

CHAPTER ONE: WHERE ARE YOU, OLD GUY?

Yeah, well, it's me again. Told you I'd be back.

Today being Thursday, I'm into my fifth day of reality time. Actually, I'd kind of lost track, because it's gone so fast. It's been pretty neat, too. Why? you ask. Or maybe you didn't ask; you already know.

Right, Holly Dragonette.

Remember the bells and whistles and Tchaikovsky? Okay, I've got it figured out. See, by last Sunday night I was *definitely* hearing some major league bells. I'm talking the Bells of St. Mary's, Notre Dame Cathedral with Quasimodo going ape, the Good Humor man, a Bell for Adano. If I'd rattled my head, a bunch of churchgoers would've probably showed up at the door of my condo.

Small wonder. After helping Holly look for a place to live (she eventually rented an apartment *four blocks* from me!), we'd biked forty miles up and down the coast. The lady barely broke a sweat! She thought it was great, especially the well-marked bike lanes, something they lack along the farm roads of Iowa. Getting to know each other so well that day, the bells just happened. And the best part was, I do believe she heard them too.

Now I could've heard whistles, and in the natural course of things old Peter Ilyich would have followed. Something soft and romantic from *Serenade for Strings* or *Romeo and Juliet*; or something stirring from the *1812 Overture* or *Marche Slave*. But no, I drew the line at bells.

This is the part I said I'd figured out. In the first place, hearing bells was wonderful enough. When you begin a relationship with more than that—like what they used to call, among other things, *head over heels in love*—there are two ways you can go. The first is to sustain those lofty expectations, which isn't easy. And the second way is *down*, falling *out* of love after you discover that the person of your dreams is inordinately devoted to mama, snores and mumbles all night, hates most of the food you like, has a Silly Putty fetish, or, perhaps worst of all, is an L.A. Dodgers fan.

But give the relationship time to develop, and whistles and Tchaikovsky will follow. Then, when you finally hear the horns and strings of that haunting love theme from *Romeo and Juliet*, wow!

So what did I do with the rest of reality time? Like I had told you, I went to the beach...with Holly. I caught a Padres game...with Holly. She's a White Sox fan (*see* the kind of things you find out?), but that can be worked on. I even called my mother, Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal, in Florida. Didn't tell her about Holly yet. (*No, Ma, I don't think Dragonette is a Jewish name.*)

And as also advertised, I continued to write down what had happened to me along the Ultimate Bike Path and beyond. One thing about reality time was that the longer the stretch, the more you begin to question whether your experiences were real or not. The writing helped to deal with that.

The reason I was even thinking about the Path today was that, earlier, I'd driven Holly to the airport. It was going to take her a couple weeks to wrap up the chapters of her life in Iowa, then she would drive out with her things in a U-Haul truck. Guess what, I'm going back there to help her.

Okay, I suppose that sounds like *true love* or something, but there's more to it. I've always wanted to bike cross-country, and while Cedar Rapids isn't exactly on the East Coast, it's far enough. So on Sunday I start riding.

Actually, I *did* think about the Ultimate Bike Path during the last couple of days, when we shared some of our more intimate moments. That was because I kept remembering the Old Guy and his cronies, and the fact that they could watch me whenever they wanted. Yeah, I know they'd promised to be discreet about my personal life; still, Holly had to wonder if I was looking for spiders on the ceiling or something.

So now, late Thursday afternoon, I was thinking a lot about the Ultimate Bike Path, which meant I was more than ready to ride it. That's when I made the first of two major league dipshit mistakes.

Dipshit mistake #1: I decided not to enter the Path from what the Old Guy called the Starting Point, down the Stuart Mesa hill in Camp Pendleton. After all, I figured, the Torrey Pines grade was only a couple of minutes from my place, and by now I'd become a pro traveling the *mbuwa lun gallee*, so why not use it? I'd gotten on the Path from lots of different hills coming back, and *they* hadn't caused any problems.

Dipshit mistake #2: I would leave for the Ultimate Bike Path without being sure the Old Guy and his pals were watching me. This, I swear, wasn't for lack of trying. While getting changed I glanced out my bedroom window at the sky.

"Hey, Old Guy, can you hear me?" I asked, feeling sort of stupid. "I'm ready to hit the *mbuva lun gallee*. Just hope you're looking over my shoulder."

No response; no divine voice, no white room, *nada*. Didn't faze me, though. I rode the Nishiki to the coast, paralleled the ocean going south, and within a few minutes started climbing the Torrey Pines grade.

