

Roch Michaud

There's Nothing Like Biking to Feel Alive



Rockquiroule

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Saint-Denis-de-la-Bouteillerie and Montréal

French title: *Parcours*

Cover photograph: Roch Michaud

Design and layout of the printed version: Anne Layton-Cartier

English translation: Peter Malden

Printer: Marquis Imprimeur

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Legal deposit – Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2016

ISBN : 978-2-9816304-0-7

There's Nothing Like Biking to Feel Alive



For Nathalie, Vincent, Mélisande and Camille

*You don't always find the right gear ratio
to climb the steep hill of literature.*

Pierre Foglia

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Prologue

Journeys. Singular or plural. It would be too easy to call life a journey. Especially since it’s really a number of journeys. There’s nothing special about mine. I’ve lived a Western life, a privileged and, I think, happy one. I’ve had the luck and freedom to indulge my passions — romantic, literary, linguistic, cultural, roving, culinary, athletic. And my great passion for nature and life.

I decided to write about my passion for biking in the wake of my first real encounter with suffering. Cancer reared its ugly head, but it hasn’t crushed me. I’ve resisted, like so many anonymous others who keep on fighting and even forge ahead. We know how the story will end, but sickness can’t take away a fraction of a second of what I’ve lived, on or off my bike.

These pages recount my journey on two legs and, especially, two wheels. Feet on the ground and planted on my pedals, striding ahead and churning hard. Nose to the wheel and head in the clouds. Spirit and heart at once light and tortured. Body invincible and ravaged.

I’ve written the book for you, with its imperfections and inconsistencies. With sincerity and humility. And with a love for life that nothing can erase.

Biking before biking

I was four years old. My parents had realized that my vision was very poor, and my aunt Rolande had offered to take me by bus to Québec City to see an eye specialist at Saint-Sacrement Hospital. Another aunt, Jeannine, a nun at the time, worked there. It's probably thanks to her that we got the appointment. In the waiting room there was another little boy, who was playing with a plush tiger's tail. Esso's slogan at the time was Put a Tiger in Your Tank, and the company gave these orange-and-black-striped tails to gas-pump customers. I was a bit jealous of the other boy: we didn't have a car.

The trip back home was also by bus, but everything looked different. It's as if I was seeing the world for the first time, thanks to my new glasses. My mother still remembers my reaction when, seated on my white and red tricycle, I shouted, "I see the rocks, I see the rocks!" The same rocks I'd already gotten to know close up, as I apparently toppled off my trike a lot — maybe because, up to then, I hadn't really seen much. At the time, Route 132 was the only road between the Gaspé Peninsula and Québec City, and venturing too close to it was strictly forbidden. We were thus "confined" to our yard and its rocks. To show that we were different and maybe scare away mosquitoes, my brother Alain and I stuck hockey player cards in our bike spokes. I wonder whether Jim Roberts' card made more noise, given the size of the Montréal Canadiens defenceman's ears.

A few years later, I rode a two-wheeler for the first time, on Rue Mont-Repos, at my uncle André Girard's place in Sainte-Foy. "Mount Rest Street" was aptly named, as there wasn't much traffic. My first time on a bicycle was a great moment of freedom, a taste of so many more to come.

The summer my father died

Summer of 1981. I was working in Kamouraska, as part of a tourism promotion program. Working isn't quite the right word. My co-workers and I were especially good at lounging about, and my only goal was to put some money aside for the fall term at Université de Montréal. Every day, or almost, I pedalled back and forth between Saint-André and Kamouraska: a 32-kilometre round trip, doubtless the biggest effort of the day. Some days I struggled against a stiff west wind in the morning and pedalled home at the end of the afternoon against an equally brisk northeast wind.

On August 7, a Friday, I got home early in the afternoon, under a grey sky. The week had been very hard: my father had metastatic cancer, and it was Phase 4. The week before, he had been taken by ambulance to the hospital. He was in a great deal of pain before falling into a deep coma. We knew the end was near.

Soon after I got home, I was in the basement filling a bucket with water for the chickens, who were languishing in their coop, when I heard a car door slam. My brother Benoît, my sister Sylvie and my mother were back from the hospital earlier than usual. I understood right away. Sylvie and I hugged each other. Later, my mother cried a lot; we left her alone while she picked out the clothes for the viewing. Benoît and I went to choose a casket in Saint-Alexandre. My memory of these three days is blurry. There were a lot of people around. Alain and I were able to share a chuckle at the assembly line of hugs and handshakes. I kissed my father's forehead before the coffin was closed and burst into tears. Then came the funeral, the burial and the inevitable wake.

A few weeks later, I set out for Montréal with Benoît. At the place where Route de la Station starts to climb, I looked back towards the house; I felt deep sorrow. I'd just lived through the summer my father died.

Lance

Movie night with my son, Vincent. *The Program*, a Lance Armstrong biopic, is realistic to the point that actor and real-life Armstrong become one. Arrogance, lies, cheating — we already knew all that. Along with courage, determination and the will to live. We believed in him, or wanted to: the dream was too appealing. He took us on a real emotional rollercoaster ride, the rogue. With his lightning starts, his magical breakaways, like at Luz-Ardiden in 2003 after his crash when he caught his handlebar on a spectator's bag, his unintended shortcut across a field after Joseba Beloki's fall the same year, he thrilled and infuriated us.

When we look back today on his incredible climbs, now that we know the extent of his doping, the incomprehensible becomes transparent. Superhuman, extraterrestrial! It all seems so clear. Lance Armstrong was a two-headed hydra, at once repulsive and captivating. Bearer of hope and architect of despair. He set an example that helped and even saved a lot of people, while disappointing even more by adding to the prevailing cynicism.

You see him in the movie looking at himself in a mirror and repeating that he has never doped. How can he feel proud of himself today when he's with his kids; how can he stay credible in their eyes and his own? He has to tell himself that, after all, he pedalled to victory in seven Tours de France, against other riders just as doped as him. Lance Armstrong, a character in a Greek tragedy or a Shakespearean play? Totally plausible. Schizophrenic? Liar? Cheat? In any case he was the leader of the pack, The Boss. The Godfather, in the Mafia sense. A braggart who had no qualms about threatening riders who balked at the conspiracy of silence.

