city tidier for everyone except the people running the carts. The number of roadside stalls allowed to stand keeps shrinking every year.

"Who are these vendors, Hasan?"

"We are. Bangladeshis, Indians, Pakistanis, Arabs, Africans, Americans — we are the stallholders. First- or second-generation immigrants are the driving force of this city within the city, rather like people at the bottom level of society. Most people who arrive here for the first time fall within reach of this profession, though that doesn't mean everyone becomes, or can become, a stallholder — there are lower kinds of work too. Every kind of work there is, we do it. That's how the system here works. To live, you have to work. Work is work.

"We call it a job. That's it! Everyone thinks, only a few more days. But those days never end. There's an intoxication in the streets of New York, and there's money too. Once you're trapped in it, breaking away is hard."

“Bhaiya, they are calling you. There, there — from the car.”

Konok bhai and the others had arrived. Our conversation ended there, mid-sentence, the way conversations with Hasan always seemed to. “Come on, Hasan. We are going to New Jersey, the neighbouring state.”

Where there had once been a wall between the two Germanys, here there was a river — bridges, tunnels beneath it, buses, trains, magical lights, dust-stained jeans, and traffic jams as ordinary as anywhere else in the world. I was startled. Good Lord, I was in America. Whom should I curse now? The bus driver? The traffic police? I couldn’t even find a police officer to blame, and every car window around us stayed



We hardly have any photos together — but this was one of those rare days when the sun came out to welcome us.

shut, so even if I did curse, no one would hear it. The bubble of abuse in my stomach swelled and burst right there, uselessly. Everyone sat in the same silence, as though the power of speech itself had gone out of the car along with the air conditioning. Thirty-five miles took an hour and a half.

“Hey, Sunny, take another road. We have to finish our work in New Jersey by seven,” Konok bhai urged. Sunny — our friend since childhood, a film-school student who knew the city like the palm of his hand — tried another road. No better. We edged forward and took a left, and then sat exactly as still as before, rolling ahead in inches, like railway carriages nudging each other down the line.

“All right, let us go through the Lincoln Tunnel. I do not think there is a jam on that road — our Sunny from Mymensingh!”

“Go, go, take whichever road you like, man. Damn it, then what is so bad about Dhaka?” Konok bhai’s frustration was quite clear.

“Bhaiya, it has been an hour and a half already,” Hasan added, in agreement rather than complaint.

I stayed quiet. There was nothing to do. I was no longer in Dhaka, where at least you could get out and walk if the jam got bad enough; this was a motorway, and walking simply wasn’t permitted. What choice was there but to wait.

We were headed to Campmor, the famous outdoor store in New Jersey — the one place, of all the stores of this kind I’d ever seen, where nearly everything could be found under one roof, with lower sales tax than New York on top of it, meaning whatever we bought would cost at least a little less here than across the river. Because we arrived late, the shopping had to be rushed; we had only about an hour before David’s bicycle shop, Bfold — well known locally for its folding bicycles — closed at seven. I called ahead and told him about the road. He reassured us but asked us to hurry. We doubled back towards New York over the Washington Bridge, through one lane after another, cut across by Fifth Avenue, and reached the shop at 7:30. The poor man had waited for us.

Preparing the Bicycle

I’d brought the bicycle from home — a special bicycle for two people, with small twenty-inch wheels, called a tandem, rare not only in Bangladesh but even here; its parts weren’t the

kind you could simply order from a shop in Dhaka. A long ride lay ahead, and several things needed to be changed. If something failed on the road, where would I find a replacement? I kept staring as David worked, the wheels of the tandem mounted on a stand, spinning from time to time with a whirring sound. My eyes remained fixed on them. It seemed as though this bicycle would cut through and bloody every hardship of the road and come out the other side — that nothing, not even a hard brake, could stop it once it started. Each time David spun a wheel by hand, my pulse rose a little, as if the dust of the road ahead were already flying up into my face.

Both wheels had to be replaced. The old pair had grown fragile on a previous trip to Sri Lanka — three weeks, five of us, starting from Colombo and riding the coast to the northern city of Jaffna before turning back — where I'd learned that whatever else these wheels could do, they would not survive a long trip with a heavy load. Sri Lanka had worked out because there had been other people with us to divide the weight between five sets of panniers. There would be no such possibility in America. It would just be the two of us, and everything we needed, on one bicycle.

I chose the best wheels I could afford. The bicycle had been a sixteen-speed, not nearly enough for a journey of this length, so it was converted to twenty-four. These bicycle speeds work somewhat like the gears of a car: the combination of pedals, crank, and rear wheel determines how much force turns into how much speed, and the extra gears meant more help on the climbs still to come — it sounds more complicated described than it actually is; anyone who's ridden a bicycle understands it instinctively. The gear shifter itself got replaced too, the lever that does the actual switching between them. Both changes mattered enough that there was no question of skipping them. Now the bicycle was ready. Prepared.

It was time to return. We hadn't eaten all day, so we stood on the street and ate gyros, then bought groceries for dinner — beef and the rest. This was the last big adda before the ride began, so the occasion took on a celebratory feeling — celebration, in this case, meaning beef on the stove. Back at the flat I found a small storm of conversation

already going in the next room; once the meat was under control and simmering, I went in and found the plate of salad Hasan had made almost empty, and attacked what was left of it. Under the force of Ujjal bhai's jokes and the sting of Hasan's white-sauce salad, my eyes nearly filled with tears from something other than emotion. I ran back to stir the meat before it caught. The commotion didn't feel bad. But amid the laughter, my mind stayed caught on the ride ahead — would my body hold up, would it manage without too much trouble. In two days we would fly from New York to Seattle, and the journey would begin there. Saikat bhai, who would meet us at the airport, had only said that it was still cold in Seattle. Really?

Sleepless Seattle

Saikat bhai had been a year ahead of me at engineering school, a brilliant student even then, now at Microsoft. For some reason he had liked me, though academically I was never anything special. So, after nearly nine years, I called in that old affection and asked to stay at his home — not that I had another option. People in New York kept telling me, “Bhai, do not worry, the Bangladeshis in America will be eager to help you.” I'd heard that particular reassurance in many forms over twelve years, which is exactly why I asked an old friend instead of a stranger's goodwill. A single night in a youth hostel could keep us on the road for another two days. Such was the reality of our budget — and among the many small indignities of flying with sporting equipment in this country, the sports-baggage fee was one I never got used to, even when the bicycle box came in under the fifty-pound limit. There was no escaping it. The charge had to be paid regardless.

We flew out of LaGuardia on time and reached Seattle a little after ten at night. While we waited at the luggage belt I called Saikat bhai, who was somewhere near the terminal and said he'd be at the kerb by the time we came out. The bicycle box arrived torn and split in several places, and my heart fluttered until I'd checked everything

was still there. As soon as I pushed through the glass doors, a gust of cold wind wrapped around my neck — in the middle of summer. The sealed, hospital-like hush of airports always makes me feel faintly suffocated, and I couldn't have told you why. I'd travelled all this way comfortably in a fatua; now I understood what Saikat bhai had meant by cold. Where, in the middle of June, was this cold even coming from?

Seattle is one of America's principal seaports, the largest city in the north-eastern Pacific, and we could have started our ride farther west, but the certainty of a place to sleep tipped the decision in its favour. I'd had a personal fondness for the name Seattle since watching *Sleepless in Seattle* — I couldn't say why, or how much I actually liked the physical city from the film, but the name had stuck, the way names from films do, without any real claim on the place itself.

"Saikat bhai!"

"Get in quickly, you cannot stand for long here," he said. He'd worried the tandem wouldn't fit his small car and had a two-trip backup plan ready, but by my calculation everything went in at once — a little cramped, but it worked.

Every building on the drive made me think, this was in the film. We reached his place, a two-storey apartment in a Microsoft housing area — what we'd call a colony back home — thirty minutes later, in a block he'd only recently moved into. Over dinner we finished our adda and made plans for the day after next, when we'd set out. That night we did nothing but eat and talk.

The next morning, unusually bright for a city famous for drizzle — the goddess of fortune must have been pleased — we went to a bicycle shop for a helmet and small parts, then to REI, the outdoor retail giant, looking for a detailed road map to Spokane. We didn't find one; the shop assistant suggested trying a gas station instead. But it was worth the visit just to see the place — nearly the size of a small town in itself, block after block of stock, more than anyone could take in without days to spare. I've been more excited by an outdoor shop like this, or like Decathlon, than I was by the Eiffel Tower in France; if the stores built for adventure travel are this large, I always wonder, how large must adventure sport itself be in a country like this?

The trouble started, of course, the moment we actually tried to buy something — prices were high, everything we bought would have to be carried, and everything we truly needed was already packed. We let ourselves want things and bought almost nothing.

We restrained ourselves from buying more gear — everything necessary was already packed — and went hunting instead for dry food at Walmart: I like to carry three days of food ahead of need, out of old habit, and dates are my particular weakness among all of it. We couldn't find any anywhere, of all the improbable things, and settled for tins of tuna instead, on top of the salt, oil, and spices we already had. Powdered milk barely exists here outside baby formula at absurd prices, and that search failed too. Saikat bhai told us not to lose hope; there were Indian stores nearby, our last resort, and we found our dates there at last, after several large stores and a trip to Walmart had failed us.

“Now we will see the city, Saikat bhai — Sleepless Seattle!”

Indigenous people moved through this area some four thousand years ago; the Duwamish people had about seventeen villages around Elliott Bay before European settlers arrived, first George Vancouver's expedition at the end of the seventeenth century, then Luther Collins and his people beside the Duwamish River in the mid-eighteenth. The city joined the map of Washington State as Seattle in 1865 — before that, Queen City. It's also been called Gateway to Alaska, Jet City, Rain City.

Our journey would begin the next day. Everything I had spent months, maybe years, quietly researching — which road to take, where to stay, how to repair the bicycle, what to do in danger — now stood one step away, difficult to describe. I had waited for this day for years, and now it was almost impossible to say whether it had really been months or years at all; time collapses like that around a thing you've wanted for a long while. Almost everything I've done has taken a long time — not from lack of devotion or effort, but because things simply take that long. This sickness of holding on has a price, and its name is habituation. Its spell is a strong one. I hadn't been afraid even to break everything apart before — to leave a job, a country, a settled life. So

why was my heart pounding today?

Ujjal bhai went to sleep. I brought out the boxes and took hold of the bicycle. Its one real disadvantage was weight — heavy, even for a bicycle, and if our riding speeds had differed much, one of us would forever be waiting on the other; a tandem solved that problem simply by putting us both on the same frame. I'd spent the previous year practising on it, and the Sri Lanka tour had been preparation too, so I knew the bicycle end to end. Handmade in a small factory in Oregon, though most tandems in the world are made industrially. We'd bought this one specifically because it could be dismantled and packed into an ordinary bicycle box, or even a large television box — avoiding the oversized-luggage fees that would otherwise have doubled our airline costs, since a tandem is nearly twice the length of a regular bike, and not every airline carries oversized luggage without charging extra for the privilege.

I spent the afternoon assembling it on Saikat bhai's balcony while Ujjal bhai napped, and made real progress once lunch was done. We had eight bags in total: panniers front and rear, an enormous eighty-nine-litre duffel on the rear rack — nearly half the size of the bicycle itself, and I could not have told you afterward why I'd bought one so large — and a dozen water bottles. Everything felt necessary. We'd also picked up the specialised Adventure Cycling Association maps, though we wouldn't need them for a few days yet; they're expensive, but they carry every kind of information a cyclist could want. Washington State was properly cold, so on top of camping gear, our load of winter clothes wasn't small either. So much for travelling light.

We'd decided to route through Spokane to Missoula, Montana, not along the official Adventure Cycling Association trail — which







2

THE FIRST ORDEAL

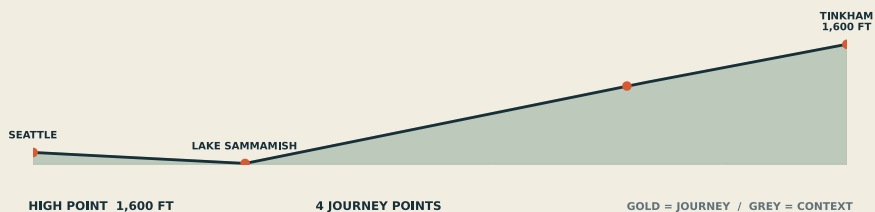
THE FIRST ORDEAL

SEATTLE / TINKHAM



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



No Bikes

My sleep is usually light before any major undertaking, and this was no exception — I turned from side to side most of the night. I left the bed early anyway, though it was cold and the sensible thing would have been to wait for the sun to make the decision for me. There was no use in that. Nothing special: tights, shorts over them, a T-shirt with the Bangladesh flag, a jacket. This is what I would spend most of my time in for months to come.

Breakfast passed in near silence at the table. Saikat bhai came down to help carry the bicycle and bags to the car park; no one spoke much, and photographs were taken almost wordlessly too. He wanted to ride part of the way with us, but I didn't want that much help so early in the morning — just, "I will call if we run into trouble."

I still remember the first push of the pedals clearly. Ujjal bhai trembled a little.

"How is it, Ujjal bhai?"

"Good, but I think I will fall."

"No, you will not fall. Pedal exactly as you do on your own bicycle. There is no special difference."

Saikat bhai's waving hand grew smaller until it disappeared, and we rode the smooth road beside Lake Sammamish, Google Maps working while the signal held — I'd loaded the phone with as much data as I could beforehand, against the day it might suddenly run dry. One of the strange difficulties of this country, I was already learning, is that everything isn't available everywhere — towns are built for cars, so a missing shop or a dead signal barely registers for most residents, but on a bicycle even one extra mile matters, and there was no way to know in advance whether the next town would even have a phone shop. Part of our purpose on this trip was to log the litter along the road for a small research project back home, feeding data through a mobile app into a website we'd built for it, which meant we needed that signal for more than directions. At eleven we hit a sign: this road led to I-90 — and directly below it, another sign: NO BIKES.

We stopped for coffee to ask about a way around. Ujjal bhai came back without his smile. Everyone said the same thing — there was no route to Spokane except I-90, sign or no sign, for at least this stretch, though cycling wasn't actually barred on every part of it. It runs over 3,100 miles across twelve states, coast to coast, from the northern West Coast to Boston, and we needed it for the day's last leg to Middle Fork Campground, some thirty-five miles from Saikat bhai's door — not far, by plan, since it was only our first day and we'd meant to go easy. There was no other road, and no way to guess whether the police would object to us being on it at all.

We took it with a bitter taste. The climbing ramp was steeper than anything I'd managed on the tandem before, and this time we couldn't ride it — the first time we got off and pushed, Ujjal bhai steering from behind while I fought to keep the handlebars straight in the correct direction, neither of us having any real idea beforehand how hard it would be to manage something this long and this heavy on foot.

The highway itself had three lanes: the far left for the fastest traffic, the middle as the main lane, and the far right shared with the enormous trucks Americans call eighteen-wheelers — two or three times the size of anything we'd call a truck at home, regarded almost affectionately here as the cargo ships of the road, trucking itself treated as a culture rather than merely a job, the trucks themselves oddly wonderful to look at. We rode the shoulder beside them, a strip a road this size can afford to spare, wide and empty at first in a way that felt almost pleasant — until the trucks began passing and the wind each one threw off nearly knocked us down more than once, sound I'd liked at first, until it simply became unbearable. The shoulder turned out to be where America dumps everything it doesn't want: broken glass, food wrappers, nuts and bolts shaken loose from passing vehicles, shredded tyre, rusted tins. We rode through it like two people trying to survive in an ocean made entirely of the world's refuse, watching the road instead of the scenery, because riding over the wrong piece of debris meant a puncture and an entirely different kind of ordeal.

Another trouble with a highway like this was that its climbs ran longer than anything we'd met so far, and riding them straight through

was hard going. By midday we'd had enough of one such slope and stopped in the cold shade for lunch, the bicycle propped at the very edge of the shoulder: bread thick with peanut butter, a tin of tuna I'd never have touched at home but which, out here, tasted like nectar, and Ujjal bhai's spicy chips alongside. Sitting there with my arms and legs spread out among the roadside litter, I closed my eyes for a moment's rest — and a fragmented image floated up: a rider, almost dark, pedalling with everything he had along an endless road, off the asphalt now and onto the harsh brick of a pavement, his lips dry, his face grim. The road did not end.

I shook it off and stood. Time to move.

If a town or shop lies beside a highway like this one, reaching it means leaving by an exit, usually two or three miles out of the way. We left at the exit for mile thirty-one, the same road that would also take us toward Middle Fork Campground, and after an hour's search, found it — private, and fully booked. No amount of pleading changed the woman's mind. Rules were rules. On the first day? Did the road really have no end?

We backtracked toward I-90, no phone signal to help us — we already knew by then that the network dropped out inside park land, which killed any hope of hunting for alternatives on Google Maps — until we heard of another option ten miles on, Tinkham Campground, via Exit 42. We'd crossed Exit 39 already, so by my count it couldn't be more than five miles further, and that thought alone put a little heart back into my legs. Another long climb greeted us the moment we tried to move.

"Ujjal bhai, let us get down for a while."

"I was about to say the same thing."

We walked it, telling ourselves it wasn't as bad without the roar of I-90 in our ears, without the truck-wind, without a place to sit and rest — that the noise and the lack of anywhere decent to stop had made the whole day worse than it needed to be. The road, mercifully, has to end eventually, however straight or difficult, and Exit 42 finally appeared, the road itself announcing that we were leaving the highway for something wilder. Thank goodness — we'd survived this leg.

A Night in Bear Country

Tinkham sat beside the Snoqualmie River, inside the Mount Snoqualmie reserve forest, the road turning to firm gravel and stone under our wheels, tyre tracks leading us on. After about five minutes we found an office building, empty. Camping beside the river without a booking wasn't strictly illegal here, but we didn't want to test that on our very first day — there's not much pleasure in breaking a rule you haven't first tried to keep. So we pushed on to look for someone to ask, checking the time as we went; a little after five, not much daylight left, and whatever we did, the tent needed to go up before dark became a second problem on top of the first.

We went further and found nothing. A car appeared behind us; Ujjal bhai flagged it down, and from a distance I couldn't hear the exchange, only that we'd apparently taken a wrong road. The car pulled away past us, and my eyes followed it — an arm emerged from the passenger window in what looked, for one hopeful second, like an encouraging wave, fist half-raised — and then resolved, unmistakably, as the fingers straightened out of it, into a raised middle finger. I kept staring after it a while longer, baffled. Why? What strange things the road gives a traveller.