Let me tell you about this *mother* of a hill! Though about as steep as the one on Camp Pendleton, the Torrey Pines grade goes on for a mile and a half, *three times* as long. Average riders avoid it like a diseased rat. Going up, you induce yourself into semi-consciousness and think about anything *but* pedaling. And *flying* down you try to remember if your life and health insurance premiums are paid up. Once, when a usual headwind was absent, I got near forty mph before deciding not to look at the bike computer anymore.

In case you're thinking that Torrey Pines sounds familiar, you might recall this golf tournament that comes on in the middle of winter, when you're freezing your buns off in Bemidji, Buffalo, or Bangor. You know, where it's sunny and seventy-three degrees, and you see hang gliders and surfers and gray whales on their way down to party in Mexico? Yep, it's the one held at the Torrey Pines Municipal Golf Course. Makes those of you from the aforementioned ports of call wish you were here; makes those of us who spend *all* our days in (overpopulated) paradise wish it were never shown.

Speaking of that tournament, back in simpler times it was called the San Diego Open, then the Andy Williams San Diego Open, or AWSDO, to those in the know. The old crooner, taking a cue (or was it a four-iron?) from Bing Crosby and Bob Hope, would play in the celebrity pro-am, sing a song or two, and in general grin a lot. After that, when corporate sponsorship became a necessity, it was the Wicks Andy Williams San Diego Open, then the Isuzu Andy Williams San Diego Open.

Eventually the singer's name became disassociated from the tournament. (Possibly because a whole new generation was asking the question, "Andy *who?*") Corporate sponsorship changed, so that in one of its most recent incarnations it was the Shearson Lehman Hutton Open. But it's probably not over. If more celebrities and organizations wish to be associated thusly, we could wind up with the Oprah Winfrey Mitsubishi Jose Canseco Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Leonard Nimoy Hebrew National Boris Yeltsin Coors Light Sierra Club Stephen King Pepto-Bismol Open. You never know.

Anyway, here I was at the top of the hill, *near* the golf course, and only moderately breathless. Once again I waved my arms and addressed the heavens (a couple of northbound riders found that interesting). Nothing. Still, not to worry; the Old Guy and his pals would tune in before long.



Scenario: Study Group Old Guys *not* paying attention to Jack Miller.

Study Group Old Guy #1: "When was the last time anyone checked on Jack?"

My Old Guy: "I did, not long ago. He was with the female again."

Study Group Old Guy #2 (grinning impishly): "Were they...?"

My Old Guy: "No, this time they were riding their bicycles. Jack appears to be quite fond of her."

Study Group Old Guy # 1: "I'm afraid he won't be of any use to us for a while."

Study Group Old Guy #2: "I think you're right. Do we have another diversion?"

My Old Guy: "Oh, indeed! At this moment a Demgrimmajin offal worm is emerging from its cocoon to begin its twenty-four hour life cycle, always a fascinating one. We can observe every minute of it!"

Study Group Old Guy # 1: "That is wonderful. We'll check on Jack when we're done." (Scratches head.) "Er, he wouldn't undertake the journey on his own, would he?"

My Old Guy: "No, he won't. Jack may be a lot of things, but he's not—" (Inserts finger in ear.) "—a dipshit."



I started down the Torrey Pines grade. The last riders had gone by a minute ago, and no one else was coming. Someone in a car could see me wink out for that split second, I suppose. But in general drivers hardly paid attention to bicyclists, and down this crazy winding hill they concentrated on the lane in front of them.

Even with a headwind I quickly hurtled along at thirty-two mph. Could've shifted then but decided to wait until at least halfway down...which is when I suddenly had these thoughts relevant to aborting the whole thing. Didn't listen, though.

At thirty-four-point-five mph I shifted into the Vurdabrok Gear...



...and for the first time was absolutely one hundred percent sure I had made a *major* dipshit mistake.

This play-by-play is of what went down in the next one-point-three seconds...if that long. What *went down*, actually, was *me*. The first thing I became aware of upon emerging onto the Ultimate Bike Path was my speed, which felt faster than all prior entries. And second, I was moving headlong toward one of the tunnel's walls—*one of the rust-red, solid-looking walls!*

I squeezed the brakes hard, pulling one foot free of the toe clip as I tried to veer off.

Too close; too late.

The Nishiki went down; so did I, after somehow pulling out of the other clip.

The mist-covered floor of the Ultimate Bike Path felt grainy and weird under me.

Still hurtling forward the bike bounced once, then struck the wall, where it was *absorbed* with a sound like that of bacon sizzling.

I bounced too, then rolled toward the same wall, unable to stop.

Oh, shit, where are you, Old Guy?