Lance Armstrong didn't become Lance Armstrong because he beat cancer. He was already a good rider before that. He won a stage of the 1993 Tour de France and completed his first full Tour in 1995. He was just as arrogant and aggressive back then, but hadn't yet acquired the mental and physical faculties needed to win a multistage race. Pierre Foglia already saw him winning a Tour de France well before 2000. Then came cancer and the Ferrari¹ miracle.

Despite all that, there's something about Armstrong's victory over cancer, a true resurrection, that tells us never to give up. We can also choose to remember that about him.

¹ The nefarious Dottore Michele Ferrari was a coach and sports doctor for numerous cyclists (Vinokourov, Cipollini, Rominger, etc.). He was involved and convicted in a number of doping cases.

Route 132

I know the stretch of Route 132 between Saint-Denis and Saint-André by heart; I've ridden it at 10, 20, 30, 40 kilometres an hour, with the wind in my face, blasting from the side, striking me at an angle, gusting from all directions. Route 132 is a wind tunnel, a road where it's windy even when it isn't windy. July's warm squalls have practically stopped me in my tracks, knocked me to the ground, made me soar like a bird. When the wind blows from the northeast, pedalling against it is like climbing a mountain pass, making me wish I were at home, warm and comfy. When I rode with other people, most often Nathalie, I liked to stay in front. I liked to feel like a locomotive, to play the protector. I was where I belonged and hated having someone else take the lead. I had to swallow my pride with my friend Jean-Yves, a Breton who now lives in the south of France. A true locomotive. He let me pass him now and again, but never spent much time in the back. One hot day last year I went biking with Benoît. We were aware of our precarious health (because my brother too is battling prostate cancer), but also brimming with energy. On other rides, I "towed" my friends Yannig and Claude from Kamouraska to Saint-Denis, and Daniel Henry from La Pocatière to Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, both times against a strong headwind. That was last summer. I had cancer, but I was still the "leader of the pack".

Along this highway I've had cold feet, frozen fingers, sore knees and buttocks, an aching back and neck. I've slalomed between clumps of manure on the bikeable shoulders and zig-zagged between tourists strolling aimlessly through the village of Kamouraska. But above all, I've spent hundreds of hours soaking up a familiar, comforting landscape. I've seen it all, felt it all: the widening of Kamouraska Bay just outside Saint-Denis, the hills (called *monadnocks*, *sugarloafs* or *cabourons*) that dot the horizon, the smell of bread as I pedal past Niemand's bakery, buzzards gliding across the infinite sky, the red-roofed house near Pointe-Sèche, bobolinks with their fluid, metallic song, red-winged blackbirds that escort me on my bike to the edge of their territory, sometimes pecking at my helmet, the unique smell of evergreens and salt water, the fragrance of cut hay, first thing in the morning or at the end of the day, the eastern view of the Saint-Denis church steeple — highest in the Kamouraska region — and silos close to the village, which, with a good dose of imagination, conjure up the medieval towers of Lucca or San Gimignano, Italy, the fields of canola, clover and flowering potato plants, the rows of wild roses, the calvary at Saint-Germain, the hill at cousin Paul Desjardins' place (now the Tête d'allumette microbrewery).



Watercolour by François Lépérance (Saint-André)

The notion of space, so important to me, takes on its full meaning along Route 132. Being able to see so far, almost to infinity, and feeling so big and at the same time so small.

Laprairie, a Saturday

It was grey and chilly. Vincent was taking part in a spring criterium along an empty, nondescript road. The race was going well. Each time the cyclists flashed by in front of us, Vincent appeared to be solidly ensconced in the pack, the peloton. After a few laps, he was gone — not in the peloton, not among the stragglers. A bit later, the peloton went by again. Still no Vincent. We started to hear rumours of a fall. Nathalie, Anne (Vincent's mother) and I stood there, powerless. Then, in the distance, we saw an ambulance heading our way, its flashing lights turned off. Not surprised, but alarmed, we saw Vincent get out. On both feet, thankfully. But with his jersey and cycling shorts torn, his skin scraped, in tears and clearly in pain.

A gap had formed on his right. Miscalculating the opening, another cyclist had bumped into him and crashed, taking a number of other riders down with him, including Mathieu, a friend and teammate. Someone even rode over Vincent. He was scraped, and Anne drove him to a clinic. He came out with bandages and ointment, along with persistent, painful road rash.

He's the first to say that he was never the same again, and from then on he kept to the back of the peloton. The game was up, as no one wins from behind. Vincent had been exposed to the harsh reality of the peloton, a hive of humans rushing ahead at 50 kilometres an hour, with zero tolerance for mistakes, slips or distractions. Its law is implacable, and anyone who doesn't or can't abide by it is ejected without pity.

Vincent rode in a few more races, but his heart wasn't in it. I remember a criterium in Contrecoeur, when he dropped out. I didn't see him go by with the peloton or behind it, and started to worry, thinking about the crash in

Laprairie. A while later he showed up beside me. He said he hadn't told me right away about dropping out because he was frustrated. I felt a father's anger and relief.

After he stopped competitive racing, Vincent may have rediscovered the pleasure of cycling. I never argued with his decision, as I totally understood. And egotistically, I have to say that if he'd continued, I wouldn't have been able to ride with him as I did so many times afterward (Spain, New York State, Eastern Townships, Jay Peak, Joy Hill, Covey Hill, Gilles Villeneuve racetrack, Mount Pleasant Avenue and Camillien Houde Way in Montréal, Bas-du-Fleuve², etc.). Without him and his encouragement, I would never have dared embark on such magnificent but daunting rides, on such beautiful bikes. In a way, Vincent has been both my cycling mentee and mentor, and it's been a great joy for me to share a passion for cycling with him.

² Translator's note: Lower St. Lawrence region.