We turned back toward the main road, unsettled — better to find people there, at least, than to keep wandering. Riding back with my eyes fixed on the tarmac, a cold current passed through me now and then; for a moment I thought I could almost see that same dim rider from lunchtime again, somewhere just past the edge of sight. We stopped where the gravel road first left I-90, needing rest as much as directions, and a little later another car came. We waved it down, and though we couldn't follow every word, we understood enough: the campground lay about five miles along the gravel road we'd already been using. We hadn't gone far enough — that was all. We pedalled hard, and astonishingly, had we gone only a little further past our earlier stop, we'd have seen the tents already. By the time we finally

arrived it was evening, smoke rising from the roof of a wooden cabin. People, at last.

While Ujjal bhai went to find the manager, I read the noticeboard out front and felt my stomach drop: bears.

Keep the camp clean. Store food, rubbish, cooking equipment and toiletries properly — in a car boot if possible, or hung from a tree branch at least fifteen feet up and five feet from the trunk. Never use a sleeping bag, tent, or anything belonging to a person for storage, and never keep any of it inside the tent. Where bear-resistant containers



Time at the campgrounds is mostly idle — a bit of a jumble, really. Whatever strength is left in the body evaporates the instant we reach a campground.

exist, use them for rubbish; never bury it or burn it. Set the cooking area at least a hundred yards upwind from the sleeping area, keep sleeping bags free of any food smell, and never sleep in the clothes you cooked in. If hunting is permitted, store game meat like any other food; if you catch fish, puncture the air bladder and sink the entrails in deep water rather than leaving them on the bank. Store horse feed the same way you'd store any other food. If you see bears, dead animals, tracks, holes, or droppings, choose another site and stay alert. Dogs can draw bears closer and shouldn't be allowed to roam. Sightings of

grizzly bears go to a twenty-four-hour hotline — 1-888-WOLF-BEAR, a number I read twice to be sure I had it right. Where in the world had we landed?

Still, the first day's journey was over, and everything had worked out in the end. The ground was gravel mixed with a little damp soil; a large log marked the edge of the site beyond which no car could pass, room enough for one tent and one vehicle, with a metal stand for barbecuing and, around it, the kind of wide iron ring meant to keep a fire from spreading further than it should. The camp table could easily have sat six; for the two of us, it mostly held the bicycle and our gear. We'd bought a small, sturdy Mountain Hardwear tent



At every campground, the ritual was the same: park the bike, scout a flat patch of ground, then strip it bare — bag by bag — before the tent could go up. This was one of those evenings.

rather than bring one from Dhaka, waterproof and easy enough to pitch even after a day like that one.

“What would you like to eat, Ujjal bhai?”

“Whatever you like. I have no problem.”

Some people find cooking on a trip like this too much trouble and just buy their meals. I love it — after a day like that one, doing

something different clears the head, and eating exactly what I need, in the quantity I need, matters to me more than convenience does. I'd brought a small MSR stove, the kind whose flame you can raise or lower as steadily as any stove at home, and after years of using it I'd grown fairly good at coaxing a proper meal out of it — useful experience, since more than one Ramadan back home had taught me how to manage without reliable gas just before iftar, and Amma always seemed to find her way to a good meal regardless. I boiled macaroni, realised too late we'd forgotten onions, and folded in eggs and the spices we'd carried from home. No chilli, but close enough. For the first night's celebration, I made semai too — dates, raisins, nuts stirred in — a full spread from home, cooked over a low flame, the familiar smell of the spices carrying further than it had any right to in a Washington forest.

Watching that low flame, that torn image of the rider surfaced again in my mind — the same one from the roadside at lunch, dark and desperate and endless. What if I let the flame simply burn him away? What if I buried the fear entirely, let the satisfaction of a proper meal become his lamp instead — a small light for pedalling on through whatever the rest of this life turned out to hold? It felt, as I sat there alone with the fire and the smell of home-cooking rising into the trees, as though something small and dark was quietly being washed out of me. It was our first day.

The campground manager stopped by as evening fell, in charge of the whole site by the look of him. We were, he said, the first people from our part of the world he'd seen arrive here on bicycles across such a distance — he seemed genuinely amazed by our preparations, eyes wide with it, and it meant more to me than I expected, translated wonder or not. Then he reminded us, once more, about the bears.

We ate — chanachur and crisps stirred into the macaroni, which took the edge off missing the chilli and added a welcome crunch besides, a little semai for dessert, the rest saved for morning — and by the time we'd washed the pots in brutally cold water at the hand pump, nearly the same design as the ones back home though smaller, it was nearly seven-thirty. The day had broken our bodies more than we'd admitted to each other. We went straight to sleep.



3

LEARNING THE ROAD



03

LEARNING THE ROAD

TINKHAM / SPRAGUE



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



HIGH POINT 3,022 FT

7 JOURNEY POINTS

GOLD = JOURNEY / GREY = CONTEXT

Following the Iron Horse

We left before six the next morning, chewing breakfast standing up — no time lost this time to finding the way, since we already knew the gravel would carry us straight back to the same stretch of road that had brought us in. Ahead lay the Iron Horse Trail — once a railway line, now Washington's playground for hikers, horse riders, and, in winter, dog-sledders, part of the larger John Wayne Pioneer Trail and rich, we'd been told, in both scenery and wildlife. It began only forty miles southeast of Seattle. A signboard claimed 1.2 million people came through each year just for the view. Gravel the whole way, and no cars: after yesterday's terror on I-90, that trade felt like a mercy, whatever the surface cost us in comfort.

By Easton, twenty-five miles in, we stopped for lunch and to ask about the road ahead — there were places to stay right there, but calling it a day after twenty-five miles would have been foolish so early in the trip. Better to press on and gather what information we could: Cle Elum, another twenty miles further, had somewhere to stay, or so we were told while buying food. Every mile mattered, and every mile behind us was one fewer ahead.

Cle Elum, when we reached it, had nowhere to camp. The motels were ten miles off, in the wrong direction for tomorrow's route, which would only have added distance for nothing. Evening was coming on. So we followed a rumour instead, toward a place called Eagle Valley Campground, climbing without daring to stop, half-expecting the previous day's disaster to repeat itself — what if we arrived and there was, once again, nowhere for us? Eleven miles, and then the gate appeared. "Ah!" — from both of us at once. Beautiful, and eleven dollars for the two of us, cheap enough to feel like a small windfall after the day before. We pitched the tent in the lee of some trees, out of the wind, and the camp manager, seeing our gear, offered us the run of his kitchen. Too lazy to haul everything over, we cooked on our own small stove instead, under the trees, glad simply to have stopped moving.

The Road Without Travellers

We'd learned the next day's road before going to sleep, since leaving as early as we planned would leave no one around to ask. Morning came, as always, far too soon.

We packed quickly and ate the oatmeal we'd soaked overnight — not delicious, exactly, but useful, and it kept the stomach properly full in a way that mattered to me more than taste did. Most of the day would again run alongside I-90, though we'd stay on the Iron Horse Trail where we could, to keep the monotony at bay, aiming for an average of fifty miles or a little more a day. Tonight's stop was somewhere called Vantage Riverside Resort, a name that worried me a little — if it called itself a resort, what might it cost?

The trail's peculiar trick revealed itself over the day: on I-90 we longed for the trail, and on the trail we longed for I-90 — “better” turned out to be entirely relative. What the trail had, that the highway didn't, was solitude: genuinely no one else, for hour after hour, nothing but wheels on gravel and leaves in the wind, the surroundings taking on something close to a supernatural quiet neither of us had known before. Even solitude, it turned out, could grow monotonous.

“Bhai, let us stop for a while. I do not feel good. I feel strangely irritated,” Ujjal bhai said.

“All right. Are your legs all right?”

“Yes. The problem is not my legs. The problem is in my mind. I cannot concentrate.”

A Tunnel

We sat a while for no reason but sitting — there was nobody around to mind, and the spot was good enough for camping if we'd wanted it — and then a tunnel appeared ahead, the gravel running straight into it, driven through the mountain the way old railway tunnels are, unsurprising once

you remembered the whole trail had once been a line of track and the tunnels had been cut to shorten it, exactly like the ones in old Western films. Both of us got off the bicycle at the sight of it.

“Is there any way not to enter, Ujjal bhai?”

“I do not understand.”

I have an excessive, almost comic fear of enclosed spaces — tunnels, holes, anything of the sort. Once, at the pyramids in Giza, I paid for an expensive ticket, pushed through a long queue, walked a little way into the passage toward the burial chamber — not far, and with plenty of light — and my imagination simply convinced me the world was closing in, my whole balloon of world-conquering spirit collapsing at once. I turned around and walked back out, to everyone’s disbelief, without ever seeing where the Pharaoh’s mummy had lain. My supernatural courage, it turns out, has limits — but staying alive came first.

The tunnel ahead brought all of that back. The walls seemed ready to close in and stop my breath, the damp brick coiling itself around me in my mind before I’d taken a single step inside.

“Ujjal bhai — I cannot do it.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment. But this tunnel wasn’t optional, the way the pyramid had been — it wasn’t scenery laid on for pleasure, it was the only way through. I pulled out my headlamp, and without quite noticing, found myself repeating “Allah, Allah” under my breath — not usually a religious man, but if it helped, let it help. If I survived this, I told myself, I would never come back. Three times true.

The tunnel wasn’t long. Pitch dark in the middle, then light at the far end, and an “Ah!” escaping my mouth on its own — I’d survived. Vantage Riverside Resort turned out to sit beside the Columbia River, and in a word: scenery, the kind that made the whole day’s exhaustion suddenly worth carrying. We pitched the tent quickly against a coming rain, cooked, and squeezed inside just as a fine drizzle started, gentle enough not to cause any real trouble. As on every evening, Ujjal bhai had gone to gather word of the road ahead before we lost the light; I stayed with the stove. I don’t remember falling asleep over the diary that night.

The Water Ran Out

The strain of three days was making itself known in every muscle, though I knew it would pass — the body remaking itself almost from scratch, the way it always does on a trip like this. Every day Ujjal bhai asked, “Why is the body not becoming thinner?” and every day I told him to wait a few weeks.

We knew from the start this next one would be a hard day — over eighty miles along the Columbia, whose banks turned out to be steep mountains rather than the flat towpath we’d hoped for; the direct motorway route would have been shorter, closer to fifty miles, but only cars were allowed on it, so we were left with the longer southbound road instead. We left at five-thirty, and made a mistake almost immediately: instead of crossing the bridge by the campground, we followed the quiet riverside road, trusting the map’s promise of another bridge twenty-four miles on. The road itself was a pleasure — good surface, gentle grades, the Columbia beside us wider than any river either of us had ever actually called a river back home, its far bank a long way off, the whole thing closer in scale to the Buriganga than to anything we’d call a river in the smaller sense. We rode it in high spirits, right up to the point where the road simply ended. No bridge. Never had been one, according to the people working a garden nearby — though it was still marked, mysteriously, on Google Maps. Three hours, burned for nothing, and my temper was thoroughly spoiled by the time we turned back.

We rode back, crossed at the bridge we’d abandoned that morning, and hit a climb short enough to laugh at and brutal enough to make us regret laughing — worse, somehow, than the three lost hours had been. “We have to stop, Ujjal bhai.” If a hill this small could do this to us, what was actually ahead? We pulled off where we could, glass from broken bottles scattered too widely nearby to move much further, ate a light snack, and pressed on past midday with barely any distance behind us to show for the morning.

The rest of the day answered the question the climb had raised. Standing at the roadside during one break, I found myself thinking

about how many riders must have passed this same stretch before us — some lost, some who reached wherever they were going, others stalled somewhere in between, each of them translating this same emptiness into something entirely their own. The sun that felt cruel to a parched throat could, on another day, become the very thing offering shade; there's a way the mind occupies itself counting light and darkness on a road like this, just to keep fatigue at bay a little longer. A headwind came on strong enough to drop our speed to four miles an hour and threaten our balance outright — “We will have to walk, Ujjal bhai, it could be dangerous if we fall” — until it eased enough to climb the slope and, once over it, let the tandem's momentum carry us at twenty, twenty-five miles an hour for a stretch, the one real advantage of riding



The America we know from movies and television is not the America we found. Out here, it's mile after mile of empty land and open farmland — nothing else. It's almost hard to believe that somewhere in this same country, there are cities so vast.

two-up on a heavy bike: once the speed is up, it wants to stay up. Ujjal bhai asked me not to put music on. He was feeling unwell, he said, and I understood why — we'd ridden more than two hours without a break by then, fifty-five miles behind us and lunch still owed to the body.

We stopped near three for that meal, if it deserved the word — bread and peanut butter again, a fresh tin of tuna, chanachur poured over the top for whatever flavour it could add, though I already knew my chest would be burning within the hour for it. What is the meaning of food without flavour? The afternoon that followed was worse than the morning — barren farmland, no shade anywhere, no trees at all, only the flat green stretch of a landscape already harvested once, energy spent without much distance to show for it. Worse: checking the water, I found we were down to our last bottle. We'd passed farmhouses too far off the road to reach. We drank half of what remained and pressed on, and later filled two empty bottles from an irrigation canal that tasted faintly of pesticide — kept, just in case, against a thirst we hoped wouldn't arrive.

By early evening, ten miles still lay between us and Othello, our water nearly gone and the light fading. There was no longer any point hurrying. We switched on our headlamps and walked — three miles an hour, three more hours, an empty road with no cars on it at all, the day's plan for tomorrow already quietly rewritten in my head: whatever happened, tomorrow would be short.

We reached town around ten-thirty and found a Burger King with the staff already cleaning up for the night. The manager took one look at two exhausted, foreign-looking men who'd arrived by bicycle at that hour, and — pity or plain humanity — sat us down, brought water and towels without being asked, and told us to wait while he saw what he could do. We ate the largest burgers on the menu and let the air-conditioning do the rest, watched, not unkindly, by the staff still finishing their evening shift.

The Cabana Motel, a couple of streets over, turned out to be run by a Pakistani owner who'd first assumed we were Pakistani too, until our passports corrected him. I don't remember checking in beyond that. I remember the bed. Straight onto it. Nothing else.

A Flag Found in the Road

After the day before, we started late on purpose — a small luxury, a treat for the body, since today's ride was short, and something in the whole business of yesterday's mistake had left us both wanting to move slowly and comfortably for once, without any of the previous day's rush. We wore the long-sleeved Bangladesh-flag shirts Bahar bhai had given us, cowboy scarves around our necks, and took photographs by the motel's wooden staircase before finally leaving at ten-thirty.

With less distance to cover, our legs had more in them than they had in days — coordinated pedalling on flat ground pushed us to thirty-five miles an hour at one point, enormous for a loaded tandem, nearly fifty kilometres by the other measure, yesterday's frustration apparently still working itself out through the pedals. The road ran through a riot of green on both sides, no large trees, only grass running out toward the horizon, wide enough with its shoulders to hold a car if it needed to, which eased some of our usual wariness of traffic. We stopped early for our first real photo of the two of us with the bicycle — thirty-one miles was all today asked of us, so there was time to spare for once — and a little later found something we'd been hoping for since the trip began: an American flag, fallen from its pole, lying in the road. We fixed it to the back of the bicycle — most long-distance cyclists fly the flag of the country they're riding through, alongside their own, and ours had been missing that piece since we'd left Seattle. Things picked up off the road carry a story inside them in a way that bought things never quite manage. Had it come from a shop, I wouldn't remember which shop or what it cost by the time I got home. This flag, found lying in the road on an otherwise unremarkable stretch of highway, is one I know I'll carry in memory for the rest of my life — the particular feeling of stopping the bicycle, walking back, and picking it up off the asphalt is hard to put into words even now, though I've wanted such a flag for days by that point and had more or less given up hoping for one.

Google's map for the day promised a thousand feet of climbing, and if that was right, there was no more room left for the leisure we'd started out with. The climbing started soon after and didn't let up — a long first hill that dropped our speed under ten miles an hour, ridden out rather than walked, on the theory that staying on the bike, however slowly, still ends the road faster than getting off it.

"All right, let us stop for a little while. I am hungry, Ujjal bhai."

More oatmeal — not delicious, but it does the job, filling a stomach that otherwise convinces itself it's had nothing at all. We drank freely too; there was no fear of running short today, not with towns along the way and no repeat of yesterday's arithmetic, though the heat still demanded plenty of water as the day wore on and our pace kept falling with it.

By late afternoon we reached Ritzville, pulling off at a petrol station rather than into the town itself for water and coffee, the mobile signal finally cooperating enough to let us check the map properly. The shopkeeper promised the worst climbing was behind us, and in his shop I found a tourist booklet that surprised me — tourism, in a town of under two thousand people? Ritzville's first houses went up around 1880 for the Northern Pacific Railway crew, and within a year the same building was doubling as lodging for the men laying the track — later remembered as the town's first motel. Towns like this, built around a railway line and little changed since, still draw a certain kind of traveller — myself included. A handful of shops, a pharmacy, a small theatre and gallery, a church, a bar, a police station that probably doesn't have much to do in a place where everyone already knows everyone else's face. There's something clean and hospitable about a place like that, evening settling over it, I thought, the way dew settles — quietly, without announcing itself.

We lingered a little too long and had to push hard to make Sprague Lake Four Seasons Campground by nearly eight that evening, our speed falling away on the last stretch though we never got off to walk. A quarter to six in the morning to a quarter to eight at night — a long day, however short the mileage. Cooking, then sleep, quietly, like dew.



We chose the Iron Horse Trail to stay off the highway. Riding this heavy bike over the rocky path was hard work. This is where the trail starts.

We rolled into the motel close to midnight — run by a Pakistani owner, as it turned out. After a day that had worn us down completely, we started late the next morning.





4

AMERICAN HOSPITALITY



04

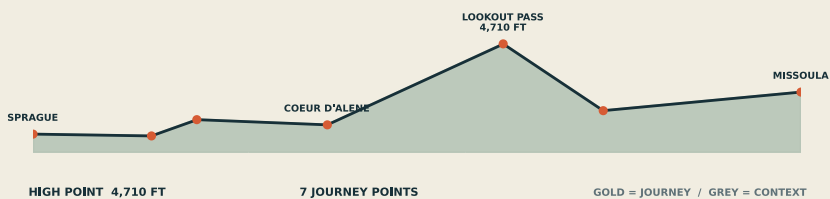
AMERICAN HOSPITALITY

SPRAGUE / MISSOULA



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



Guns in the Boys' Room

David Fisher and I had never actually met. A cyclist friend, Rick Gunn — who'd ridden through Bangladesh himself and spent nearly two years on the road — introduced us on Facebook when he heard our route would pass near Spokane. David, over sixty and no cyclist himself but fond of those who were, had asked us to spend a day with him in Cheney, just short of the city. We'd planned to make up the lost time later by bus from Spokane to Missoula.

Only thirty-seven miles that day, through mountain country that never quite goes flat, but nothing steep enough to make us walk. By half past twelve we had a signal and called David, who talked us the rest of the way in. Somewhere along the outskirts, a large vehicle passed us twice — once going, once coming back — before pulling over. A grey-haired man got out. "Muntasir?"