Le doux pays

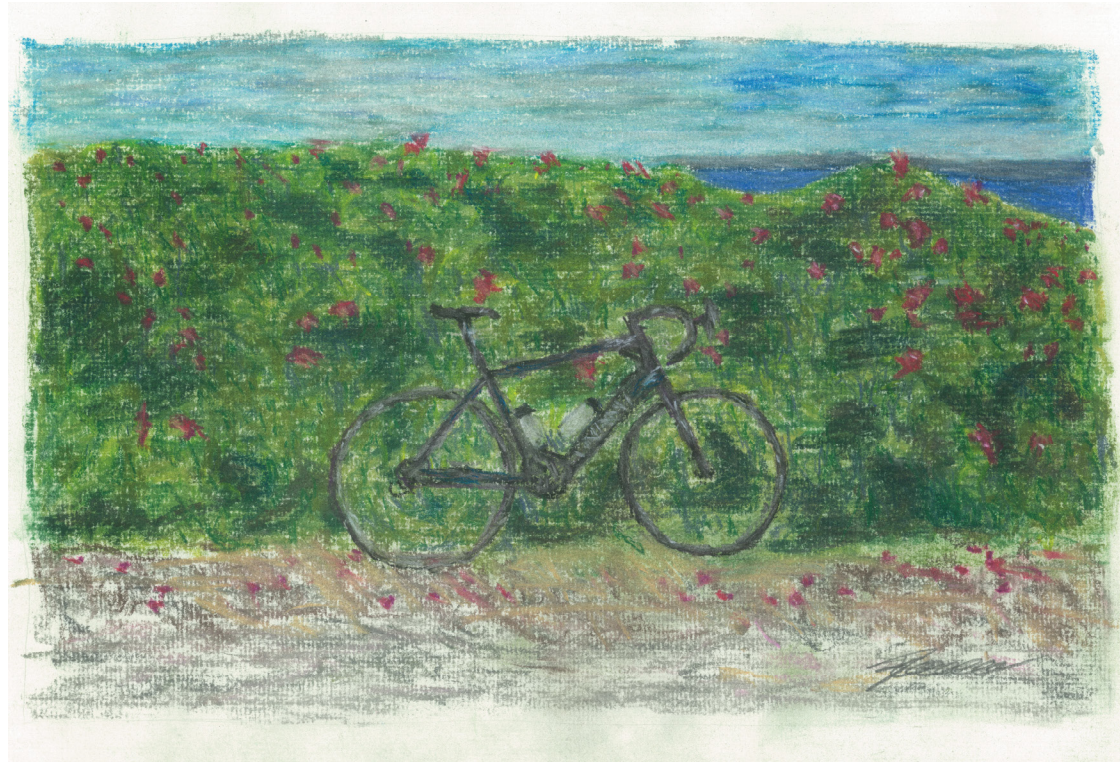
The person who came up with the slogan "*Le doux pays*" — literally, "The gentle country" — to tout the Kamouraska region's charms clearly never pedalled to Saint-Onésime, Mont-Carmel or Saint-Bruno, and certainly never sweated his or her way up the imposing hills (with gradients of up to 16 percent) on a hot July day.

One fine morning in the summer of 2013, I set off on a tour of the region and its 16 villages. All told, 148 kilometres of farms, pastures and fields, forests and views of the St. Lawrence, which is never far away.

The region is sparsely populated, even though villages like Kamouraska try to make people think otherwise. In the summer, people saunter along the streets, rev their engines and cruise along at snail's pace.

Benoît pedalled alongside me from Sainte-Hélène to Saint-André, via Saint-Joseph (I almost forgot to add it to my checklist) and Saint-Alexandre. For the return trip along Route 132, I had the wind in my face, it was 30 degrees Celsius and my knee gave me grief for the last 10 kilometres.

Was it hard? Yes and no. I don't want to boast, but how many people can claim to have explored as much of the region in a single day? It was July 14, the same day as the Mont Ventoux stage of that year's Tour de France. Chris Froome conquered the mountain and his competitors as if he were out for a stroll on a Bixi rent-a-bike. While he was at it, he should have stopped for a beer at Chalet Reynard, six kilometres from the summit. Having tackled the same climb the year before, I can say that Froome is a mutant, but I'm not sure which type. Bionic? Mechanical? Physiological? Biochemical? Genetic (increasingly popular, apparently)? One can only wonder.



Pastel by Denis Bourque (Le doux pays)

Crash landings

I was relatively spared by falls during my cycling “career”, even after my shift to a carbon frame and clipless (step-in) pedals around 2003. I recall falling somewhere close to the Berceau de Kamouraska (original site of the village of Kamouraska) during an outing with my friend and cousin Georges. Just for fun, I stupidly nudged Georges’ rear wheel with my front wheel — and found myself head over heels in the ditch. Another time, riding under freezing rain one evening on Chemin Sainte-Foy, in Québec City, I slipped and fell. My career as a year-round cyclist probably ended with that crash.

My worst fall was on Rue Bélanger, in Montréal, when an absent-minded driver opened his door just as I was passing. My shoulder took the brunt of the collision and the rest of my body followed, flying through the air and landing in the middle of the road. I lost my glasses, and my first concern was to find them. The driver spotted them — after bawling me out for “riding too close to the cars”. The heartless churl then went about his business, which probably involved picking up a skin mag and a pack of cigs at the convenience store. At least that’s what I deduced from his dim-witted face. I went home with an impressive bruise on my shoulder and a blurred, kaleidoscopic view of the world. I wound up at a clinic, where a doctor gave me a tetanus shot. My normal vision came back about two hours later.

No doubt the most unnerving fall happened on the Estriade bike route between Granby and Waterloo, with Vincent in his child seat. My right foot slipped off the pedal, I lost control and we came down hard against the pavement. I clambered back on my feet and, before anything else, made sure that Vincent was all right; he was crying but he wasn’t hurt. As soon as we set off again, I started to feel the burning in my arms and legs that was to plague me for the next few days.

The shift to clipless pedals came with a few falls, none of them serious. One of them happened near Saranac Lake, in New York State. I was too slow to release my shoe as I rode into some fine sand. I came out of the incident with a few scrapes. I also took a few tumbles on grass, stationary on my bike. My ego was more bruised than my body.