"Yes, it's me."

We shook hands, embraced there on the road, and followed his hand-drawn map to the last turn, where we waited for him rather than risk an unfamiliar gravel track alone. The road out to his place looked like the back lanes of Mouchak in Gazipur, except we passed neither person nor house the whole way, and I found myself wondering — not for the first time on this trip — whether it made sense to trust a stranger's hospitality this far from anywhere. Then his wooden farmhouse appeared, gravel road ending right at the door, and the wondering was over.

There's a particular kind of relief in a first handshake with someone you've only known as a name on a screen — a sudden, almost embarrassing rush of gratitude at being expected somewhere, at having a door in the world that would open specifically for you. I hadn't realised, until that moment on the road, how much of the past week had been spent quietly bracing for the opposite.

His wife Linda met us upstairs, already primed with everything David had told her about us. A house, after nearly a week! I couldn't

resist rice with fried eggs for lunch — eaten by hand, off a large plate, pure nectar after days of tuna and peanut butter — and slept hard for two hours afterward.



What are ordinary Americans like? Just like us — generous, even more so when your pockets run thin.

In the afternoon the four of us drove David and Linda's pickup twenty- five miles of gravel road to their daughter's place — John and Amanda, newly married, having built their own two-storey log house together over more than a year, standing alone on a hill with nothing around it for miles. Everything about the house shone, still new — the two of them had built it themselves over more than a year, and standing on its hill it could have stepped straight out of a Western, the prairie running off in every direction with nothing to interrupt it. Climbing the knee-high veranda into the main house, it was hard to believe such a finished, comfortable place existed on such a deserted hill at all; David's own place, back in the trees, had felt remote enough, but this was something closer to true wilderness. John's main work was installing wires on power lines, with farming and a small livestock operation on the side — the kind of life, he explained, that leaves you

almost entirely self-sufficient by necessity, because even a small errand out here can mean thirty miles each way, and there's no substitute for keeping what you need close at hand.

Amanda showed us the house; John showed us “the boys’ room” — a shed whose walls, floor to ceiling, were hung with guns of every size, rifles and pistols and hunting knives, boxes of ammunition stacked underfoot. Outside the military museum at Mirpur 12, I'd never seen anything like it, and I'd certainly never held a real gun myself — the closest I'd come was shooting balloons for five pellets a taka at a fair-ground stall. John looked at me like I'd said something impossible. Fair enough — out here, guns are simply part of growing up, taught to children early, alongside cattle and hunting; there are even guns made especially for small children. Ujjal bhai put on a cowboy hat for a photo that would, predictably, be on Facebook within days.

We sat outside talking as evening came on, and they sent us off with apples from their own orchard. A completely unaccounted-for, foreign, family sort of day.

The Chain We Left Behind

Since we hadn't found a proper bicycle box, I spent the next morning cutting a refrigerator carton down to size and taping the bicycle into it — no box, no bus. David drove us into Spokane, past a hospital so orderly and clean it made me think, uncomfortably, about the crowded, poorly kept ones back home, and whether that's really only a matter of population, or something closer to how carelessly we treat our own health and cleanliness. I filed the thought away.

Everything about that hospital seemed enormous compared to how few people were actually inside it — the opposite of what I was used to, where our own hospitals, built for a far denser population, carry the visible marks of being stretched thin. But is that only a matter of numbers, or are we also, if I'm honest, somewhat careless and unhygienic about health in ways that have nothing to do with

crowding? Why else would the corners of our own stairwells so often be stained with phlegm and betel juice? Had I not seen this hospital's spotless corridors with my own eyes, I might never have known a hospital could look like this. It reminded me of home mostly by contrast, the wind through the car window loosening the knot of the thought as we drove on.

We said goodbye to David over lunch and boarded the Greyhound — Ujjal bhai, myself, and a tandem bicycle in a fridge box, bound for Missoula, Montana, four hours through I-90, the only route bicycles weren't allowed to ride themselves. This is the pleasure of the road: a stranger becomes family within days, with little chance of ever meeting again, and the closeness forms anyway. I'll remember Linda's hand on my head for a long time. Every blessing offered along the way, in whatever form it took, seemed to have worked — otherwise, I don't think we could have stayed on this road as long as we had.

Half an hour from Missoula, the sky went black and heavy rain started hammering the windows — Missoula's greeting to us, cold and violent. It hadn't stopped by the time we got off the bus, though at least it wasn't torrential. We reassembled the bicycle under the station's shelter in the drizzle, freezing, and then discovered the timing chain was missing. We'd hung it from a tree branch back at David's while packing and simply forgotten it — confirmed by a phone call, for all the good that did us now.

There was a KOA campground five miles off with cabins, which I'd already decided we'd take rather than pitch a tent in this. Without the chain the bicycle couldn't be ridden, so we walked it — me pushing, Ujjal bhai steering from behind — along the roadside in rain that showed no sign of quitting, splashed by every car that passed.

"It must have been more than an hour, Ujjal bhai. Will you check the map again?"

We were going the wrong way. Three miles in the wrong direction since the bus station — which meant the campground was now more than eight miles off, three hours on foot, and it was already ten at night.

No point retracing our steps. We kept going the way we'd been headed and found a petrol station fifteen minutes later. The clerk,

about my age, took one look at the bicycle and asked if we were in trouble. I told him the story.

“You will not find a motel in this area now. If you walk to where one is, the night will be over before you get there,” he said. “You can clean up and change out of those wet clothes here. I have no place for you to sleep, but you can sit at the tables outside — fewer customers soon, and we can talk more then. If you wait until midnight, all the coffee gets thrown out for a fresh batch — still perfectly good, just against the rules to keep it — and you can have as much as you like, free. Some food will be marked down too, close to its sell-by. I wouldn’t buy anything just yet, though.” And he went back to work.

There’s a particular kind of humility in being cared for exactly when you have nothing left to offer in return — a stranger’s kindness landing at the one moment you’re too tired even to be properly grateful for it. I’ve thought about Peter many times since that night: a young man on a night shift, no obligation to us at all, quietly bending the rules of his own job because two soaked, shivering strangers had wheeled a broken bicycle into his forecourt. Whatever I’ve since forgotten about that road, I haven’t forgotten how it felt to be looked after by someone who owed us nothing.

We changed clothes, fought our cramped feet back into wet shoes, and kept ducking inside at intervals to escape the cold. After midnight we ate, filled our bottles with the discarded coffee, and sat outside killing mosquitoes for something to do. I don’t remember falling asleep with my head on the table — only waking to the sound of a vehicle at dawn, the morning shift arriving to relieve our clerk, Peter.

“Come, I will drop you off. I have a vehicle. Everything will fit.”

He left us at the City Center Motel, where an Indian gentleman running the desk took pity and cut the price to fifty dollars. We had the whole day ahead of us and no plans for it beyond sleep. I sank into the room under a thick blanket and was gone.

A Wall of Stickers

A night sitting at a petrol station had done more damage to my body than days of riding — no cycling the next day either. We slept in past ten, ate bread and coffee from the room, and walked into town with the bicycle to visit the headquarters of the Cycling Association.

ACA began in 1973, when Dan and Lys Burden and Greg and June Siple rode from Anchorage, Alaska, all the way down to Tierra del Fuego in Argentina, and came back wondering how to make this kind of travel more popular. For America's bicentennial in 1976 they organised a coast-to-coast ride along what became the TransAmerica Trail; about four thousand cyclists joined that first summer.

We left the tandem outside and walked into a small reception area where cyclist, simply, was the only identity that mattered — country, race, and colour all beside the point under that roof. Free ice cream, light food, water bottles, a pump and whatever else a rider might need were all just there for the taking; I'd never imagined an organisation's office could feel like this. On one wall, stickers from visitors ran from floor to ceiling and stretched in both directions, with room left for new arrivals to add their own. We added ours. We'd soon be lost among the thousands already there, but we'd remain on that wall regardless — somewhere in that field of names, if anyone ever thought to look, they'd find Bangladesh sitting quietly after ours.

Seeing our own sticker go up there, small and slightly crooked, mattered more to me than I expected it to. Not because anyone would ever come looking for it — but because for one afternoon, in a country that had no particular reason to know we existed, Bangladesh got to sit on a wall the same size as everyone else's.

Greg Siple himself showed us the actual bicycle he and June had ridden to Tierra del Fuego, along with story after story of how the organisation came to exist. ACA's single greatest achievement is the maps: when Greg and the others made that first ride, no such maps existed for most of the route, so the need itself forced them to start

making their own, refined over the following decades by the very cyclists who relied on them. The ones we were using, at around a hundred and fifty dollars, were so dense with detail — lodging, shops, every rise and fall in the road — that nothing else was needed.

Then Greg photographed us, the way he's photographed every rider who's passed through here for years: an old Pentax loaded with black-and-white film, despite digital cameras being everywhere now, a plain white backdrop hung in the open space beside the garage. Nothing about it felt casual — just the two of us and him, no crowd, no rush. I've travelled by bicycle to a great many places over the years and never felt quite so much like a celebrity as I did standing in front of that camera. Afterward he put the bicycle on a scale — he records the weight of every bicycle belonging to every cyclist he photographs, a habit kept up for decades — and pronounced ours far too heavy, even with the water bottles not entirely full. What varied hobbies people keep. Coming from a man with that many bicycles' worth of data behind him, the verdict was worth taking seriously; we'd have to think about what could come off.

We left with handfuls of chocolate and the address of a bicycle shop, and spent the rest of the day resting. Ujjal bhai went out alone for groceries and came back a little deflated. "You know, I met a Bangladeshi too," he said. "I tried to talk to him, but he didn't seem very interested." Ujjal bhai collects people the way some collect stamps — meeting a fellow Bangladeshi abroad is, for him, an automatic occasion, and being met with indifference stung.

I understood exactly. Years earlier, cycling past the Louvre with a French sailor friend, I'd greeted a water-and-flower seller with salaam — clearly, from his face, a fellow Bangladeshi. He brushed past without a word. Another, older, stopped to talk, and offered an explanation for the first man's coldness that stayed with me: "You look like one of us, but you arrived on a sahib's bicycle. It is therefore difficult for us to recognise you as one of our own." Strange, how much a change of place can rearrange a person's sense of who belongs to whom.

The evening passed quietly — talk with the motel's owner, rice cooked in our room. Tomorrow, the road again.



It was one of Greg Siple's ACA traditions — measuring the bike and taking a photo with a film camera.





5

INTO THE ROCKIES



05

INTO THE ROCKIES

MISSOULA, MONTANA / ALDER, MONTANA



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



HIGH POINT 7,360 FT

13 JOURNEY POINTS

The First Hundred

We started eager and cold — forty degrees Fahrenheit, four Celsius, past seven in the morning. Jackets on, we pedalled hard enough to warm up fast on a level road, and reached Florence — four hundred miles on the trip odometer — after two easy hours.

Then the climbs started, and I decided we simply wouldn't walk today, whatever it cost us in time. Ten miles took ninety minutes of sweat. By noon we'd reached Hamilton — four hundred and twenty-seven miles — and the road eased again, the temperature climbing from that morning's four degrees to a comfortable twenty-two, warm enough for the potato-like crops filling the fields around us.

We bypassed Florence itself, stopping only for a photo at the town sign, and reached Derby Campground with daylight to spare — sixty-nine miles for the day, over a hundred kilometres, and still hours in hand. That's the uncertainty of every day on the road: no amount of planning tells you in advance whether it'll break you or hand you back an idle evening. The manager, hearing how far we'd come, cut our rent from fifteen dollars to ten. Dinner was macaroni with eggs, onion, and the local green "chillies" — really more like bell peppers, not hot at all, but good enough to imagine heat into.

Under the Pull of Gravity

Next came Lost Trail Pass, and my heart had been trembling about it since morning. Neither of us has an athletic build, and climbing on a loaded tandem is harder than either of us could have imagined ten days ago — though ten days had also taught our bodies a great deal; slopes that once forced us to walk no longer did.

Three hours in, we broke in the small settlement of Sula for something light to eat. The sun was punishing, the road itself burning too hot to stand on barefoot, and according to the map the day's highest point still lay some thirteen miles off, already visible from where we sat — a long, straight climb with not the slightest bend in it anywhere, the kind of road that makes a bicycle look, to anyone watching, like it's

moving at the speed of a tortoise. Cars passed close enough to ring in our ears, a bicycle plainly out of place on a highway built for engines. At least the shoulder was wide enough that even at our crawl, stopping to rest never felt dangerous.

We covered two miles in an hour. “Any hope, Ujjal bhai?”

“Yes, it seems so. Let us start.”

We got no further than the next bend before both bodies gave



Lolo, Montana — ‘Home of Travelers’ Rest.’ We kept riding.

out. “Let us get down,” Ujjal bhai pleaded — and I wanted exactly the same. There was nowhere cool to sit; the guardrail burned like hot iron, the road burned worse. We packed the water bottles away before the sun could ruin them — out here, water isn’t something you waste. I doubted, more than once, whether we could keep riding at all, but forced myself to believe the fewer times we got off, the sooner it would be over.

We passed a car stalled on the shoulder, its occupants sitting outside in the blazing heat because the inside was worse, waiting on a tow truck that could be hours away and a bill that would sting for a long time after. I felt for them, and understood our own situation a little better for it: what if that had been us?

Nearly six hours after starting, we reached the top — 7,014 feet, Lost Trail Pass, with tourist shelters, seating, toilets, and water. I tried to lean the exhausted bicycle into a strip of shade and the kickstand simply broke. After six hours of pushing thirteen miles uphill, standing there holding the bicycle up by hand felt like a particularly cruel final joke.

For a moment, standing there with the bicycle refusing even to lean, I let myself feel it properly — not the ache in my legs, but something closer to disbelief. We had climbed this. Whatever the day still owed us, that particular fear was gone for good.

Then, at least, it was all downhill — the numbing, whole-body relief of a long descent, undercut almost immediately by mosquitoes so persistent that Ujjal bhai spent the whole ride swatting them off my arms from the back seat, since I couldn't steer one-handed.

Near the town of Wisdom, a free campground turned us away — maybe that's exactly why it was free — just as the sky went black and started rumbling, mosquitoes and thunder arriving together like a coordinated assault. We settled instead on Pioneer Mountain Lodge, eighty-five dollars a night — a week's budget in one shot — talked down to sixty-five by Ujjal bhai's refusal to give up. Worth it: two rooms, a television, a proper kitchen, cheap by any family's standard. The lodge had a double-door system — screen door, then the real door, never both open at once — the only way to keep the mosquitoes, who arrive here by the million rather than the swarm, from taking the room along with us. No Bangladeshi, raised on mosquitoes as we are, is prepared for this. We cooked pasta and lachha semai for two days at once. Money buys comfort — a great truth, confirmed once again.

Roger, and the Land of Limitless Sky

Echoes rise along a road like this one in strange proportion — a gentle breeze touching you softly one hour, the same wind leaving you exhausted the next, every day its own unrehearsed chronicle. After Lost Trail Pass, most of the following day ran downhill, but eighteen miles in, Ujjal bhai was worn out and my right knee was complaining, so we called it early and reached Jackson, Montana — population thirty- four, one place to stay — by seven that morning, having risen at 4:30 and left by half past five. We camped behind the lodge instead,

thirty dollars just to pitch a tent, in a valley pretty enough that the price stung less than it should have. The shopkeeper hadn't expected anyone at the campground so early and, once we'd explained, charged us for only the one night.

We stretched out on thick grass in the morning sun, and it carried me straight back to a field behind Lalmatia Arong, where Hamid, Sakil and I used to sit and talk for hours as boys. One of them lives in Australia now, the other in Canada, and here I was in Montana's Big Sky Country. Ujjal bhai, predictably, wandered off and made friends within the hour — he has that gift, an easy trustworthiness people respond to immediately — and talked his way into a free soak in the lodge's hot-water pool meant only for paying guests.

A group of five cyclists arrived that afternoon, headed to Maine on the other coast. One of them, Frank, told us they were on their way to RAGBRAI — a seven-day cycling gathering held every year in Iowa, less a race than a rolling festival of noise and celebration, drawing riders from across the country and beyond. It started the third week of July. Iowa was already on our route; RAGBRAI wasn't part of the plan, but hearing about it, neither of us wanted to rule it out.

Two passes lay ahead the next morning, so we were up at five again and moving by six, well before the rest of the group. Ujjal bhai had arranged for the lodge owner to drive us over the first, Big Hole Pass, but there was no point waiting for him at that hour, so we started climbing on our own. We didn't need him after all — ten minutes after his truck caught up and offered us a lift, we'd already crested the pass, 7,360 feet, without once getting off to walk. I felt genuinely proud; I hadn't expected to clear it that cleanly.

On the second climb, a rider named Roger overtook us — in his sixties, something close to five hundred thousand miles logged over thirty-five years, unhurried but unstoppable even in the wind. He pulled a small bottle of rum from beside his water bottle, took a sip, waved, and pedalled on. "See you soon." Thirty-five years of anything becomes its own kind of religion.

The second pass ended in three brutal uphill miles that nearly finished us off before we reached Dillon. Forty-eight miles was enough; we let the rest of the group push on without us.

The Wind That Wouldn't Let Us Ride

The next morning we set out along a gently descending road that still needed pedalling, past ranchland where enormous cows stared at us, unblinking, clearly baffled by a bicycle carrying two people at once. Between the cows and the mosquitoes — Montana's real menace, biting hard enough to demand an immediate scratch — stopping for more than a moment came at a cost. We paused for oatmeal, twenty miles in, and again in Twin Bridges, six miles further, for a longer rest.

The small towns of North America are beautiful the way stories are — nothing necessarily remarkable in them, yet carrying an unfamiliar atmosphere of simplicity all their own. Everything sits along the one main road, visible almost at a glance, and from a distance the municipal water tank catches the eye first; I'd learned by then that you can roughly measure a settlement's size by how many tanks it has — more than one usually means the population had once been smaller and grown into itself since. We crossed a small wooden bridge and turned onto Main Street, calm and intimate, too small to make much noise even if it wanted to, some shops still open and some clearly shut for good. Catching my own reflection in a shop's glass wall there, unfamiliar to myself for a second, I thought: is that really me? Not so long ago I'd seen this same face in the scratched glass of a bus in Dhaka. Today, in the coloured glass of a shop window in a place called Twin Bridges, I might not have believed we'd come this far if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. Time was moving, and so were we — different versions of the same person, caught in a single glance.

Then the wind hit — fifteen miles from Alder, on flat, easy road, in broad daylight — and we simply couldn't fight it any further.

"Ujjal bhai, tell me — what should we do?"