And then there are the near falls, especially one near Beebe Plain, in the Eastern Townships. At the end of a long descent, my brakes failed and the front wheel started vibrating ominously. At the bottom of the hill there was a creek and a bridge, and I was sure that I was going to crash into the railing or flip over it. None of that happened, but I'm still a bit fearful when I start a steep descent. To this day, I get shivers when I think that after streaking down Jay Peak, Vincent, who was about 15 years old at the time, proudly announced that he'd maxed out at 82 kilometres an hour.

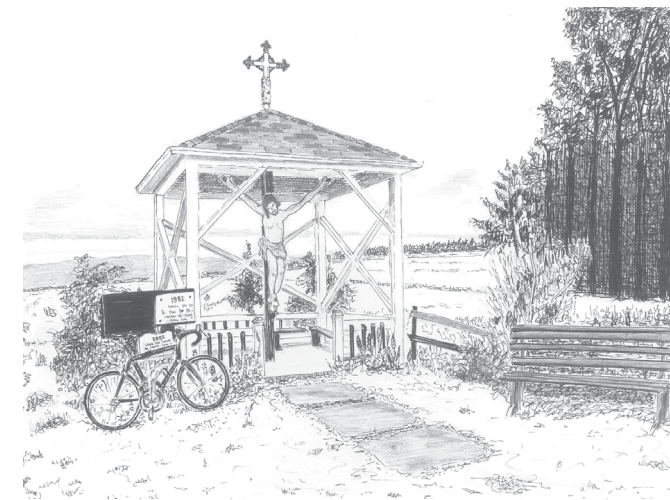
Last fall, on the Lachine Canal bike path, I almost collided in a curve under a bridge with a texting teen. There was a metal fence on the right, and in the middle of the path, the bozo in question. I yelled. The texter quickly shifted to the left and said he was sorry, but he still got a piece of my mind.

I've always found that bike paths are the most dangerous places for biking. People are all over the map, from four-year-olds learning to ride a two-wheeler to time-trial specialists tearing along at 50 kilometres an hour, without forgetting big-bottomed riders zigzagging along and chatty duos taking up both lanes.

Especially in the city, you develop a sixth sense. You "feel" that a car door is about to open or someone is about to turn without signalling. You also develop a good vocabulary of swear words and angry gestures. You adapt — in all languages.

Philosophy 1

Where the road to Saint-Germain meets Route 132, there's a very pretty calvary, built in the 19th century to glorify the virtues of temperance. On his way home from a boozy evening in Saint-André, a merchant nodded off and toppled out of his sleigh at this very spot. Unfortunately for him, the mishap occurred on a freezing-cold January night. He died.



Drawing by Guy Bonnefoy (Calvary by Saint-Germain)

Today, instead of tipsy merchants, the calvary draws dishevelled cyclists who stop to catch their breath or have a snack.

Emil Cioran, author of the highly amusing *The Trouble with Being Born*, had no problem with drowsiness. He was tortured by insomnia.

Even after long bike trips, sometimes more than 100 kilometres, he often couldn't get to sleep at night. During his outings, he liked to lie down in a cemetery, smoke cigarette after cigarette, and let his thoughts swirl up like smoke, as ephemeral as life. Cioran spent months and months pedalling across France, Spain and Switzerland. Later on, in a rare moment of nostalgia, he looked back on those days as the most active time of his life.

What's the link between the merchant and Cioran? One of them shouldn't have dozed off, and the other only wished he could. If Cioran had passed by Saint-Germain, the sight of the calvary would no doubt have inspired him or conjured up a sentence from his writings: "What is that one crucifixion compared with the daily kind any insomniac endures?"

Tour du Courage

I've never been in a real bike race. The only thing that comes close is the Tour du Courage, in which I took part in 2010 and 2011. Sponsored by a prostate cancer awareness organization called PROCURE, it's a threefold event, with a four-kilometre prologue and a 55-kilometre race on Saturday in the Laurentians, followed the next day by a 30-odd-kilometre time trial on Montréal's Gilles Villeneuve racetrack.

The first time, I got there the day before and took the opportunity to check out the prologue terrain. It didn't look easy, and seemed even less so the next morning when I saw the other participants on their super bikes, with their super calves. I pedalled at my own pace and finished three minutes behind the leader. I almost had to skip the road race, thanks to a flat tire a few minutes before the start. It took two inner tubes, one of them borrowed from my "teammate" Gilles (we were the only racers who weren't part of an official team). At the end of the day, I didn't do too badly, especially since I couldn't count on a team to tow me or encourage me. From time to time I passed another rider, but the pack was already far ahead of me and I wasn't too concerned. About three-quarters of the way through the race it started to rain. In no time at all, we were in the midst of a downpour. I've never been very brave during descents, and found myself hurtling down a long hill at 50 kilometres an hour under the pounding rain. A motorcycle policeman accompanied me for a long time. Without him, I would have felt really alone; I could hardly see.

I ended the race safe and sound and was the substitute winner of a magnificent Cannondale bike: the initial winner turned down the prize, as he already had his stable of bicycles. The next day, on the Gilles Villeneuve racetrack, was a relative walkover. I wore my fine Italian jersey from Cicli Bizzarri, a bike shop in Lucca, and was proud to finish the event.

The following year I had help. Yannig and I created a team called *Les Cabourons*, along with some other individual participants, including Richard, a prostate cancer survivor, and Louis, a hemophiliac. I wasn't in great shape,

even though I did outdo my previous year's time. Above all, I wasn't focused on the competition. I was left behind at the end of the road race and suffered a lot during the final climb. The crowd's cheers of encouragement felt almost like verbal abuse. When I crossed the finish line, I gulped down a chocolate milk, grumbling all the while. On Sunday, I was relieved that the time trial ended without an accident: we were racing along in a pack at 37 or 38 kilometres an hour, sometimes just shy of a disaster. Proof that despite everything we still didn't take ourselves too seriously: we did a lap too many. But the experience convinced me that I wasn't made for the peloton. One or two buddies is enough. I'm not gregarious by nature.