"Leave it. I see no point in riding in this. We cannot enjoy ourselves, and we cannot see anything. It feels as though we are pressing the pedals for no reason at all. Meaningless."

He was entirely right, and my own temper had gone sharp with frustration to match his. Everything else about the day was fine — the road was level, there was plenty of daylight left, our destination was only thirteen miles off — but I had genuinely never encountered wind like this in my life. It reminded me, absurdly, of the desert storm in *The Alchemist* that hides the sun and nearly finishes Santiago before the Bedouin chief intervenes. A red pickup truck pulled over as we stood there, defeated, wondering whether the town itself was always this quiet or only today. “What’s up, guys? This wind is not gonna slow down anytime soon. Will you go, or keep pushing?” I didn’t have to say a word. Ujjal bhai, with his usual gift for charming total strangers, had the panniers off and the bicycle loaded before I’d finished thinking about it, the driver climbing down to help without being asked. Minutes later we were in Alder — a ride that took no time at all, undercutting every ounce of pride from having pushed this far under our own power.

The KOA manager, Ed, was old and well over six feet tall, his belly no longer willing to stay restrained by his belt — for a second I thought of B. C. Bhadra Sir, who’d taught us mathematics at Notre Dame College and used to console anyone who’d scored a zero by saying that even passing through the origin point was progress of a kind, since it at least gave you somewhere to move forward from. Ed’s belly, I decided, would have won that particular contest outright; our teacher had never had the height to match him.

Twenty-eight dollars got us a night on grass so soft and even it shamed every field either of us had ever played on back home — I thought of a cricket match our school once played at the Mirpur City Club ground, pockmarked and scarred in a way this grass simply wasn’t. A single tree stood at the exact centre of the campground, a lake spread out in front of us, and a log swing rocked back and forth on its own in the wind, drifting first toward the water and then back toward us, as if it hadn’t quite made up its mind — a degree of beauty that felt almost unfairly concentrated in one small place, the kind of place that makes you wonder how many people ever get the chance to see it.



Ed from Alder, KOA





Our KOA campground in Alder, Montana. Top left: the office, easy to spot by the neon 'OPEN' sign. Top right: before dinner, we sat around trading stories with a few other travelers at the Gold Rush Grill. Bottom: the campground itself — picnic tables, a porch swing, and the river just beyond.



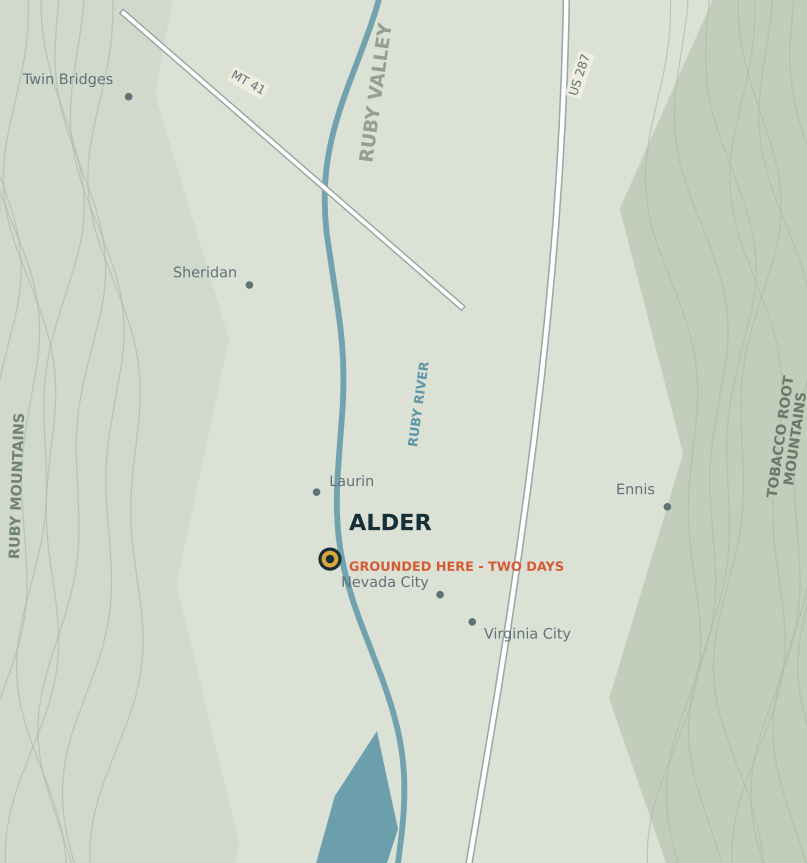
6

GROUNDED

06

GROUND

ALDER AND THE RUBY VALLEY, MONTANA



LOCAL TERRAIN SECTION

CONTEXTUAL - NOT A RIDING PROFILE



Ed's Kitchen

There's a kind of humility a heavy tandem teaches you that an ordinary bicycle never would: some winds simply will not be argued with, no matter how far you've already come or how much you still have left to prove to yourself. Being grounded, it turned out, could be its own kind of lesson — the road forcing a stillness on us that we would never have chosen on our own.

The other cyclists rolled in well after us that first evening, having taken their time over a restaurant lunch. With a shop nearby, we allowed ourselves pasta with six eggs and plenty of onion, cooked in our only two pots while the wind rattled everything around us and Ed came over to see what smelled so good.

That night the tents kept collapsing inward under the wind, and by morning it hadn't let up at all. The other riders left anyway, a little earlier than usual to compensate; we didn't have the nerve. An ordinary bicycle might have managed, but a long, heavy tandem catches wind like a sail. We sat on the campground swing eating oatmeal, rocked by the same gusts, and watched our new friends disappear down the road.

Ujjal bhai went to extend our booking and came back with the actual verdict: a red weather alert. Winds strong enough that vehicles were told to take extra care, and campers were being moved out of tents and into solid buildings, no exceptions. Ed took our tent down himself, put us in a log cabin at no extra charge, and told us to cook indoors too — lighting a stove outside in this wind wasn't safe.

Ed had taken a liking to yesterday's pasta and asked, more than once, if I'd cook something Indian. I settled on beef, and Gani — about Ed's age, working the campground with him — drove off to get it, checking first against a full list of what the kitchen already had. We were given free run of the campground store. If someone handed me a proper kitchen on a day I couldn't ride anyway, I couldn't ask for much more.

While the beef simmered — my own spice packet and mustard oil, which I never travel without — Ujjal bhai helped Ed and Gani fight a losing battle against wind-blown leaves with a blower, and

the radio ran hourly storm updates, a habit that surprised me a little in a country this modern, until I remembered how much radio still mattered to us back home too, growing up with a Philips set through the upheavals of the 1990s.

By evening the beef curry, potatoes, and pasta were ready, and everyone ate well, and I sat down afterward to my own bowl of hot rice with the last of the gravy — how many days had it been since I'd had that? By then Ujjal bhai had already become “Moh” to the Americans around us, short for Mohammad, his actual first name — Ashrafuzzaman, from which Ujjal had come — being easier for them to shorten than to pronounce. And I was simply “M,” from Muntasir.

It occurred to me, cooking there, that I've been handed an “Indian” identity everywhere I've travelled — Boston, São Paulo, France, Foz do Iguaçu — simply because of how I look, and asked to cook Indian food accordingly. It used to bother me. Then I considered that our own ethnicity might reasonably be called Indian in the broadest sense — Pakistanis might disagree, considering themselves closer to Persian; Nepal and Bhutan lean Mongoloid; that leaves us, alongside Sri Lankans and Indians proper, closer kin than the modern borders suggest. I still couldn't tell you, if pressed, which food is originally and only Bangladeshi — paanta and hilsa at Bengali New Year, maybe, though I've never once seen anyone eat that combination in an actual village; it's a city habit dressed up as tradition, the way our seasonal festivals now revolve around Rabindranath alone despite the Bengali poets who came before him. I don't mind, honestly. At least something is happening. So I no longer feel bad when someone hands me an Indian identity along with a kitchen — if I cook something Indian in a place like this, everyone accepts it as authentic, purely because I look the part. If I tried to make sushi, no one would believe it for a second. We calculate these things in advance, all of us, whether we admit it or not.

We were still grounded the next day, the wind unbroken, so we kept helping around the camp — leaf-blowing, mostly — and let Ed take his turn in the kitchen. That's when I noticed all the equipment came from a company called Delta, and learned Ed himself owned

it — a major restaurant-supply business that had catered events like the U.S. Open. He cooked rosemary chicken, two whole birds and potatoes under a heap of herbs, into the oven at 315 degrees.

Ed had served in Vietnam and, despite being a committed Republican, had a deep fondness for Muslims that traced back to a wartime friendship with an Iranian named Rashid — the two of them long out of touch, unable to reach each other anymore, but the affection clearly still there on both sides. Politics, I thought, listening to him, is a game played by kings; it was true before and it remains true now. Can it fully remake the character of the ordinary people caught underneath it? It hasn't yet, and I don't think it ever quite will. Common people live by gathering whatever sweetness they can from one another, even when the countries above them are busy being enemies.

It reminded me of a night in 2006, at a gathering of travel writers in a small town called Bhadreswar in West Bengal, where I met a man named Rathin Chakraborty — an article he'd once written about Sherpas had earned my quiet admiration long before we ever met in person. Afterward, back in Kolkata, I stayed a night at his home; by morning he'd become Rathin-da, showing me around the city, and sent me home with several copies of a book he'd written called *Salam Pakistan*, which travelled back to Bangladesh in my own backpack. Sitting in Ed's kitchen in Montana, hearing an American veteran describe his affection for an Iranian friend, I thought of Rathin-da's book again. Difference and disagreement, it turns out, can work like a powerful glue — and the patch it leaves behind tends to outlast the disagreement itself.

Dinner was rosemary chicken and bread, and talk of finally leaving the next day if the wind allowed — Ed offered to drive us forward himself to make up the lost time. That evening we also met Joe, a Native American friend of Ed's, who would take us as far as Yellowstone the next day.

Lying in that log cabin afterward, listening to the wind still working at the walls, I found myself thinking less about the miles we'd lost than about how easily a kitchen in Montana had come to feel, for two days, like something close to home — Ed's fondness for a friend he

could no longer reach, Gani's careful list-checking before a grocery run, the particular comfort of being fussed over by people who had no reason to fuss over us at all. Whatever else this trip was teaching me about America, it kept coming back to this: how much of it, underneath the highways and the wind alerts, was simply this — strangers deciding, again and again, to make room for us.





7

YELLOWSTONE AND THE HIGH PLAINS



08

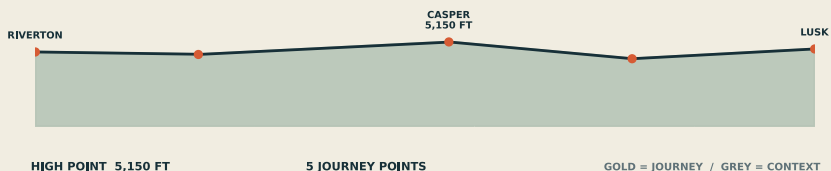
INDEPENDENCE DAY IN WYOMING

RIVERTON / LUSK



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



A Native American's House

We left Alder late, once Joe arrived with his vehicle, and before the day's ride began he took us to see his own home — the first time either of us had ever set foot inside a Native American household. His wife was an artist; a small tipi stood in the yard, dream catchers and medicine rings scattered through the house, more than I could take in or remember properly. It was hard not to think, standing there, about what settlement had done to the people who'd lived on this land first — the disease and dispossession, the long aftermath of addiction and poverty that followed generations of having almost everything taken. Joe himself was clearly not living that story, but the shadow of it sat behind the visit anyway.

His wife had an exhibition on in Jackson, Wyoming, and we passed through that afternoon — a genuinely beautiful town, wood-built, two-storey, the kind of place that makes you understand the word “aesthetic” as a picture rather than an idea. By evening, driving on toward Yellowstone in the last light, we had to stop the car entirely for a herd of bison crossing the road, horses galloping behind them through the dust — cowboys, maybe, though who could say for certain. Nobody around us seemed troubled by the delay. Time here moved the way a tide moves at its slowest point; there was no train to catch, no rush to justify. We reached a campsite inside the park after ten that night and paid thirteen dollars to sleep.

Bear With Cubs

Yellowstone itself is enormous — nearly nine thousand square kilometres — and its real luxury is simply how much of it has been left alone. No phone signal, no towers, no argument about their absence. I liked that about this country: for all its advancement, its forests had been allowed to stay forests.

The road south out of the park rolled the way a good road should,

rising and falling just enough to keep the tandem's momentum working for us rather than against us, until a hand-lettered roadside sign stopped me cold:

BEAR WITH CUBS — NEXT TEN MILES

I got off the bicycle immediately. There was no version of this in which I was riding through it on a bicycle, of all things. We waited to



A shelf inside the home of the family who took us in — carved figures, an old portrait, small totems of a life lived close to this land."

see whether enough traffic might pass that we could tuck in behind a car, but the road stayed nearly empty — a handful of vehicles in twenty minutes, nothing like a steady stream we could shelter inside. Calling the police crossed my mind and went nowhere useful. After a full hour of waiting with no vehicle willing to stop for us, Ujjal bhai finally talked me into moving. I have never enjoyed friendly relations with wild animals — an elephant chased me once in Sri Lanka, and it cured me permanently of any appetite for testing my luck with them, on a bicycle least of all — but sitting on that shoulder indefinitely wasn't an actual plan either.

We rode those ten miles about as fast as fear could carry two tired legs and a heavy tandem, which is to say not very fast at all — the road climbed just enough to keep any real speed out of reach, proving the old saying that the place you fear a tiger is exactly where evening catches you. Somehow, perhaps precisely because we were frightened the whole way, the ten miles ended. We sat by the road afterward simply breathing, life rising and falling in my chest like something caged and newly let out.

By half past four we'd reached Togwotee Mountain Lodge — an enormous log building, two proper storeys with something like an attic above that refused to commit to being a third floor — and the “campground” behind it turned out to be nothing but a leaning wooden latrine and knee-high scrub, uninhabited long enough that pitching a tent there felt like an open invitation to exactly the kind of wildlife we'd just spent an hour avoiding. The lodge itself wanted more than two hundred dollars a night.

“How much shall we offer?” Ujjal bhai asked.

“Bring it down as far as you can.”

He went upstairs to negotiate and simply didn't come back — long enough that I'd started composing the phone call I couldn't actually make, no signal to make it with — and when he finally reappeared I could see every one of his thirty-two teeth from across the lobby. He'd gotten us a room for fifty dollars, on the condition we tell no one else the price. I still don't know if that was a genuine deal or a kindly told lie, but the room itself — white linen so clean I hesitated to sit on it, a window that opened onto nothing but scenery in every direction — was the most beautiful place either of us had stayed on this entire trip. I held my hand up to the glass: sun-darkened, calloused across every knuckle, the handlebar's shape still pressed into my palm. America, at least the America made for people chasing a dream, was working the exhaustion of the road right out of my hands as I watched.

Family Tandem Travellers

We left before seven the next morning with the day's cold air still sharp in our lungs, and met, in quick succession, some of the more memorable company of the whole trip: a mountain biker who'd ridden all night along the Continental Divide with barely a rest between towns, which made our own exhaustion feel almost indulgent by comparison; a British cyclist heading the opposite direction who'd already logged three thousand miles westbound; and then, most memorably, an entire family on bicycles — a father riding a tandem with his youngest child, three more children each on their own bikes, all moving together with a discipline that startled me more than the mileage did.

We'd absorbed, growing up, a certain cinematic idea of what an American family looks like, and it kept not matching what we actually found on this road — most of the places we'd stayed were family businesses, run by husbands and wives thirty years married, this particular “conservative America” quietly at odds with everything we thought we knew before we left. Watching that family disappear around a bend, I found myself wondering how four children ride in formation for days on end without the whole system collapsing into chaos — whether discipline like that is simply trained into people, or something closer to a gene, some inherited willingness to follow a rule that we, as a nation back home, have never quite managed to sit still for.

The land opened up as the day went on — ranches running off both sides of the highway, horses and dogs audible from a distance, every entrance gated and private, no way to actually ride in even if we'd wanted to. It looked exactly like the Western paperbacks I'd devoured as a teenager, the ones from Seba Prokashoni that most Bangladeshi boys my age grew up on, fifteen years gone in an instant at the sight of a hundred-year-old ranch sign. There were no paved roads in those books, only stagecoaches and cracking whips and hoofprints in the dust, and yet here were the same ranches, the same red mountains to our left, a river running level ground to our right — the actual

physical landscape those stories had been describing all along, mostly unchanged, still working under names a century old. We reached Dubois KOA by one in the afternoon, first among our loose, unofficial group of fellow travellers, and spent the idle afternoon oiling a creaking chain and comparing this campground, only half seriously, to the one at Alder — no lake here, and the bathrooms too far to be convenient. Bengalis, I've decided, are constitutionally incapable of not finding something to complain about. It might be in the genes too.

A Police Officer's Card

Another day out of Dubois we crossed a valley wide enough to let the sun hit us directly from the moment the morning climb ended, and covered fifty miles by our second break before the road turned hard again — an eight-mile final climb into Riverton that I rode with my head down and my teeth clenched, not entirely sure, afterward, how long I'd actually spent inside that particular tunnel of effort. We'd covered seventy-five miles by half past twelve, which felt almost unbelievable once I did the arithmetic.

Riverton itself was large enough to make finding anywhere to camp a genuine problem — motels priced well past our forty-dollar budget, one after another, until an Indian woman running the last motel we tried couldn't offer us a room but printed us a Google map to a campground instead, since our phone data had run out. We still couldn't find the place, and eventually flagged down two police officers outside a restaurant to ask directions.

They told us, flatly, not to go to the campground we'd named — not safe, they said — and gave us the address of another one instead, along with a hand-drawn map and, unexpectedly, a business card. If there was any trouble at the new site, we were told to show the card and ask the office to call the officer directly. Nothing like that had happened to us before, and I couldn't stop wondering, walking there, exactly what kind of trouble they were anticipating.

The neighbourhood on the way reminded me, oddly, of old

Dhanmondi before the high-rises came — open streets, quiet, a krishnachura tree somewhere to sit under, kids playing cricket on a road no one complained about. Whether that comparison says more about Riverton or about how much has changed at home, I couldn't say.

The RV park itself had a large sticker on the office window: NO CAMPING. That was clearly why the officer had handed us his card in the first place — he'd known exactly what we'd be walking into. We handed it over, and the manager, visibly unhappy about it, gave us a site anyway. Site 19120. Bare ground, one or two stunted trees, and barely a strip of shade between them wide enough to hide in from the afternoon heat. We'd take it.