What counts the most is that I raised a total of \$3,500 those two years for prostate cancer research. A number of men around me have struggled with the disease, and I found that the cause was totally worthy. People sometimes grouch about the overabundance of fundraisers with numbered race bibs, ribbons and t-shirts. While I have to admit that the "cheerleader" aspect of these events can be irritating, hearing people complain about them is even more grating. After all, what harm do they do — other than annoying a few couch potatoes and jealous types?

In 2013, I also participated in the Défi André-Côté, a fundraiser for palliative care in the Kamouraska region. I covered the 130-kilometre itinerary, along familiar roads, at an average speed of 28 kilometres an hour. We rode single-file, in groups of 10, and my group finished first with a fantastic 40-kilometre-an-hour sprint, just for fun. It was a great experience, much easier and less competitive than the Tour du Courage. I probably would have signed up again if it weren't for my health.

Now, the Tour du Courage is every day

Profiles

Nathalie

She doesn't like to pedal against the wind, but she got used to it. She's also not particularly fond of hills, but she's done some very hard climbs (leading up to Lac Trois-Saumons — shame on me, I never should have taken her there, Camillien Houde Way a number of times, Côte de l'Aéroport at Notre-Dame-du-Portage, Route de la Station by Saint-André, Jay Peak, Lewis Pass in New Zealand, and the list goes on). But nothing infuriates her more than the wind, especially between Kamouraska and Saint-Denis. An implacable wind that makes her blood boil.

For a long time and during different periods, back pain stopped her from riding with me. She was always there to drive me home, take me somewhere, meet me somewhere (Charlevoix, Tadoussac to Sainte-Rose-du-Nord, Gran Sasso and Castelluccio, Italy, etc.), get me out of a mess following a flat tire or a breakdown, take pictures of me and encourage me. To wait for me for breakfast, lunch, dinner, to share an aperitif. How many times did I leave a note on the kitchen counter telling her when I'd be back (and selfishly hope a coffee would be waiting for me as soon as I got home)? How many times did she watch me ride off, eager and energized, while she stayed behind with her back aching and a heavy heart? I remember one summer morning in particular, when despite her pain, she drove to meet me in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli. She never tried to dissuade me from pursuing my projects, my ambitions, my cyclist's zeal. Maybe she knew there was no point; nonetheless, if she disagreed, she could have chosen to show it by blaming me or being bitter, but she didn't. And today, she still encourages me in my sometimes painful attempts to climb back on my bike and, for the past few days, in my cyclist's resurrection.

I think she really loved exploring the Bas-du-Fleuve (Route 132, obviously, but also the country roads between Saint-André, Saint-Germain and Kamouraska, and between Saint-Eugène, Saint-Aubert and Sainte-Louise), the Eastern Townships (Iron Hill, Tibbits Hill, Fulford, Waterloo, Warden, Bondville, Sutton, the Missisquoi Valley, the Estriade bike route, Saxby Trail, Mount Pinacle, Mount Echo), the Laurentians a bit less (Saint-Donat to Lac Supérieur), the Po Valley in Italy. And then there was her desperate attempt to outrun a crazy dog near Hemmingford, not to mention my sudden disappearances at strategic intersections.

I was often impressed by her perseverance and determination, especially in New Zealand. She's never been someone who throws in the towel. And seeing that biking is an allegory of life, that says a lot.

Jean-Yves

We met Jean-Yves Léo during a week of snowshoeing in Queyras in 2004. We were signed up for a group with a guide, a new experience for me, and I was sceptical. A bit of joking broke the ice and, on the evening we got there, we met Jean-Yves. Along with Guy and Monique, from the Auvergne region, he soon became a great friend.

During the week, whenever our gaze lingered on the snowy peak of Mount Izoard, we said that one day we'd tackle the mountain on our bikes. Eight years later, there we were.

We saw Jean-Yves again in 2011 in Auvergne, at Guy and Monique's, and we all went hiking together in Lozère and the Tarn River canyon. Later the same year, Jean-Yves came to see us in Québec, and we went on our first bike outings in the Bas-du-Fleuve, Charlevoix, the Eastern Townships and Montréal. I came up with an exciting and challenging program to start with: from Cap-à-l'Aigle to Petite-Rivière-Saint-François, with an extremely steep climb three kilometres after Pointe-au-Pic, another climb at Les Éboulements and a six-kilometre ascent after Baie-Saint-Paul. It started raining. Instead of waiting for me at the Petite-Rivière crossroads, Jean-Yves zipped down a long slope and I had to go down and get him so we could climb back up together. After that, our hands and bodies were numb with cold as we headed down another hill towards the town. Shivering, I opened a beer, which turned out to be an undrinkable cooler. Some mistakes are unforgiveable.

We crossed the St. Lawrence by car, picked up our bikes again at L'Islet and headed home to Saint-Denis, passing through Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, Saint-Roch and La Pocatière. Jean-Yves met his first Nordet (northeast wind). A few days later, we climbed Joy Hill, near Frelighsburg, and then Mount Pleasant Avenue and Camillien Houde Way in Montréal — a taste of what was to come in the fall of 2012 in the southern Alps, Mont Ventoux and Italy ([see Up We Go](#)).

We planned to climb Mont Ventoux again together some day, but cancer decided otherwise. Jean-Yves was deeply moved by my illness and was always very present. In the meantime, he moved to Provence, abandoning the northern mist, and now lives at the foot of the Luberon. He decided to climb Mont Ventoux via all three sides of the mountain on the same day, and to call the exploit the "Roch TRI". On September 8, 2015, two days after his expedition, he sent me an e-mail that started with "WE'VE done it."

In figures, that means 131 kilometres, 4,730 metres of ascension, an average speed of 14.7 kilometres an hour, eight hours and 50 minutes of pedalling, 7,890 calories burned — and two beers.

Given the type of guy he is, he never considered giving up, and on top of that he set himself a challenge, a moral and friendship commitment, that was stronger than anything. When he got to the top the third time, he broke down and cried, overcome by emotion, fatigue and joy, just like when we climbed Mount Izoard three years earlier.

Did I tell him? For me, what he did that day will always be something great, a huge achievement, an example of what people can do when they set their mind to it.

When we saw each other again in June 2016, our pent-up emotions overflowed. In a way, we'd come full circle. Four years earlier, we'd met each other in the parking lot at the airport in Lyon before setting out for the southern Alps. This time, there we were again, two grown men blubbering like babies. We still had hope.

Carlo

Goldsmith since 1961, cyclist since Day 1.

Carlo is an artist. He works with all sorts of materials (gold, silver, pewter, bronze). I met him through Nathalie, who spotted a bust of cyclist and fallen hero Marco Pantani in his studio in 2010. An ardent defender of Pantani and determined cyclist himself, Carlo didn't need to be coaxed to chat about biking with Nathalie, and later on with me during my first stay in Arezzo, when he invited me to go riding with him. Amidst his creations, I noted a bust of Giordano Bruno, man of letters and science condemned for heresy and burned at the stake in the 16th century. For his moulds, Carlo uses plastiline, a ready-to-use precision modelling dough that is 100 percent reusable and, unlike clay, doesn't dry.

During subsequent stays, Carlo and I often arranged to meet in the early morning hours on Piazza Sant'Agostino, where he and his son, Matteo, have their workshop. Carlo introduced me to a number of small roads around Arezzo and, at the same time, gave me art history lessons. Above all, he talked about our shared passion. We often stopped to visit a site (a schoolyard in Quaratra) or a church (Montemigniao after a stage of the Giro d'Italia, Santa Maria del Sasso on our way back from La Verna) featuring a work of art by him or one of his students. We also stopped at Ponte alla Piera, a tiny village about 20 kilometres from Arezzo, where he spoke about Ivo Andrić's novel *The Bridge on the Drina*.

Inquisitive, knowledgeable and cultured, Carlo is a perfect example of what I call "the intelligence of life", the type of intelligence that drives people to stand up to scoundrels, to the terrorists, Trumps and Berlusconis of this world, an intelligence that is the opposite of ignorance, injustice and greed. Carlo was a magnificent biking partner, but he's also a sincere friend, with whom I share values, a vision and a love of life. I can still see him welcoming me to his workshop or meeting me on Piazza Sant'Agostino, with an ironic smile and an incredibly candid look in his eyes.

I associate Carlo a lot with La Verna, a place of calm, silence and spirituality. We rode there together once. As always, when the road started to climb, he told me to go ahead and we'd meet at the top. He climbed at his own pace, surprising for a man of 73, and never seemed to reach his limit. No unnecessary efforts or movements. But a heart as big as Tuscany. In 2016, we went back to La Verna as a "delegation" (with Nathalie, Carlo's wife Rosita, Sylvie and Fabien), and had lunch together in the *foresteria* (guesthouse) at the sanctuary, a place we loved so much.

I left my "European" bike with Carlo. He set aside a prime spot for it in his *cantina* and draped it with a cover woven by his mother. It's sort of a shrine. On the phone, he often tells me that he talks to my bike, to console it for my absence. Almost always, after our conversations, I feel a wave of nostalgia. *Mi manca l'Italia. Mi manca Carlo.*



Watercolour by François Lespérance (Ponte alla Piera)

Suffering and resilience

According to me, there are three types of suffering. The kind you inflict on other people, the kind you inflict on yourself and the kind that is inflicted on you (often by sickness). The first type has to be the worst: it includes wickedness, unfairness, exploitation, cruelty, torture, violence, etc. The second type is completely different, and to a certain extent corresponds to my own experience. Unless you're a masochist or a fetishist, you normally impose this type of suffering on yourself by overexerting your body. Mountain climbing, all types of sports, adventure seeking, humanitarian causes. It's become a sort of cult, especially in the Western world: the adventurer or sportsman who pushes his limits, who gorges himself on endorphins to feel more alive in a society where people don't have to worry about where their next meal is coming from. In other societies, things are different. When each day is a struggle for survival, you don't have time to mull over self-transcendence.

I like to push my limits when I'm on a bike, and I felt incredibly alive on the Col d'Izoard, on Mont Ventoux and in lots of other places. I certainly suffered at times, but I couldn't really complain, as "I asked for it."

This self-imposed suffering may have helped me get through the past year and, even now, helps me understand the suffering inflicted on me by disease. It may also have helped me discover the scope of my resources and realize that the human spirit is unfathomable. The body has an extraordinary ability to recover and regenerate. Toughen up, I told myself. Maybe I succeeded, seeing that generally speaking, I didn't let the pain caused by cancer get the better of me. I think I managed in a way to reforge my identity in the face of adversity, while remaining whole. I was often haunted by the image of a long, high mountain pass to climb.

But there's one big difference: after moments of discouragement and even revulsion during especially hard bike rides, I was always ready to get back on the saddle. After a cancer episode, no thanks! I never thought the pass could be so high.

"You rise to an ordeal with what you have at the time. Later, when you think back, you try to understand what happened, so that you can stop being confused and control the way you remember the event. You incorporate the tragic event into your own story, to give it meaning and set out on a new path in life. It's only then that you can talk about resilience."³

In other words, resilience isn't an instantaneous process that we fall back on when we need to, a sort of survival instinct. It comes after the fall, after the storm. To paraphrase Cyrulnik, I'd say that resilience occurs after the traumatic event.

Being diagnosed with cancer wasn't a traumatic event. But finding out that my PSA level was 27 two months after I underwent a prostatectomy, and suffering to the point that I found myself whimpering like a wounded animal after a palliative radiotherapy session — those were traumatic events. And that's when I had to show resilience.

Exercising hard before or after a decisive medical appointment or a chemotherapy or radiotherapy session isn't resilience. It's fighting spirit. Cycling can thus be seen as an allegory for combativeness and resilience: Don't give up, despite the discomfort and pain, don't dismount (literally or figuratively), ask for more, always be ready to start again, brave the elements. It goes without saying that, barring an accident, cycling isn't usually associated with the tragic side of life. We require this effort of ourselves; it's not imposed on us by any outside force. But I repeat that for me, cycling has been and remains a school for standing up to cancer. I had and still have endurance to spare.