The Confederate Flag

The next morning we left Riverton at a quarter past six into a headwind that hadn't let up from the day before, crossed into naked, treeless land at a junction called Shoshoni, and refilled every bottle we owned — we'd learned that lesson once already and didn't intend to repeat it. The temperature climbed past 104 degrees by midday, hotter than even the worst mango-ripening heat I remembered from home, and there wasn't a tree in sight to shelter under, let alone a roadside vendor selling mangoes for ten taka a kilo. I played the only three songs I had on my phone — all by the same Bangladeshi singer, Konak bhai — and let the wind carry Liluya Batas out across the empty plain, more for Ujjal bhai's sake than my own.

A road sign read HIGH WIND AREA, as if the wind itself needed official confirmation. I hadn't come on this trip to prove I could suffer through anything the road threw at me — I'd come to see the country — and by that point I genuinely couldn't. We got off and walked, alongside Randy and Kim, two of the other riders in our loose group.

In the distance stood a house with a red flag flying above the roof, blue bands crossing it diagonally. I mistook it, at first, for the American flag.

“Those are Confederate flags,” Randy said. “They ain’t gonna give us anything.”

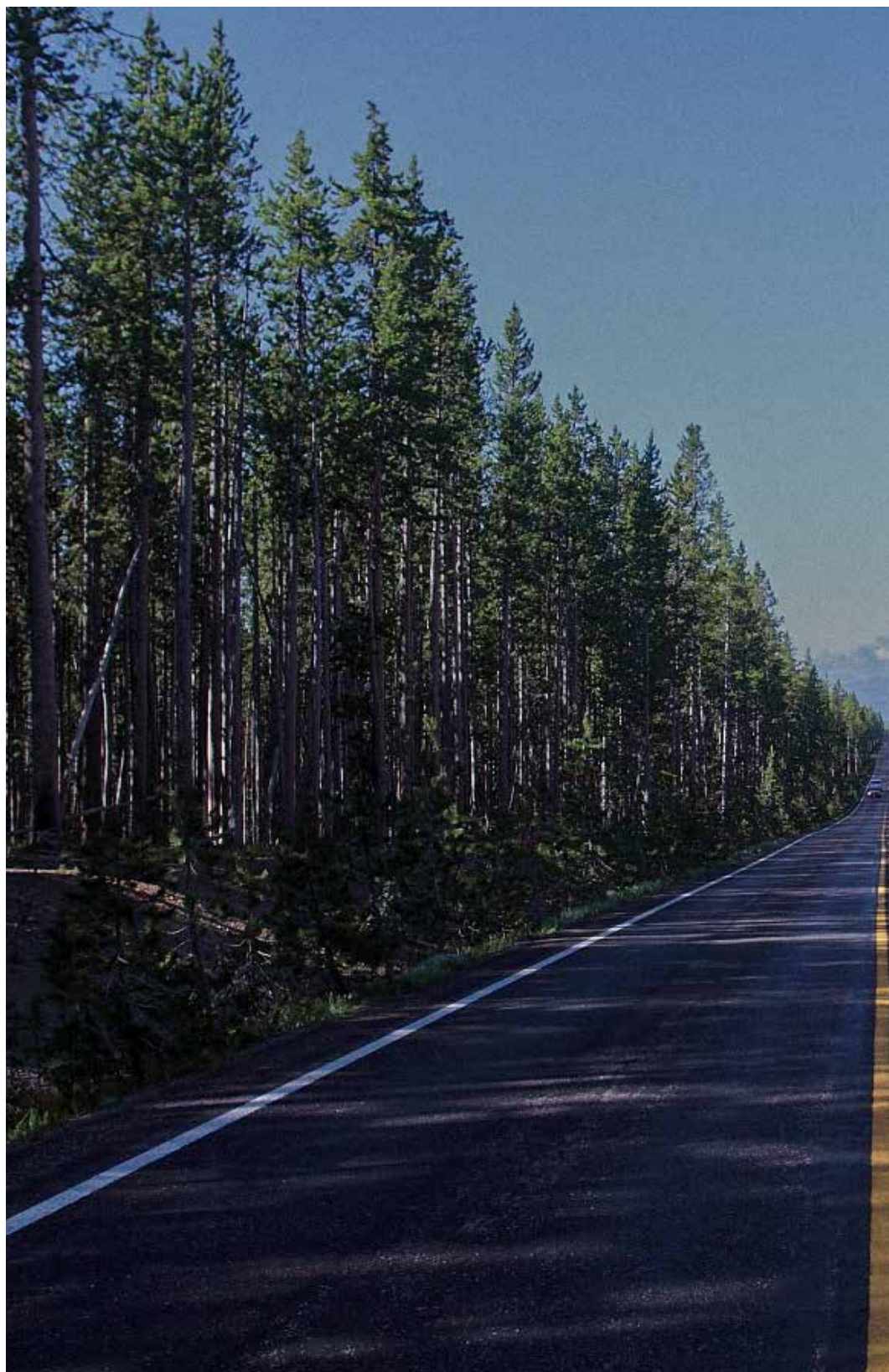
I didn’t know the history well enough to argue, so I asked him about it, and he explained what I’ve since read confirmed elsewhere: the flag rose to prominence after the Civil War, tied originally to the South’s resistance to the North, but carried today by some as a symbol of a separate, self-declared racial hierarchy — protected here, like almost any opinion, by a constitution that asks only that you not physically harm someone else for holding it.

“I’m telling you again, they won’t help us at all,” Randy said again.

Ujjal bhai, who has never in his life accepted “no” as an answer to basic human decency, walked up to the barbed-wire gate anyway with our empty bottles. Two dogs answered before anyone else did, and then an enormous woman, in a voice harsher than the dogs, told him plainly: no water. Randy had been right. We walked on.

Around two, Frank texted to say he’d found permission to camp on unused land beside a gas station eight miles short of town, rather than push further as planned. Not long after, the sky opened — rain thin enough that a poncho would have only slowed us down further in the wind, so we simply kept walking through it, steam rising visibly off the hot asphalt, the smell of it thick enough to scramble my thoughts. Whatever has a beginning has an end, and after sixty-six miles we reached that gas station to find the rest of our group already there, full of praise for two people they’d clearly assumed the wind and heat would break. It nearly had.

We pitched our tents in the gravel as the sun went down gold behind us, and I fell asleep almost instantly, exhaustion pulling me under before I’d finished the thought I was having — something about a face ruling over a foreign kitchen, the smell of fried eggs, laughter in bursts, whether that endlessly moving person was really me. Milestones kept passing somewhere behind my closed eyes. I woke once, and slept again.







8

INDEPENDENCE DAY IN WYOMING







08

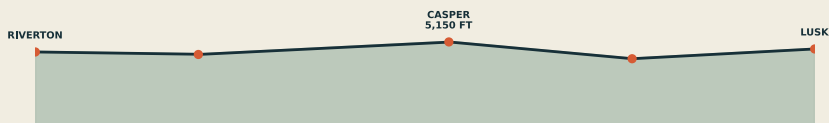
INDEPENDENCE DAY IN WYOMING

RIVERTON / LUSK



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



HIGH POINT 5,150 FT

5 JOURNEY POINTS

GOLD = JOURNEY / GREY = CONTEXT

Hell's Half Acre

After the ordeal of the wind and the Confederate flag, nothing left in Wyoming seemed quite as frightening — a kind of reckless calm settled over the whole group, everyone riding together for the first time since we'd started, as if yesterday had welded us into something none of us could quite name. At a gas station someone assured us the worst of the wind was behind us, though by then I'd learned enough about this stretch of geography to distrust anyone's confident promises about tomorrow's weather. Eight miles in we passed the Waltman rest area for a quick group photo, and eight miles past that we detoured off Highway 20 onto a hard red-earth road to see Hell's Half Acre — a place some locals call Devil's Kitchen, three hundred and twenty acres of eroded badland ending, without warning, in a near-vertical drop into a ravine deep enough to be called the Grand Canyon of Wyoming in miniature. A wooden sign at the rim explained what archaeologists had found in the depths below: arrowheads, and a great many bison bones. Native hunters here once drove entire herds over the edge and let the fall do the killing.

Learning that history left me a little sick to my stomach, even knowing hunting for survival is about as old an instinct as we have — there's a real difference between killing to eat and killing to hang a trophy around your neck, and it wasn't entirely clear to me, standing at the rim with the wind pulling at my shirt, which side of that line this particular place actually sat on. The highway afterward ran on through bare, treeless grassland like a river with no current at all, mile after mile of nothing but the road itself and, eventually, the first scattered rubbish and factory shapes that told us a town was close.

We reached Casper by noon, fifty-eight miles in seven hours, and settled into Fort Caspar Campground — named, we learned, for a lieutenant killed here by Native American fighters defending land that had been theirs long before any fort existed. Casper's whole history runs through that same fault line: a garrison built to "protect" settlers

who were, more accurately, the threat, oil wealth arriving later to earn the town its old nickname, Oil City. It's hard to find a Western city whose founding doesn't carry that same stain somewhere underneath it — America's history, like most nations', has its share of chapters nobody's especially proud of, and to its credit, the country's own literature doesn't flinch from saying so; *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* remains one of the most widely read histories of the period, even now, in the very country it indicts.

Independence Day

Tomorrow was the Fourth of July, and Casper had fireworks planned. The date had always meant something else to me first — my childhood friend Pritam's birthday — until a Hollywood disaster film reassigned it in my head sometime in my twenties, turning an ordinary American holiday into something that felt, absurdly, universal. I still can't fully explain how a piece of fiction managed that, except to say that America is good at exactly this kind of persuasion — dressing its own national story up as everyone's story, and half convincing you it's true. There was real irony in reading the history I'd just read about Casper and then watching a town celebrate its independence a stone's throw from where that independence had been built on someone else's dispossession.

What struck me more than the fireworks, though, was something quieter: a woman driving a rubbish truck had stopped to talk with us at a rest area days earlier, easily and without any trace of self-consciousness about who we were or what we looked like — a kind of interaction I'm honestly not sure would happen the same way at home, where what a person does for a living tends to fix, fairly rigidly, who else they're allowed to talk to. Travelling by bicycle put us in the way of people we'd never otherwise have met, at every rung of whatever ladder exists here, and again and again it seemed the rungs mattered less than I'd expected.

Back at the tent, chaos was waiting. Our tents sat scattered beneath a big tree that reminded me of a pakur back home, in a camping area oddly fenced by widely spaced logs that seemed to keep out nothing at all — not even a cow could have been stopped by those gaps, let alone whatever had actually gotten to our food. Squirrels — enormous ones, nearly the size of small cats — had gotten into our unfastened food panniers and chewed through everything inside, including a rain poncho I'd bought years earlier in France, a small indulgence from a trip I'd been fond of remembering. One of them still had it clamped in its mouth when I finally spotted the culprit and chased it off, already knowing the poncho would carry those tooth marks for the rest of



Some days, before reaching the campground, we'd stop for a meal wherever a fast food chain turned up along the way — McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut, whatever we could find.

the journey. Then, while I was cooking lunch, someone shouted that a snake was in the campground, heading straight for our tent — I bolted the wrong direction entirely and landed flat on a gravel pile to general laughter, before someone with actual competence walked up and caught it bare-handed, informing the whole amused crowd that it was venomous but not deadly, and asking, not unkindly, why I was

so afraid of a snake. I am afraid because I am afraid. There isn't a more satisfying answer than that, and there never will be.

We watched the fireworks from the campground that evening rather than joining the crowds — still striking, though nothing that



And yes — a snake actually showed up at the campground, and I ran.”

would ever top the fireworks I once watched on Mexican Independence Day in the Zócalo, three Bangladeshis in sombreros shouting ¡Viva la México! along with everyone else, a night I still think about as one of the purest, most unguarded celebrations I’ve ever witnessed anywhere. Casper’s fireworks were good. They were not that.

This Is What You Call Shooting

Two days later we hit a stretch of pure gravel far rougher than anything the Iron Horse Trail had thrown at us, twenty miles into the day, with no way back to the paved road that wouldn’t cost us forty extra miles. We took the punishment instead. Frank, riding ahead in a red shirt, looked like a single dot halfway up a climb that seemed to merge directly into the sky — at least five miles of it, our speed falling to four miles an hour on the loose surface, balance the real enemy rather than exhaustion. I’d set my camera on a small tripod in the empty road before we started, filming the whole climb, and once the camera was rolling neither of us had the heart to stop and ruin the footage — Frank shouting encouragement from the top the entire

last stretch. We reached him and he embraced us both like we'd won something. Maybe we had.

I walked back alone afterward to retrieve the camera, alternating between walking and a jog I couldn't sustain, and somewhere in that solitary stretch of empty road — green in more shades than I'd ever had names for as a boy who'd once thought green meant only the colour of a fern — I found myself thinking about how far I'd actually travelled to get here, in every sense of the word. I reached Ujjal bhai waiting just ahead and took his hand. The last fifteen miles were paved. We reached Douglas KOA by mid-afternoon, done for the day.

Trouble from Sesame

The following day's road ran level and monotonous through grassland gone naturally grey rather than green, hot enough and dry enough that my nose kept drying out faster than I could keep it moist with Vaseline. A road sign stopped us cold: Lost Springs, Population 4. We detoured to see it out of pure disbelief — two large wooden buildings, a bar and a shop, neither obviously open, no sound when we called out. We turned back to the highway without ever confirming whether the four residents actually existed.

Lunch that day came late and desperate, under a bus shelter we spotted from a distance like a mirage — “We are saved, Ujjal bhai!” — where Randy, Kim, and Frank found us not long after and we shared out whatever food everyone had. We reached Lusk by mid-afternoon and found a campground that was really just someone's back garden, thick grass underfoot, ten dollars against fifty-nine for a motel, an easy choice given how our budget had been running lately. The owner was warm and attentive; the well water tasted better than anything we'd had in days. A cyclist named Jim, riding down from South Dakota, joined us that evening, delighted to find company, and I cooked for all three of us.

Cleaning the bicycle before dinner, I found a broken spoke in the rear wheel we hadn't noticed all day — a genuinely dangerous thing to have missed, given the weight we were carrying, and we fixed it

together before it was too late to matter. Then, mid-conversation over Jim's beef jerky, Ujjal bhai said he felt unwell. His scalp had started swelling in small lumps under my hand — a sesame allergy, it turned out, something that had happened to him before and had medicine waiting for exactly this. He asked me to get it from his wallet. I did, and the campground owner stood by in case we needed a hospital run. It took several hours and a great deal of my own quiet worry before he was fully himself again.

Grassland

We were up at five the next morning, Ujjal bhai recovered, facing seventy or eighty flat, featureless miles that would carry us across the state line into South Dakota. The name meant almost nothing to me beyond a half-remembered fact from childhood — that my favourite Bangladeshi novelist, Humayun Ahmed, had once studied in North Dakota, a detail that had lodged itself in my memory decades before I understood Dakota was a real place rather than a word in an author bio. I thought, riding through it, about how much I wanted to see him again once this trip was over — not for any particular literary reason, just to say I'd made it to Dakota myself, the long way round, on a bicycle instead of a plane.

We covered forty-seven miles by early afternoon and crossed into a sign reading Buffalo Gap National Grassland — which explained, finally, the grass that had been running unbroken beside the road for two days straight. By evening we'd reached a small town where the only option was a city park uncertain about whether tents were even allowed; Ujjal bhai talked our way into permission the way he always does. Randy and Kim moved on to look for something better. Frank stayed with us, and the three of us cooked together as the light faded, the low hum of the road still in my head, some half-formed thought about grasslands and freedom and the particular sound gravel makes under a bicycle that has learned, finally, how to carry its own weight.







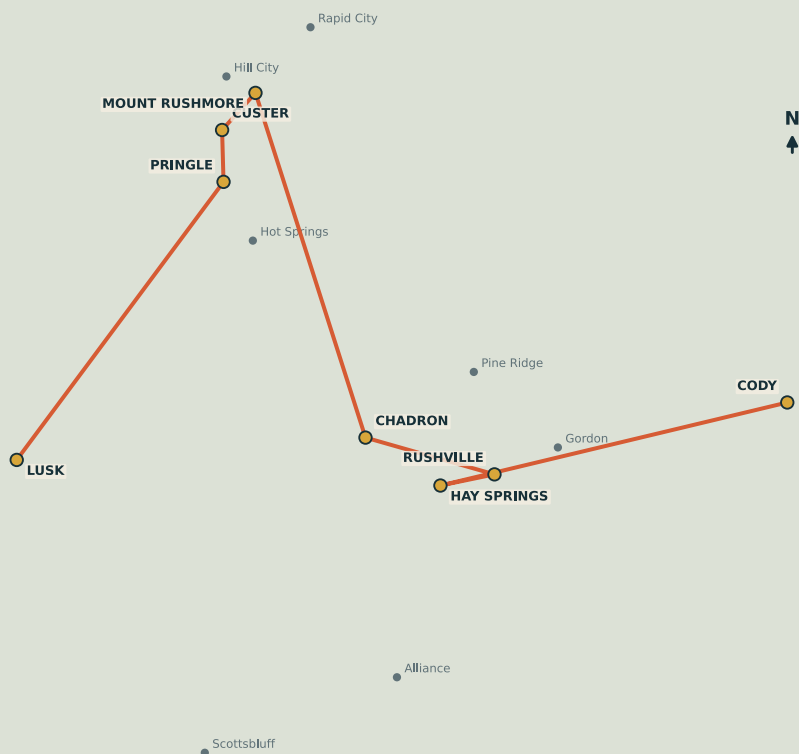


9

THE BLACK HILLS AND THE GRASSLANDS

THE BLACK HILLS AND THE GRASSLANDS

LUSK / CODY, NEBRASKA



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



HIGH POINT 5,725 FT

8 JOURNEY POINTS

No One Kept Their Word

A late, lazy start cost us more than we expected — six miles in, we'd already burned through the day's spare oatmeal and hit a hunger neither of us had felt before, followed almost immediately by a climb steep enough that even walking it felt like wading through something solid. "What will happen today, Ujjal bhai?" "Yes, that is what it seems." The descent that followed was nearly as bad as the climb — steep enough that we had to ride the brakes the whole way down, the tandem's weight threatening to run away with us the moment we let up, and we'd barely levelled out before another climb started, this one too steep to carry any speed into. We pushed. It was, at least, beautiful — clear sky, small clouds, cool air whenever we stopped moving, everything a climb like that needs except trees, which this stretch of South Dakota simply didn't have. We'd been told South Dakota's mountains would ease off the further east we rode. They didn't. Every state, I was learning, keeps that promise only for cars.

We limped through Pringle and Custer, found a stretch of the Mickelson Trail — another old railway line turned gravel path, like the Iron Horse Trail out of Seattle — and regretted it almost immediately; the gravel here was soft enough to swallow a tyre whole, nothing like the firm trail out west. Back on the highway, a sign for Crazy Horse Mountain stopped us cold. I hadn't known, before that moment, that a second monument existed alongside Mount Rushmore — carved into a mountainside, a Lakota war leader's face taking shape where a government-funded sculpture of four presidents got all the road signs and all the fame. Native settlements, it turns out, rarely make it onto American maps. This one, somehow, had.

The brochure at the entrance carried a line from Chief Red Cloud that I don't think I'll ever forget: "They made us many promises, but they kept only one. They promised to take our land, and they did." Sitting there beside the bicycle, reading it, I felt something close to hollow — disgusted, mute, useless. The story of colonization reads

the same everywhere you go looking for it, North America or South, whichever continent got there first: an elderly woman in Brazil once told me her own people, seeing the first Portuguese arrive on horseback, believed they were angels. Thousands of her ancestors died at those angels' hands. The language of her country is Portuguese now, and has been for centuries.

We reached the KOA below Mount Rushmore on a long, gentle downhill — the largest campground either of us had ever seen, more like a golf course than a place to pitch a tent, small lakes and wooden bridges scattered through manicured grounds that made the thirty-five-dollar fee feel steep at first and entirely fair once we saw the site itself. Sitting on that impossibly clean grass as evening came on, I found myself thinking, strangely, of the footbridges over Dhaka's busiest roads, where people climb up in the late afternoon just to stand and watch the traffic pass beneath them for no obvious reason at all. Quantum physics says a person can occupy two places at once, more or less — for a moment I believed it, sitting under a mountain carved with four presidents' faces while some other half of me stood on an iron footbridge back home, watching neon light up a city eight thousand miles away.

A Country Beyond the Country

The road to Mount Rushmore itself climbed seven brutal miles the next morning, steep enough that a group of lightweight road cyclists passed us easily, calling out friendly hellos as they went. We ground our way up regardless — “In the name of Allah, we began” — and got tangled, once we arrived, in a traffic maze clearly built for cars, not bicycles; a police officer finally waved us into the right lane.

The monument itself, once we reached it, underwhelmed me a little — four sixty-foot granite faces so enormous that standing close actually made it harder to take them in, the way the Pyramids at Giza had felt strangely diminished the closer I'd gotten to them on

two separate trips to Egypt, guides and camel-safari touts swarming so thickly the first time that I'd resorted to playing loud music on my phone just to signal I wasn't interested in anything they were selling. The Sphinx, when I finally got a proper look at it, reminded me less of ancient grandeur than of Botox — new stone patched shamelessly into old, the way ruins sometimes get “restored” back home too, propped up rather than preserved, and I've never quite decided whether that's a reasonable compromise or a small betrayal of the thing itself. Some monuments, at least, are built to be seen from a distance, and this was one of them. Work on Rushmore ran from 1927 to 1939, no real connection to the Pyramids beyond the shared gravity that popular monuments seem to exert on crowds everywhere — money, satisfaction, the particular hum of people pausing together in the same place from a hundred different roads.

The real gift of the day came on the descent, holding the brakes down a steep two-mile drop, when a minibus slowed to ask directions and then inexplicably turned around and stopped again ten minutes later. Two men got out and waved us down. My first thought was trouble — no phone signal to call for help if it was — until I got close enough to see their faces and realized, with real relief, that they looked like us. Indian, it turned out, mid-fifties, travelling together, who'd noticed the Bangladeshi flag on our bicycle the first time we passed and doubled back just to say hello. They opened a cooler and handed us cold Coca-Colas and food, delighted and a little disbelieving that anyone from the subcontinent had come all this way to cycle across America. “You are our brothers,” one of them said. “It is difficult even to drive a car up this slope, and you are pedalling bicycles.”

It struck me as more moving, honestly, than the monument itself — two nations with a barbed-wire border between them, a history that isn't always gentle, dissolving completely the moment either of us stepped outside it. Geography expands once you leave it. The neighbour becomes family. I'm not sure what to make of a truth that only holds at a distance, but I know it's true.

Bangladesh on the Roads of the World

I paid for a tin of Spam that night — an unfamiliar smell should have warned me before I cooked it into the pasta, and it repaid the mistake with a night of vomiting and diarrhoea that left me crawling into the tent barely conscious. Roger and Frank found us still asleep the next morning, worried, having never once seen us fail to be ready before them. We apologized and got moving, slowly, toward the Nebraska border.

The state line arrived with a billboard: “The Good Life.” We crossed sixteen more grinding miles under it before reaching an empty RV park with no one in the office and a phone number scrawled on the counter. An elderly man in a faded green cap arrived ten minutes after we called — the kind of person I liked on sight, before he’d said a word — and gave us a discount once he learned we were Bangladeshi: he’d spent time there decades earlier as a relief worker and still carried the memory of it. In the office, out of the scorching wind, he mentioned, almost in passing, that another Bangladeshi lived in this tiny town — a professor at the local college. He couldn’t give us a number. We hadn’t met a single Bengali speaker since Seattle, and the mention alone was enough to set something restless going in my chest.

Ujjal bhai went to Walmart that afternoon wearing a T-shirt with “Bangladesh” printed across the back, and came sprinting back to camp with a story: a stranger had called out “Bangladesh! Bangladesh!” across the parking lot, explained that his own tenant was Bangladeshi and taught at the college, tried and failed to reach him by phone, and left us the address of our campground instead. We spent the rest of the afternoon half-waiting, not quite admitting to each other that we were waiting, until a black van pulled in and a Bangladeshi face appeared behind the windshield. Before he’d even asked our names, his first words were: “Come with us! Come, bhai, come.”

That is, I think, a peculiarly Bengali way to greet a stranger — no introduction required, just an insistence, and somehow it works exactly because it skips the part where two people are supposed to stay

cautious of each other. Dr. Shafiqur Rahman put us up in a proper motel rather than his own modest home — a little embarrassed about the size of his house, though we were in no state, road-dirty as we were, to have accepted an invitation into anyone's living room anyway — and came back that evening to feed us at his table. His wife and daughter peppered us with the questions every Bangladeshi family asks two strangers who show up having cycled here from Seattle: why, how, whether Ujjal bhai's wife and children knew what he was doing, where the money had come from.

It turned out Dr. Rahman had written a book I'd actually seen sitting on a café counter back in New York — a small, improbable thread connecting a professor in a Nebraska town of five thousand people to a friend of mine an entire country away. We ate paratha and fried potato for the first time in a month, packed with more food to take with us before we left, the universal grammar of hospitality working the same in Bengali, French, or English. I hadn't realized how long it had been since I'd eaten with my heart as full as my stomach. That night, in an air-conditioned motel room with Shafiq bhai's kindness still warm in the room, I slept better than I had in weeks. It's this chapter, this small-town, unplanned collision of home and distance, that gave the whole book its title.

Little Town of America

We rode out the next morning full of paratha and slow with it, through a Nebraska that turned out to be almost entirely farmland — short thorn trees where forests should have been, mile after shadeless mile, one tiny settlement after another that insisted, against all visual evidence, on calling itself a city. Rushville had a hardware store, a tavern, a grocery, a police station, even a movie theatre, all crammed into a single block — the particular scale of American small-town life that I found myself loving more with every one of these we passed through. There was something in their unhurried pace that felt oddly, deeply familiar.

Ten miles past Hay Springs, the rear tyre finally gave out — a real blowout, a chunk of rubber torn clean away from the rim, the tube cut open beneath it. We patched it as best we could with a spare that wasn't quite up to the job, half-tempted to radio ahead to Shafiq bhai for help and deciding, in the end, that having the option was somehow enough; we didn't actually need to use it. We found a replacement tyre, a poor one, in a hardware store in Rushville and took it anyway — a blind man's staff, better than nothing — and made it into Gordon by evening having covered nearly fifty miles despite everything.

Sitting on a park bench there as the light went gold, I found myself turning over an old question that this whole trip kept circling back to without ever quite landing: how far a person can actually run from whatever they're running from, and whether the running itself is the point. Someday, I suppose, I'll have to put the brakes on for good. Until then, I'd rather keep my helmet strap tight and my eyes on the road ahead of me.

Farewell, Friend

We covered nearly sixty miles to a place actually called a village rather than a town — Cody, Nebraska — through country growing steadily more populated the further east we rode, though we still hadn't seen a single person who looked like us since Chadron, nor so much as a Chinese restaurant, usually a reliable sign of a town's size. Cody's park, when we reached it, was genuinely beautiful — real shade, thick grass, even a place to bathe, rare enough in the campgrounds we'd been sleeping in to feel like an unearned luxury.

I'd just set the bicycle down when a text arrived from a friend back home: Roger Payne had died.

I didn't know Roger Payne the way I knew the people I'd actually shared a road with — we'd never once met face to face — but the internet had made that distance feel smaller than it was. He worked with the Union of International Alpine Associations, something like a United

Nations for mountaineers, and I'd first written to him a decade earlier, fresh out of engineering school, consumed by a sudden desperate need to go to the mountains. Most of the emails I sent in those years went unanswered. His didn't. We stayed in touch across the years that followed — a Sikkim expedition that fell through over permits and diplomacy, a joint climb in the Indian Himalaya in 2007 that actually happened, three of us reaching the summit, Roger contributing a note to the book that came out of the photography exhibition afterward.

Sitting in that small-town Nebraska park, a country and half a lifetime away from any mountain we'd ever climbed together in spirit if not in person, I didn't notice I was crying until a phone call pulled me back — a journalist wanting to interview us about the trip, oddly well-timed, a small piece of ordinary life arriving in the middle of grief the way it always does, whether you're ready for it or not.

Rest well, Roger Payne — in fame and obscurity both, in the kind of friendship that never once needed a handshake to be real.







10

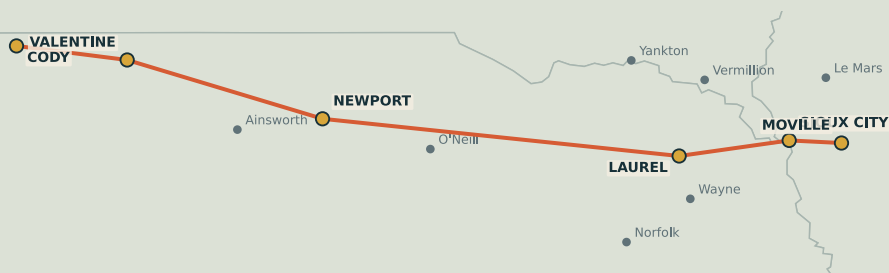
THE HEARTLAND



10

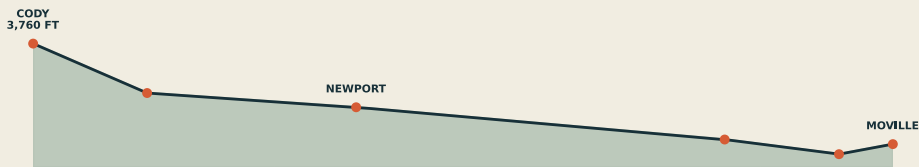
THE HEARTLAND

CODY / MOVILLE



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



HIGH POINT 3,760 FT

6 JOURNEY POINTS

Looking Back at the Village

We'd upgraded our water system by then to nearly thirteen litres a day, seven bottles plus two gallon jugs, weight we'd simply accepted as the price of not running dry again the way we had outside Othello. A cheap replacement tyre from a Rushville hardware store was still slowing us down, a spare from David on order but with nowhere settled enough yet to have it mailed to. The road out of Cody descended for a while before the bitumen gave out entirely, rough and cracked in a way that made the tyre's condition feel less like bad luck and more like simple arithmetic — two thousand miles on a bicycle built for half that distance, carrying twice the weight it was designed for.

We reached Valentine's city park by mid-afternoon, five miles past the edge of town on a road with nothing else on it, isolated enough that the emptiness felt faintly eerie even as it also felt like a relief. The only water tap released water solely while held down, so I tied the handle in place with my gamchha and sat beneath it exactly the way I used to sit under my grandfather's tube well as a boy, diving into the Bangali River with cousins and letting our wet clothes dry on the walk home. Bathing under an American park tap, on the other side of the planet, I found myself missing a village I hadn't visited in years. Countries are strange that way — they sneak up on you through the most ordinary physical sensations, water on skin, nothing more.

Hospitable Midwest

The wind found us again the next morning, the particular gloom that comes from feeling it through canvas before you've even left the tent — a tandem, I'd learned by now, catches wind an ordinary bicycle simply shrugs off. Nebraska's emptiness had started to feel different from the emptiness further west, harder to name — fewer trees, maybe, or roads cracked and

patched with tar like bandages across old wounds, baking under a summer that locals kept telling us was hotter than usual. By midday the thermometer had climbed close to a hundred degrees.

We found shelter under a tree outside a small café that reminded me, unexpectedly, of the gab-tree corner from my own village — a tree that had seemed enormous when I was young and had somehow shrunk as I grew, the way childhood landmarks always do. Filling our bottles from the café tap, I found myself turning over an assumption I hadn't examined in years: that white people, coming as they mostly do from colder countries, must struggle in real heat. It's nonsense, obviously — snow falls in white countries because those countries are cold, not because whiteness itself repels warmth — but the assumption had been sitting in me anyway, unexamined, until this heat put it to the test and proved itself wrong in the plainest way possible: everyone here was suffering exactly as much as we were.

A mile later, a vehicle pulled close enough to startle us, and a frail, elderly woman leaned out with a Pepsi cup full of ice water, her hand trembling with age, offered without a word of explanation beyond having seen us resting outside the café. They drove off before we could properly thank them. I'd heard so much, before this trip, about the Midwest — Republican country, suspicious of outsiders, unwelcoming to people who looked like us. None of it had held up so far. If anything, the smaller the town, the more generous the people in it seemed to be, a pattern that felt less like an American peculiarity and more like something true everywhere, if you go looking for it in the right-sized places.

Astonishing Love

A missight of the clock cost us two hours the next morning — the alarm had rung on time; we'd simply set the wrong hour the night before — and cost us nothing more than a little pride once the road turned out kind: level, a rare tailwind, a park

in Newport so neat and empty we had it entirely to ourselves for a late breakfast of soaked oats.

The heat, though, found new records to break. By early afternoon a gas station thermometer read 108 degrees, hot enough that I genuinely worried the tyres themselves might blow from the heat alone. We retreated to the shaded edge of a fenced property — technically still public ground, careful never to cross onto someone's actual land, because in parts of this country a homeowner who feels threatened can shoot a trespasser and call it self-defense, and we never once forgot that while resting near a stranger's fence. Ujjal bhai went to ask the nearest house for water anyway. An elderly woman answered, read the situation instantly, and sent him back with both water and ice — enough to pour over our overheating wheels and still have some left to drink.

As we were packing to leave, two children came running from that same house, each carrying two more bottles of water, asking simply: "Do you need water?" It wasn't the water that moved me. It was watching two kids independently decide, without being told, that two strangers resting under their trees needed help, and acting on it immediately. Whatever holy book anyone reads, this is the thing that sits above all of them. We'd sat under those trees half-afraid of being shot for trespassing, and instead we were handed water twice by the same family, once by a grandmother and once by children too young to have learned caution yet. Every day, it seemed, this trip kept correcting whatever fear I'd carried into it.

True as a Story

Rain drummed on the tent before dawn the next morning, wonderful and warm-sounding until Ujjal bhai stepped outside to tighten the fly and came back laughing: it wasn't rain at all, just the park's automatic sprinklers, aimed with more enthusiasm than mercy directly at our tent. We hauled everything, soaked, across the field toward the parking lot — and found the

whole park suddenly lit up by a police car. Someone had reported movement in the city park at that hour, not unreasonably, and asked to see identification for the first time anywhere on the trip. Two exhausted, soaked foreigners dragging a tent across a field at 4 a.m. would raise anyone's eyebrows.

The officer, once he understood, apologized — this town, it turned out, had two parks, and only one allowed camping; we'd pitched in the wrong one entirely without knowing it. We rode on into that particular half-light Bengali calls *subh-e-sadiq*, the true dawn, past a farmer's crop-duster plane that buzzed us low enough to startle us twice, before we understood the pilot was simply amusing himself at our expense, or perhaps welcoming us — I chose to believe the second.

That evening, having arrived at the next town's park at midday, the local sheriff himself pulled up to apologize again, this time for sprinklers that hadn't even gone off yet — word of us had apparently travelled between stations — and handed us free tickets to the town pool and showers before promising to check in again that evening. I'd been warned, more than once, on Facebook, by well-meaning American friends, about exactly this part of the country. Reality kept refusing to cooperate with the warning. That night an old friend from Dhaka, Melissa — Mallika, to those of us who'd known her through a travel group years earlier — drove down from Minnesota to camp with us, along with Frank and Roger. It was, easily, one of the best dinners of the whole trip.

Looking Back at Childhood

Nebraska's grey-green grass, the following day, kept pulling my mind backward without asking permission — a friend from college once told me that Bangladesh, seen from an airplane, looks cloudy rather than the deep green we see from the ground, and something about this grass, half a world away, brought that memory back whole: afternoons in a field behind Lalmatia Aarong that felt, at the distance of years, almost unbearably simple and good.

Physical pain does this, I think — forces the mind somewhere else entirely, an anesthetic administered without being asked for. Without it, I suspect I'd have abandoned this bicycle days ago. We rode through towns too small to offer much beyond a place to sit in whatever shade existed, Nebraska's roads in worse condition than anywhere else we'd crossed, its charm lying, if it had one, precisely in how little glitter it offered — no tourist trail, nothing to perform for anyone. By evening we'd reached Laurel, our last night in Nebraska before Iowa picked up the story.

A Compulsory Break

Two days of nearly unbearable heat carried us out of Nebraska entirely, past irrigation systems on a scale I'd never seen — long pipes on wheels crawling across fields taller than either of us, spraying water in every direction, nothing like the single Yanmar engine and earthen channel I remembered from my grandfather's village. We skirted Sioux City rather than risk getting lost inside it, crossing the Missouri River into Iowa on a bridge loud with real highway traffic for the first time in what felt like weeks, and stopped in the small town of Merville, having ridden nearly sixty miles in half a day.

For the first time on the trip, we asked a motel clerk whether the room had air-conditioning before agreeing to anything else. She laughed, looked at the state we were in, and lowered the price without being asked. Not long after we checked in, Ujjal bhai said quietly, "I think I have a fever." Within the hour it had become impossible to pretend otherwise — his temperature climbing fast enough that the Tylenol that had kept every minor ailment at bay so far simply stopped working.

We decided, without much debate, to take the next day off. Sitting with him that evening, going through our accounts to plan the rest of the week, the second piece of bad news arrived: his card had run dry. We were, for the first time on this trip, actually out of money.