³ Boris Cyrulnik, *Sauve-toi, la vie t'appelle*.

I also saw Nathalie suffer a lot and admired her resilience. In a way, she was living a traumatic event on a daily basis. Her pain came back constantly during the day, in the evening, at night, after she sat down or lay down. For a year, she had to work standing up. A real ordeal. People who are in pain are trapped in their bodies. The outside world becomes inaccessible, forbidden. Days go by, with little hope. And I realize that with time, mental illness develops the same way, perhaps even more acutely. And I understand that sometimes we can feel like we're on the brink of the abyss.



Pastel by Denis Bourque (The longest climb)

Diary, or The longest climb

The relationship between cancer and cycling has been tense, to say the least. While cancer now seems to have gotten the upper hand, I gave it a serious run for its money during the summer and fall of 2015, and managed to thwart its plans in the summer of 2016. It's not over.

A few dates:

2015

» June 4:

First bike ride (10 kilometres) since my operation on April 14.

» June 20:

A more ambitious outing: Lachine Canal, downtown, Olmsted, a bit of Westmount and home again via Lansdowne and De Courcelles. My first real climbs. My knee wasn't too happy and I was a bit winded, but I still felt fine.

» June 26:

I'm getting used to my new bike (Opus Allegro 3). I think we're going to get along well. I've chalked up 300 kilometres since I started again. It's a great source of encouragement.

» July 2:

Despite everything, seated on my bike, I'm in fairly good shape: I've still got fuel in the tank. I may have more pain, more discomfort, but I find that for someone who had surgery less than three months ago, I've still got something in reserve. And I don't have the impression that I'm hurting my body to feed my passion.

» July 4:

First climb up Camillien Houde Way, in calm and silence, and also in pain. Everything hurts: knee, legs, ischium (?) — but I’m obviously pleased to have done it.

It’s only early July. I just hope the pain won’t set me back.

» July 7:

After Dr. Saad told me that my PSA level was 27 I (nonetheless) set out very early this morning for a ride. Tears, sweat, drool and snot. I pedalled furiously. I wanted to scream. All for the best: cycling always makes me feel better. I managed to work today, to see the beauty of life, to find the energy to pedal as hard as I could, and I’ll find it again tomorrow.

» July 12:

Camillien Houde. Always hard, but a bit less so today. Great outing: Lachine Canal, Old Port, Berri, Avenue des Pins, Camillien Houde, Summit Circle and back again via Lansdowne. Sunday morning, between 6:00 and 7:30 a.m.

Why do I always feel better after biking? Do I have to keep on pedalling to the bitter end (joke)? What happens if (I want to stress the *if*) I can’t ride anymore? It’s amazing how vital it’s become for me. While I was slowly working my way up Camillien Houde, Jean-Yves climbed Mont Ventoux twice, once via Bédoin and the second time via Sault. The rogue pedalled uphill for over five hours, to be with me in a way. I have to say that as proof of friendship, that’s hard to beat. At the same time, I know I would have done the same thing for him.

» July 17:

Camillien Houde, third time this week. Afterward, I felt deeply satisfied for a few hours. Being able to move also gives me great strength and confidence, which wilt away when the pain comes back.

» July 21:

Camillien Houde, fifth time this week. A bit tired today, not enough sleep.

» July 28:

Almost no pain and 38 kilometres of biking, via Saint-Gabriel. Days like this, I feel confident, almost indestructible. I have the impression that nothing can stop me.

» August 1:

Longest ride this year: 55 kilometres (Saint-Pacôme, Saint-Gabriel, Saint-Onésime, La Pocatière), with Yannig and Claude, who seem to have enjoyed it. I’m in shape and it’s surprising; it seems that I should be dragging my feet seeing that I’m “sick”, that I sleep little and poorly. How long can you live off your reserves, or am I imagining it? It’s as if my body has forgotten the operation. And even my mind forgets a bit. If asked to describe what I feel these days, I’d say that disbelief and incomprehension are probably the main words that come to mind.

» August 8:

So the cancer has metastasized to my bones. Some people may think I’ve reacted casually, but if they knew everything that’s swirling in my head, they’d think otherwise. I was reassured by the doctor, and feel ready to follow his advice blindly. One of the areas affected is the right ischium. Strangely enough, there was an acute flare-up there last night. It’s as if I can now allow myself to hurt, knowing that my bike isn’t the culprit.

» August 11:

Short jaunt to Saint-Germain yesterday, 45 kilometres without too much toil. Encouraging, as I’d felt myself getting a bit worse for the past few days.

» August 14:

Ischium pain or not, I've pedalled 110 kilometres the past three days. I'm still determined and in shape, even though it was harder this morning.

» August 19:

Yesterday, trip home from Saint-André with the wind in my back. I must be getting close to 1,500 kilometres this year. Not bad.

» August 23:

Today I'm feeling better. My ischium has left me alone since yesterday evening; I slept better and yesterday's discouragement has lifted. This morning's 35 kilometres are certainly part of it; Camillien Houde (twice yesterday), a very diverse itinerary, and strong legs didn't hurt.

» August 28:

I went out for a ride to see how things are going, and I saw — that they aren't. I was in more pain afterward and the rest of the day.

» September 2:

I don't really know how, but I pedalled 27 kilometres yesterday, albeit sometimes gritting my teeth.

» September 13:

Yesterday, almost 25 kilometres, like an obstacle course because of roadwork, but I pedalled well. Muscle pain in the afternoon and evening, and during the night as well. It looks like the chemotherapy is having its effect.

» September 15:

Yesterday's 25 kilometres — wonderful, other than the bugs I swallowed — did me good at first. Afterward, maybe not. Stomach ache, cramps, ischium pain, headache and hourly trips to the bathroom. It wasn't the most restful night, but maybe it didn't have much to do with biking, which I'm convinced does me a lot more good than bad. So I'm not going to put my bike away for the winter any time soon. I still have about a month and a half to reach 2,000 kilometres this year, and I don't want to miss my target.