I emailed everyone I could think of who'd once told us to reach out if we needed anything — including a woman named Suzy Becker, a bestselling author I'd been corresponding with since 2007, who had once cycled across America entirely alone to raise awareness for AIDS, decades before either of us had thought to attempt anything like this trip ourselves. We had, tucked away separately from our main accounts, a small emergency reserve that would carry us a few more days. It would have to be enough until someone wrote back.











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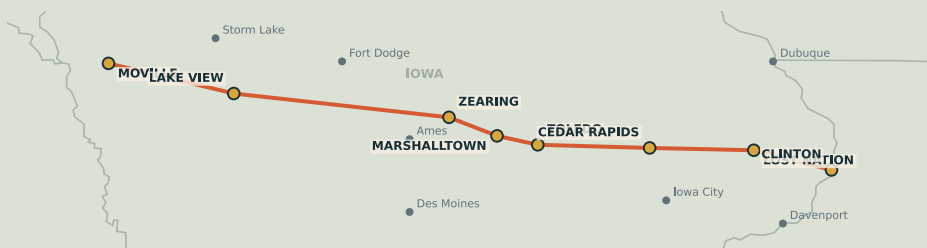
RAGBRAI



11

RAGBRAI

MOVILLE / CLINTON



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



HIGH POINT 1,360 FT

8 JOURNEY POINTS

Daily Reluctance

Money worries had joined the road itself as something to think about now, and the roads here weren't helping — no shoulder at all, just a four-inch strip of white paint between us and the traffic, a ribbon we'd learned to ride the way a tightrope walker learns a wire. Human beings adapt to almost anything, given no other choice; I'd once read that mountaineers saw the handles off their toothbrushes to save weight, and it no longer struck me as absurd. We escaped onto quieter Highway 59 rather than fight the main road, found small towns every ten miles to break up the heat, and reached a lakeside campground near Lake View — no motel luxury tonight, not with our funds where they were.

Waiting for a New Day

The reason we'd routed through Iowa in the first place was RAGBRAI — the state's forty-year-old cycling rally, some twenty-five thousand riders a year, roads closed to cars for their exclusive use — though our loaded tandem could never keep pace with a group covering nearly a hundred miles a day. What struck me most, riding parallel to it rather than inside it, was the reverence people showed the bicycle itself in this state. I'd grown up standing roadside with a paper flag whenever a foreign dignitary's motorcade passed through Dhaka; here, ordinary people stood at the roadside and waved for cyclists, no dignitary in sight, just the bicycle itself treated as something worth celebrating. We camped that night at Oak Park in Dayton, still waiting, impatiently, for word back from the emails I'd sent.

Just Out of the Map

We were relying on a paper map now instead of memory — the ACA route long abandoned, one road blending into the next through towns too small to expect anyone to have heard of. Zearing, population five hundred, felt like most of the small towns we'd been passing through by then: neat, orderly, conservative in a way that reminded me, distantly, of the modesty codes back home, though nothing quite so literal. Anyone who thinks they understand America from New York and Las Vegas alone is missing the country these towns actually are — no global power radiating from any of them, just people living quietly along a road that happened to cross ours for one afternoon.

Searching for Roots

Iowa's back roads reminded me constantly of Bangladesh's village roads, minus the unpaved surfaces and missing bridges — a grid of straight lines instead of Bengal's improvised, snaking paths, but the same essential logic: people wearing a road into the earth over decades before anyone official ever paved it. Passing field after small field, farmhouse after farmhouse, I kept catching myself hunting for resemblances to home, unsure whether my mind was finding Bangladesh everywhere out of genuine likeness or pure homesickness dressed up as observation. Maybe that's what people mean by the pull of a homeland — it doesn't ask permission before it starts looking for itself in everything you see.

We passed through the edges of Marshalltown on the fourth day of RAGBRAI, the town's atmosphere as festive as Bengali New Year at the Institute of Fine Arts, and reached Toledo by early afternoon under punishing heat, choosing a Super 8 motel over another night of tent logistics — a small mercy that bought us internet, real beds, and an hour of sleep we wouldn't otherwise have had.

Bangladesh Again

Cedar Rapids meant real traffic again after so many quiet roads — signals, stopped cars, the particular mechanical feel of a real city after days spent among towns where everyone recognized everyone's face. Somewhere past the halfway point the heat turned genuinely dangerous — 107 degrees by the time we staggered in, hallucinating half-remembered fragments of a childhood khutba about the signs of the Day of Judgment, when the sun draws close over people's heads and not a sliver of shade remains anywhere. My scalp felt like it was frying straight through the helmet. "What shall we do, Ujjal bhai? Stop, or keep riding?" "Where will you stop?" There was nowhere — flat, sun-scorched land in every direction, nothing resembling shade for miles. "Let us move ahead. We will stop at the first thing we find," Ujjal bhai said, his voice giving away exactly how bad his own condition had become. We pedalled harder, eyes fixed on the front wheel, until a line of trees finally appeared to the south and I brought the bicycle to a heavy, grateful stop.

"What a pull that was, dada! What do you say?"

"Hmm."

"What do you mean, hmm?"

"Hmm."

Nothing more needed saying. We'd clawed our way back from what felt, in that moment, uncomfortably close to the gates of hell.

A phone call found us mid-collapse: a Bangladeshi contact in Cedar Rapids, checking our progress, promising to call again once we'd arrived. We took a Motel 6 the moment we reached town, too spent to consider camping in that heat, and that evening a well-dressed stranger — Acura SUV, designer sunglasses, clearly prosperous — picked us up to take us to dinner at his home. I felt a flicker of self-consciousness next to that kind of polish, road-worn as we were, but the welcome was completely genuine: a house full of people fasting for Ramadan who'd nonetheless prepared a full meal for two strangers who showed up sunburnt and smelling of the road. We ate until we couldn't manage another bite, talked long past dinner, and fell asleep that night still tasting home.

I Have a Home Everywhere

Word of us had spread by then through a network of Bangladeshi engineers and academics scattered across the Midwest — people driving considerable distances just to meet two strangers cycling through their part of the country. Leaving Cedar Rapids for the tiny town of Lost Nation, we reached our destination well before noon, forty-five miles in half a day despite the heat, and had barely settled into the empty city park when a car pulled up carrying an elderly couple who'd simply come to see who we were.

Within minutes they'd invited us to stay at their home, two miles away — clean beds, a full bathroom, more food than we could eat, no conditions attached. It reminded me instantly of a van driver years earlier outside Rangpur Medical College, who'd heard me mention looking for a hotel and simply said, "Why are you looking for a hotel, brother? Why not come home?" Some kindnesses land so simply and completely that they stay with you for the rest of your life. We followed the couple's car to a tidy two-storey house, ate a home-cooked lunch around a round table, and talked — about their two daughters, one going through a difficult divorce, about the deep, unshaken family stability the couple themselves had built across forty years of marriage in the same small community. Their religion mattered to them plainly and without apology; she said grace before both meals, once at lunch and once again the next morning before we left, praying aloud for our safety on the road ahead in a way that felt, honestly, indistinguishable from any dua I'd ever heard at home. They packed us sandwiches for the road in zip-lock bags and refused, gently but completely, to let us leave without eating breakfast first.

The End of RAGBRAI

The rally's final day put us directly inside the thing we'd been riding parallel to for a week — twenty thousand cyclists converging on Clinton, the road entirely closed to cars, every kind of bicycle imaginable moving together in a single unbroken current, some rigged with speakers louder than the machines themselves, nobody minding in the slightest. Our loaded tandem was, by a wide margin, the slowest thing on the road, stopping constantly for photographs, but it hardly mattered — everyone was headed to the same finish line regardless of pace.

Every motel in Clinton had been booked solid for months. We spent an hour on the phone with friends scattered across three states, hunting for anywhere to sleep, until a room finally turned up and a childhood friend named Mithu drove ninety minutes with food just to see us in person. Standing on the balcony that evening, watching a seven-day gathering of twenty thousand people quietly dissolve and scatter for home, I found myself scanning every face below for one that looked like mine — half-hoping, half-expecting a stranger to turn, inexplicably, into someone I already knew. It never happened. But the looking itself felt like its own kind of company, the particular loneliness of being far from home turning, almost without my noticing, into something closer to peace.







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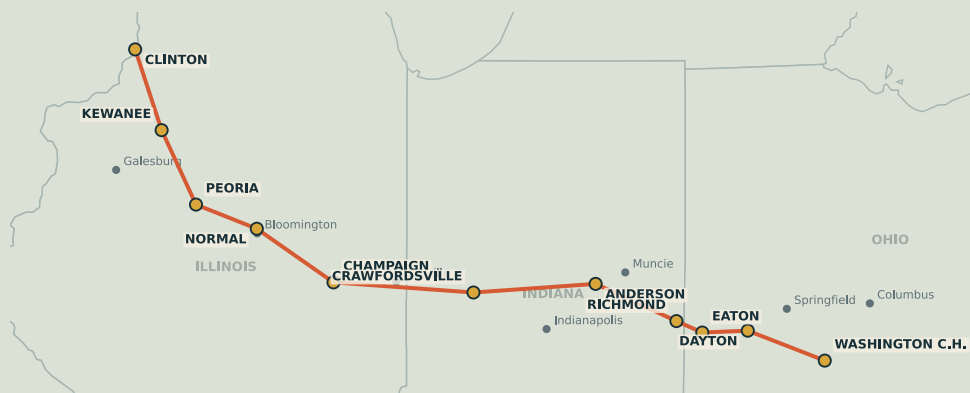
TOWARD HOME



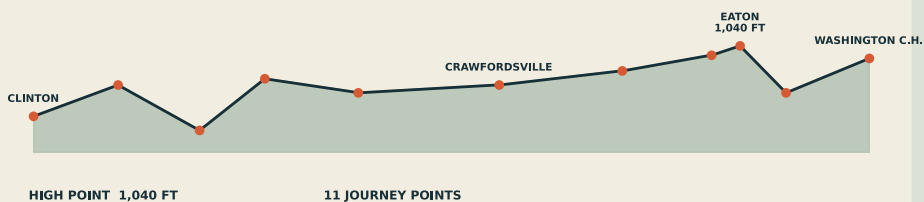
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TOWARD HOME

CLINTON / WASHINGTON COURT HOUSE



ELEVATION PROFILE



Little House on the Prairie

Iowa ended and Illinois began somewhere behind us, and with it, an entire network of Bangladeshi friends and acquaintances waiting ahead in Champaign and Normal — old schoolmates, university seniors, the particular density of Bangladeshi students that clusters around good American universities. Turning south to cut toward Peoria changed our relationship with the wind, which now struck the long tandem side-on rather than head-on, and changed the landscape too — a deep, abundant green that kept reminding me of home more insistently than almost anywhere we'd crossed so far.

We'd finally arranged an address for new tyres. David, my bicycle mechanic back in New York, had been holding a package for weeks, unable to send it anywhere because we'd had nowhere settled enough to receive mail. He'd shipped it ahead to Normal, to the home of a professor named Ali Riaz, an acquaintance of Ujjal bhai's from years back. Until we reached him, we rode on, tyres worn thin enough that the friction loss was becoming impossible to ignore over long distances, however invisible it was mile to mile.

We reached Kewanee — its name meaning “prairie chicken” in a Native American language I didn't recognize — before the afternoon had fully turned, checked into a motor lodge run by a kind Gujarati owner, and let the name pull my mind back to a childhood reading of *Little House on the Prairie*, one of those books that reads as children's literature and rewards you more the older you get when you return to it.

Toward Home

A motel clerk in Kewanee had insisted, with real conviction, that the “real” Illinois only began the next morning — I never did figure out what Kewanee had done to be excluded from its own state. New tyres had become the thing I

dreamed about at night, the way I used to dream about new clothes before Eid as a boy; there's a particular, slightly embarrassing joy in wanting something that small that badly.

Peoria split into two halves across a lake, and rather than gamble on morning bridge traffic, we pushed the extra distance to cross that same day, through a suburb called Dunlap that made both of us grin for no reason beyond the coincidence with Dunlop tyres — the kind of small, private joke that means nothing to anyone else and means everything when you're this many miles into a trip. The first forty miles somehow swallowed five hours for no reason I could identify, and Peoria's traffic, once we hit it, cost us more time still — three bridges crossed the lake, and local advice steered us toward the middle one as the safest for a bicycle.

At the Super 8 in East Peoria, for the first time on the whole trip, a motel refused to let the bicycle inside — leave it under the awning by the window, take the room, no exceptions. We had no fight left in us to go motel-shopping elsewhere. Washing the road off my face in the bathroom mirror that evening, I caught my own reflection properly for maybe the first time in weeks — sun-darkened, rough-skinned, unfamiliar — and for a moment saw, layered underneath it, the person who'd left Saikat bhai's apartment in Seattle at the very start, still soft, still uncertain whether any of this was really going to happen. Fifty days in, I still didn't fully recognize the man in between those two versions of myself. Ujjal bhai's voice broke the moment: the duffel bag had torn again.

Professor Ali Riaz

Professor Riaz had quietly arranged everything before we even arrived — a room already booked at the Motel 6 he'd guessed, correctly, that we'd have chosen ourselves, and David's package of tyres, spokes, a spoke wrench, and chain lubricant collected and waiting for us in person. His friendship with Ujjal bhai went back to 1997, to Ujjal bhai's years at the BBC in London — old enough a



At Dr. Ali Riaz's place.

connection that I hadn't expected this kind of effort on our behalf, and warm enough, once he arrived, that any hesitation dissolved immediately.

I looked him up online before he came and found page after page — clearly an important, well-known academic — which only made his attentiveness to two road-worn strangers more striking. This is the real gift of travelling with almost nothing in your pocket: you see exactly who people are when helping you costs them something real and gets them nothing back. The famous sights fade with time and repetition. This kind of ordinary human generosity is what actually stays.

He and Ujjal bhai fell into old BBC stories while I replaced the tyres, and the next evening we ate dinner at his home — nothing showy, just a plain house with a small patch of grass out back, another family our own age invited to round out the table, hours of conversation and argument that felt like something out of ordinary family life rather than an audience with someone important. Before we left the next day, all I had to offer him was plain respect, which felt, honestly, like far too little.

He Who Risks Nothing Never Sips Champagne

My old college classmate Imranul met us at the motel the next morning, his own bicycle ready — a PhD student at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, one of the finest universities in the country, which somehow made his enthusiasm for cycling more surprising to me than it should have been. I'd met plenty of brilliant Bangladeshi students who wouldn't dream of getting on a bicycle for pleasure. He rode with real style, and the fifty-four miles to Champaign passed easily with someone who actually knew the roads.

Illinois' green kept doing the same thing to me it had been doing for days — pulling my mind helplessly back to Bengal, to the particular color of monsoon fields, whether I wanted the comparison or not. *Hubbul watani minal iman* — love of the homeland is part of faith — a line that had stuck with me since childhood, though I'd once famously failed a religious studies exam on the same subject. Apparently love of country doesn't require passing marks.

Imranul's wife, deep into her own PhD in computer science, had prepared a full meal despite being every bit as busy as he was, and that evening a group of about twenty Bangladeshi students gathered in a university hall just to hear our story — casual, shorts-clad, completely unpretentious despite the university's genuine standing as what's sometimes called a "Public Ivy," a public institution carrying the same weight as the eight famous private ones without any of the private tuition. Among them was Shamim bhai, a Scout patrol leader from my own school years, three years my senior, someone I hadn't seen since the fierce, half-serious rivalries of our old Scout troop's annual day-camp competitions — four patrol leaders, Lion, Cat, Horse, and Hound, each recruiting the best new Scouts like rival chieftains, none of them giving an inch even though they were all close friends outside the competition itself. I'd come second in two events that year and first in two, and still remember the book I won as a prize better than I remember most of what I studied that whole year. Whatever

I've become since traces back, in some real part, to what those four older boys taught a much younger version of me about intelligence, generosity, and brotherhood, long before I understood any of those words as anything but Scout-camp vocabulary. We ended up at his home that night, cutting a cake for his ninth wedding anniversary with a stranger who, an hour earlier, had been nothing more than a shared memory from adolescence.

The Homestead of the Believing Scholar

I ndiana arrived the next day along quieter back roads chosen deliberately to avoid traffic, and somewhere around the state line I found myself thinking about Father Pischetto, a physics teacher from my own college days back in Dhaka, born in this very state, who'd once explained centrifugal force to a room of Bangladeshi teenagers using his mother's washing machine as the example. The debt Bangladesh owes to foreign missionary teachers like him is easy to forget and shouldn't be.

We pushed nearly ninety miles that day — our longest single day yet — reaching Crawfordsville by mid-afternoon and choosing the cheapest motel available, thirty extra minutes of riding saved for ten dollars we'd rather spend on food than lodging. After days of camp cooking, the appeal of simply ordering something and not touching a stove had become its own small luxury.

The Punishment for Foolishness

T he next day punished a moment's overconfidence — a wrong turn north when we should have stayed dead east added eighteen unnecessary miles just to correct course, on a day meant to be an easy fifty-five and turned into eighty-five instead. We'd also crossed into the Eastern Time Zone without quite

registering it, waking an hour earlier than we needed to by local clocks, under a sky already flashing with distant lightning.

Anderson, Indiana, when we finally reached it, was almost aggressively beautiful — the neatest roads I could remember seeing anywhere on the trip — though the Motel 6 we stayed in did its best to undercut the city's reputation, small and visibly dirty, three hours lost just getting the Wi-Fi to connect. Ujjal bhai, ordering Chinese food that night, made a point of mentioning we were Bangladeshi, “beside India,” and got noticeably more rice packed into the containers for the trouble.

The Wright Brothers

We crossed into Ohio the next day, eighty more miles ahead of us, and stumbled onto a small roadside sign for the rural birthplace of the Wright brothers — a detail that stopped me cold. Two brothers, born in the middle of genuine rural nowhere, had gone on to invent powered flight itself. There's something almost too neat in that, the isolation of a place like this maybe planting exactly the kind of restlessness that invents faster ways to leave it.

“Will you go, Ujjal bhai?”

“Will you? It will add another six miles. And after reaching it, we will spend more time there.”

He was right, as he usually was about these calculations. We photographed the sign and rode on, through Richmond and four more hours of unexpectedly long, gentle climbing, fueled at the end by a Monster energy drink Ujjal bhai talked me into and swore would work. It did. We reached Eaton as evening fell, worn through in the particular way that comes from a day that simply refuses to end on schedule.

Take Leave; See as Much as You Want

The next morning's ride toward Dayton passed two small towns whose names — West Alexandria, New Lebanon — sent my mind straight back to an old trip to Egypt, years before this one, when a work assignment to a three-day conference had somehow, almost accidentally, turned into a personal tour of Alexandria on my bosses' own encouragement: "Muntasir, you go everywhere. Take leave. See as much as you want." I'd walked the Corniche, seen Fort Qaitbay, visited the rebuilt library that carries forward one of history's great namesakes, and come home to tell two Egyptian managers, without hesitation, that Alexandria had been my favorite place in their entire country — an answer that made one of them howl with laughter at the other's expense.

Back on the road in Ohio, a police siren caught us descending a stretch of Highway 35 we hadn't realized had quietly become a motor highway, bicycles technically not permitted. The officer didn't ticket us — just redirected us onto a proper bike route, a converted rail trail running dead level and shaded the whole way, fast enough that we covered twenty miles an hour without much effort. We passed through Xenia Station, an old Victorian rail depot turned cyclist's rest stop, and reached Washington Court House by mid-afternoon, checking into a motel across from a cemetery — the cheapest rooms in any American town, we'd learned by now, always seem to cluster near a graveyard.

The Indian owner, missing his wife who'd gone home to visit family, let us use his kitchen for the night. We cooked rice and egg bhuna together in his empty kitchen, two small households of loneliness and homesickness briefly overlapping into something like company, and ate better that night than we had in a week of gas-station sandwiches and Chinese takeout.







13

THE APPALACHIANS



13

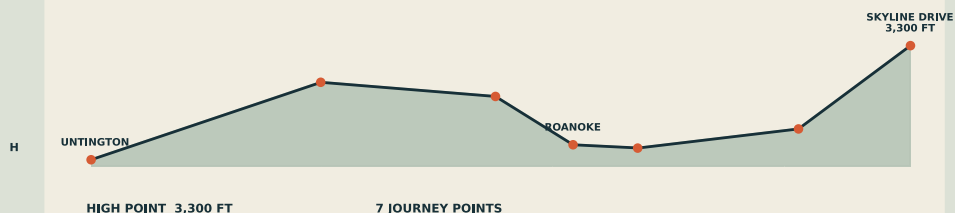
THE APPALACHIANS

HUNTINGTON / SKYLINE DRIVE



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS



Welcome, Love

Masud bhai, another old Scout patrol leader from my school years, lived in Huntington, West Virginia — south of our direct route to Washington, D.C., far enough that riding to him and back would have nearly doubled the remaining distance with autumn cold already threatening to close in on us. His solution was simple and generous: we'd ride directly to Lake White State Park in Ohio, and he'd drive the rest, collecting us there and later carrying us forward by exactly the distance his detour had cost us, so neither our mileage nor our schedule would actually suffer for the visit.

The ride there ran through farmland so vividly green under gusting wind that it moved like water — a genuine sea of crops, dotted, oddly, with a massive billboard for an Indian tractor brand, a small reminder of how thoroughly global agricultural machinery has become. Most of what Hollywood had taught me about America growing up had nothing to do with this — the cities, the beaches, the office towers — when in fact vastly more of the country's land feeds it than photographs it. At the lake itself, waiting for Masud bhai, we fell into conversation with a local man named Martin, deeply religious, curious about Bangladesh and startled to learn Ujjal bhai actually knew Muhammad Yunus by name. Before leaving, Martin pressed a twenty-dollar bill into our hands, insisting it would bless him more than us. Different faiths, in my experience, keep landing on the same handful of truths; the trouble only starts when we turn belief into a competition over whose God is more generous. I sat with that twenty-dollar note for a while after he left, oddly moved by the weight of it, before Masud bhai's car finally pulled in.

Unending Affection

Masud bhai's wife, Abha apa, had known me since school and treated both of us like her own younger brothers the moment we arrived — the whole house already thick with the smell of an elaborate dinner she'd clearly spent hours

preparing, more food than any ordinary weeknight back home would ever call for. I'd known them both since a trip to Japan years earlier, when Masud bhai was completing his PhD there and I'd travelled out of my way just to spend a few days with them after climbing Mount Fuji.

Marshall University, where Masud bhai taught chemistry, carries its own quiet tragedy: in 1970, the entire football team, coaches, and staff died in a plane crash returning from a game, one of the worst disasters in American sports history. We walked the campus at night — open to anyone at any hour, a freedom that still surprises me each time I encounter it here — and stood before the Memorial Fountain built in their memory, thirteen feet of bronze rising from a still pool like a burst of pollen frozen mid-air. A plaque nearby promised they would live on in the hearts of those who remembered them. It felt, standing there in the dark, like a genuinely kept promise rather than an empty inscription.

A Cordial Invitation

Masud bhai and his old classmate Dolon bhai had split the long drive into Virginia between them, meeting us halfway in Beckley in a light drizzle — two men who'd grown up on the same childhood playing field in Dhaka decades earlier, each now grown into a small act of unreasonable generosity toward two strangers on bicycles. Dolon bhai put us up for free in the largest room at the motel where he worked, then drove us past Virginia Tech, where he told us, walking the quiet campus, about the 2007 shooting that had left thirty-two students dead — still, at the time, the worst mass shooting in modern American history.

"Dolon bhai, do you have a gun?"

"No, we do not. To tell the truth, it is not as though everyone owns one. Many people like us have businesses but do not own firearms. But yes, buying one is easy — very easy."

I'd read about how easy for years before this trip. Standing outside

gun shops the size of supermarkets, stock piled floor to ceiling, made the fact land differently than any newspaper article ever had.

To Some Mother

Leaving Christiansburg after three restful days felt harder than any climb we'd faced — the kind of reluctance that sets in specifically because there are too many good people nearby making it easy to stay. Dolon bhai, fasting for Ramadan, had gone back to sleep after sehri and told us simply to call if anything went wrong.

Something did. Ten miles into an otherwise gentle downhill, the pedals seized entirely — a broken chainring, the kind of mechanical failure that stops a tandem dead no matter how good the road underneath it is. A call to David in New York produced sympathy but no fix from two thousand miles away; a call to Dolon bhai produced an immediate, "What happened? Do I need to come?" and, within the hour, a ride to a bike shop in Roanoke that finally had the part — seventy-five dollars just for labor, the first time on the whole trip anyone had charged us to fit a part rather than simply the cost of the piece itself.

Dolon bhai wouldn't let us leave the area without lunch at his mother's house first. Watching her fuss over feeding us despite Ramadan, despite having never met us before that morning, brought my own mother into sharp, aching focus — how long it had actually been since anyone had insisted I eat, the particular scent every mother in the world seems to carry that no perfume has ever managed to bottle. "Baba, what madness you are doing," she said, only half joking. "Why must you cycle across all of America?" I couldn't tell if it was anger or fear speaking, and I found I couldn't fully answer her either. I barely managed to finish the meal, thinking about what my own mother must be carrying in her chest at that exact moment, half a world away. We finished the day in Buchanan wanting nothing more than to be done, homesickness sitting on my shoulders the rest of the ride like something physical.

Let It Stop Today

The road rose and fell all the next day and so did my mood, though my body, by now, barely registered the difference — sixty-one days in, it simply did what was asked of it without complaint. The mind is a harder animal to train. I found myself wondering, riding, whether this had really been a journey at all by that point, or just an elaborate, expensive form of running — toward home, disguised as running away from it. Whenever we learned a familiar face lived within a hundred miles, we chased the connection almost compulsively, and it took me most of the trip to understand why: ten hours of riding a day, most of it silent, each of us privately doing the math on how much suffering the next mile might cost, wears the sweetness off even genuine adventure eventually. We wanted someone new to talk to. We wanted, more than either of us said aloud, simply to be looked after for an hour. We stopped after only twenty-four miles. Neither of us had it in us to go further.

Almost Heaven

The Blue Ridge Mountains greeted us the next day with real, sustained climbing — six or seven miles an hour on the steepest stretches, slow enough to make an hour of continuous effort feel almost pointless. I found myself humming John Denver's old song about these very mountains without meaning to, the phrase "almost heaven" running on a loop in my head. I'd never fully understood, as a kid reading the lyrics translated, what a "country road" actually meant — every road is technically inside some country — until I considered how few people even in Dhaka actually claim Dhaka itself as their ancestral home; my own father had left a remote village called Jhinai to build a life in the capital, and Dhaka never quite became his home in that older, rooted sense.

It never fully became mine either. I was as much an immigrant in my own capital as my friends scattered across America were here.

“I cannot go on. Stop,” Ujjal bhai finally said, breaking through whatever reverie I’d wandered into. We ate the last of the morning’s oatmeal, bought a Monster energy drink at the next gas station — a habit Ujjal bhai had fully converted me to by this point in the trip — and reached Waynesboro by four that afternoon, stopping early deliberately, because tomorrow’s climb, we’d been warned, would need everything we had left.

The Noblest of Creation?

With only one day left after this one, I expected excitement. Instead what actually surfaced was closer to dread — the dream that had consumed years of planning was about to end, and behind it waited every ordinary adult problem I’d successfully outrun for two months: work, money, the question of what exactly I’d return home to. These were, I realized, thoughts that probably should have visited me before I left rather than now, on the second-to-last day, but that’s apparently how dreams work — you don’t examine the cost too closely while you’re still inside one.

We’d built, before the trip, a small mobile app called Trashmaniac to log roadside litter as we rode — not out of any grand environmental ambition, just something useful to do with attention that would otherwise go entirely to pain management. A mathematician named Patrick Runkel, working for a statistics software company in Pennsylvania, had found our published data months into the trip and analyzed it independently, publishing his own findings: that even in a country as wealthy as America, recycling rates hadn’t kept pace with consumption. We’d never set out to prove anything in particular. The data simply existed because logging it cost us nothing extra.

Today’s climb ran along Skyline Drive, through the Appalachian foothills — the same range, more or less, where we’d started among

mountains in Washington state two months earlier, the trip closing on itself with an almost deliberate symmetry. The first few miles were nearly level; the six after that climbed hard enough that we simply stopped talking and rode.

“Come, Ujjal bhai. Let us try to finish it in one continuous push.”

“Come on. It can be done.”

Something happens to me on climbs like that one — a kind of prayer without words, not unlike what I imagine a Sufi feels mid-turn, or a yogi deep in meditation, the conscious mind stepping back and letting something older and more automatic take the wheel. I’ve felt closest to whatever I mean by God exactly there, on a bicycle, on a mountain, hands empty of anything except the need to keep moving — the same instinct, I suspect, that put solitary hermit shrines on the flanks of the Himalaya, that put Reinhold Messner somewhere unreachable inside himself during his solo ascent of Everest. I don’t need it to make logical sense. I’ve crossed through that particular grace too many times now to doubt it.

“Stop. Stop.” “We are done.” “We are done!”

Ujjal bhai’s voice, full of relief, pulled me back into my body. It was over — faster than I’d braced for, the way the worst climbs sometimes are. We drank, ate, and got back on the saddle. Nothing left now but forward.









14

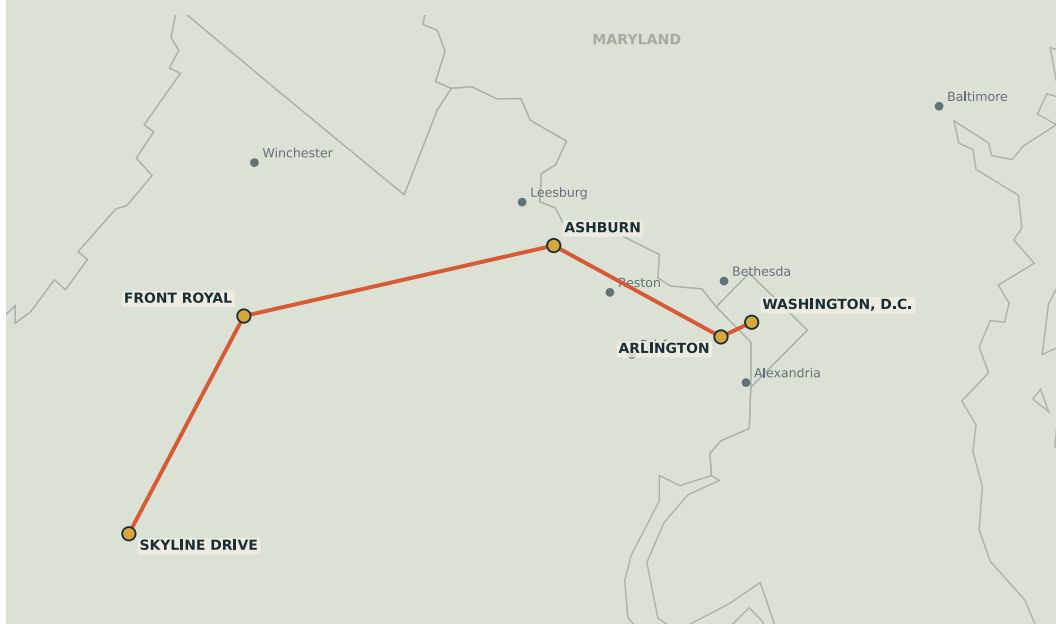
THE LAST MILES



14

THE LAST MILES

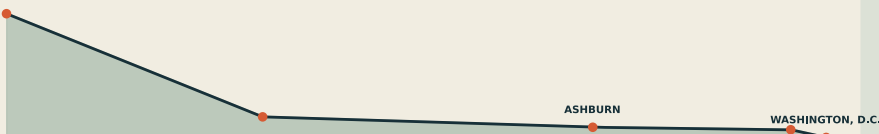
SKYLINE DRIVE / WASHINGTON, D.C.



ELEVATION PROFILE

RECONSTRUCTED FROM NARRATIVE ROUTE POINTS

SKYLINE DRIVE
3,300 FT



HIGH POINT 3,300 FT

5 JOURNEY POINTS

Brotherhood

Excitement had been building since morning — the particular kind that comes when a long story is finally circling back toward everyone who helped write it. We'd been messaging people since the night before, the list of names too long to properly finish. Today's destination was Ashburn, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C. — the capital whose exact state affiliation I still couldn't quite pin down, shared somehow between Virginia and Maryland without fully belonging to either.

We had a bed waiting rather than another motel search: Ishtiaq, an old schoolmate and fellow Scout from the same patrol, whose bicycle I'd envied badly as a kid — I never had my own, whether from money or my family's fear of accidents I still don't fully know — had a house ready for us in Ashburn and had already walked us through the route by phone.

We made one wrong turn near Remington, tempted by a quieter road that turned out to run straight into someone's private driveway. "Turn back. We made a mistake," Ujjal bhai said. "We do not need such an empty road any more. If it has to be a highway, let it be a highway." There was no arguing with that logic two months and two thousand miles into a trip.

Riding into Ashburn's manicured neighborhoods in the late golden light, children on bicycles and skateboards stopped to watch us pass, and their parents on porches watched more carefully still — two sunburnt, faded strangers who, on foot, might easily have passed for refugees rather than long-distance cyclists. A police car appeared at a distance more than once, the way it had periodically through this whole trip whenever we looked sufficiently out of place; each time, they simply watched, worked out what they were looking at, and moved on without a word. We got lost finding Ishtiaq's actual house despite his directions, circling the same few streets for half an hour, until finally he was standing right there in front of it.

"Welcome," he said, and embraced me. The riding itself was over. The actual ending, it turned out, still had one more evening to go:

a Bangladeshi organization called Drishtipat had arranged what they promised was the best biryani in America, at a restaurant in Arlington called Ghoror Khabar, timed for iftar during Ramadan even though neither of us was fasting. Twenty people gathered to hear a shortened version of two months compressed into a single evening's telling, biryani piled high as any mountain either of us had climbed, praise and questions circling the table long after the plates were empty. Many of them hadn't been home in years; some had been born in America and never seen Bangladesh at all. Yet the pull in the room was unmistakable — everyone there was, in some way, a fragment of the same country, drawn together for one evening by two strangers who'd simply pedaled far enough to remind them of it.

The Last Evening

Conversation rose and fell as the evening wore on, everyone gradually settling into their own private ease, faces from childhood surfacing in the strangers around me — a scout den, a muddy field before Gowainghat, a friend jumping to dodge leeches in a tea garden years ago. The country, it felt like, had sent for me specifically that night. I'd left alone, and I would return alone, but in between I'd been folded into a hundred strangers' kindness like a guest circulating through an endless open house. Solitude, I found myself thinking, isn't something you can advertise for or borrow from someone else's friendship. It's closer to a private settlement you make with yourself — not elegant, not something to perform, just a door you learn to open a little further each time, moving slowly toward whatever wisdom waits on the other side of it.

Tomorrow would be the actual end of the ride. My old classmates Joydeep and Wahid, along with Hasan Tareq — a Scout too, more a younger brother to us than a friend — had already left New York that afternoon to meet us. We were also invited that night to Tanvir bhai's home for a dinner-and-sehri gathering — the same Tanvir bhai who'd overseen my Cub Scout initiation back in 1990 and, if memory serves,

once made me sing during the test. Joydeep, Wahid, and Hasan joined us there after dismantling the bicycle for the last time, and the room filled with old stories told too loudly, the particular warmth of decades of friendship compressed into one final night before the actual finish line.

Canada

The car pulled away in the small hours, everyone having eaten sehri, the sky just beginning to whiten with the first true light of dawn — subh-e-sadiq, the same phrase for true dawn that had followed us the entire trip. Even surrounded by that much affection, my chest went unexpectedly heavy. Why now, of all moments? Hadn't every mile of hardship existed precisely so it could end exactly like this? It had happened. And now it was over. Back in 2003, saying goodbye to a Canadian friend at a bus terminal after trekking to Everest Base Camp, I'd wondered, half-seriously, whether I'd ever manage to cycle across North America myself. It had happened. And now, apparently, it was already something to grieve a little, the way anything worth doing seems to demand its small toll of sadness once it's finished.

I'd spent years weaving a canopy over this particular dream — leaving jobs, returning to them, disappearing and reappearing, playing an endless game of hide-and-seek with the domestic life everyone eventually has to answer to. Whatever held that dream up all those years carried my mother's face somewhere in its structure, my father's worn hands somewhere in its foundation. Standing on my own two feet again, I found myself turning back toward exactly that domestic arrangement — the destination underneath every other destination. Would the game stop now? Or would I simply keep circling the same question everyone eventually asks themselves, the easy question with the answer that never quite arrives?

Whatever the answer, one thing remained entirely mine: this last lightness, unearned and weightless, carrying me wherever I wanted to go. A stranger's hand had reached toward me somewhere in the

middle of all these miles, and I'd found the courage, somehow, to trust it. It had rested on my shoulder. I'd pedaled harder. Somewhere along the way the hand had changed, again and again, though I couldn't say exactly when I'd stopped noticing the difference.

Does an ending always carry some sorrow, even for someone who's been properly seasoned by the hardship leading up to it? However painful the passing of time feels in the moment, its warmth stays lodged in memory long after the difficulty itself fades. Maybe that's simply how we're built — living partly in the past, on the pages of whatever we managed to actually finish. Let it bloom there, then, at life's own picnic.

Turning his head from the front seat, Wahid asked, in his usual easy tone: "Dosto, where will you go next?"

"Canada," I answered, without thinking.