» September 20:

Another 25 kilometres, this time with my Opus, which is itching to reach 1,000 kilometres and equal or better my bike in Montréal. I told it, "Don't worry, we'll make it. I don't know how, but we will."

» September 24:

35 kilometres yesterday with Benoît (who came to meet me by the bay at Saint-Denis). Not bad for two "invalids".

» September 26:

Strange. Life goes on as usual, but at a slower pace. I'm less afraid that I won't be able to cycle any more. I'll soon be at 2,000 kilometres for the year. It's both futile and really important; it's laughable and crucial: 2,000 kilometres is almost Florence to Moscow; it's more than Lima to Bogota; more than London to Granada or New York to Chicago; and almost Beijing to Tokyo and Montréal to Kuujuaq. On your bike, you move and at the same time travel in your head. It's still my favourite therapy.

» October 1:

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2! My PSA is back down to 2. Let's hope there's no yo-yoing.

A few observations: Saad too is a machine (in the same way as Jean-Yves), a machine that works marvellously well and says what he means. Next! (but politely).

Sylvie Ménard, my coordinating nurse, is indeed the angel that I thought.

According to Dr. Saad there's a 40 percent greater chance of survival after five years thanks to the combination of chemo and hormonal therapy. It's worth it!

I now know that this diary is going to become a "book" — that I'll give to the people I care about. That's my post-cancer project, along with getting back in shape.

Humans are strange creatures. The first good news about my cancer in a long time, and I'm shattered. When I got home I burst into tears, under the emotion, mental fatigue and physical pain, which has never been worse. I hurt and I'm haunted by the idea of a fracture. At times, I think I could snap a bone just like that, without doing anything. It's irrational, I know.

» **October 3:**

20-kilometre ride (I'm a bit proud to tell myself that not many patients who have chemotherapy in the morning go cycling in the afternoon), followed by a tasty risotto.

» **October 5:**

30 kilometres; I must have reached 2,000, but why stop now when I'm on a roll? I'm going to keep on, especially since the weather is great.

» **October 11:**

Yesterday, on my bike, I had a few words with my degenerate cells. It wasn't a dialogue — more of a monologue, which went something like this: "You want to make trouble? I'll show you what trouble means. I'm going to stick it to you."

» **October 19:**

I've been biking less and less (admittedly, it's 5 below this morning), doing less and less exercise of any sort.

» **October 30:**

I've just come back from my latest palliative radiotherapy session. I treat myself to a good cry. The week was hard, maybe the hardest since the start of this story. My defences were down. I stumbled with surprise from one pain to another, from one discomfort to another. For more than seven months I've been in discomfort and pain, racked with doubt and fear. I've always picked myself back up. I've always recovered. Today, I even went biking. But I've seldom or never been tested as much as this week.

» **November 11:**

Yesterday, a fairly good day. Pain reasonably under control, hormonal therapy injection by a very kind, understanding nurse, biking (the weather was so great), but I barely missed colliding with a schmuck who was texting while pedalling.

» **November 22:**

Another impression of a turning point, especially since my "last" solo bike ride yesterday was very encouraging. I was in shape. I could have gone farther. I realized just how much chemotherapy can tire me out, because yesterday I felt much better than last Sunday. Apparently, the fatigue that follows chemotherapy for the first few days fades away.

» **December 6:**

I biked to Île Notre-Dame. I'm riding back today, to get some air. Always a must.

» **December 28:**

I declare the biking season officially over. A short, 20-kilometre ride. Three degrees, but sunny, for a grand finale. Thank you, Lachine Canal, for all the kilometres with no injuries. All told, I chalked up close to 2,300 kilometres during this rather special year. A lot more than I hoped, given the circumstances.

2016

I'll remember that it was on February 7 that I found out I could no longer pedal (on an exercise bike).

» February 18:

I've made a pact with the devil that seems pretty legitimate to me: five years with no cycling, three years with cycling.

» February 23:

I'm starting to get used to the idea that there may not be much more cycling.

» February 26:

Ice and other hazards: I used to rush down slopes on my bike at 50 kilometres an hour, and now I'm afraid to walk to the corner of the street.

» February 29:

Sometimes I no longer wonder whether I'll be able to bike again, and think instead about when I'll have to start using a wheelchair.

» May 5:

I managed to pedal a bit — in the garage! — but the pain was soon unbearable. The feeling of being freed from cycling that I felt a while ago comes back from time to time. It won't be biking at all cost, and maybe I should focus on what I can do: walk. Bikes may stop being part of my life. I'm talking about the physical machine, not cycling, about which I'm still just as passionate.

» May 12:

Yesterday, another failed attempt at biking; my groin says no.

» May 14:

I strongly suspect I won't be climbing the Rassinata or Scopetone again, or pedalling up any of the other hills I've tackled so many times. I've changed labels. From cyclist to sick man. It's terrible and even cruel, but my passion hasn't faded. And no one can take away what I've already done.

» May 17:

I managed to swing my leg over the bike frame without too much trouble.

» May 29:

At least I can still draw on thousands of memories, unforgettable moments, as well as the lesson I learned through cycling, one of the most important schools of life for me: don't dismount.

» May 30:

I keep dreaming about cycling, over and over. I can't say I miss it; it's still too much a part of me. I pedal now in my head, because I don't want to forget.

» June 3:

After a few false starts, I rode all the way to Robert's (at the end of Chemin de la Grève). That's the most I've been able to do since December.

» June 5:

Now, in the morning, instead of going biking, I go back to sleep. A bit of a drag, but restful.

» June 20:

Saw *La dernière échappée*, about Laurent Fignon's last Tour de France. He didn't give up, but he couldn't change the way it ended. When the movie was over, I told myself that he was lucky after all, because now he's found peace. No more treatments, bad news, endless examinations and appointments, physical and mental pain. Peace, damn it. Living in expectation of the worst is very hard.

» July 3:

I'm waiting for news about Zytiga, but I'm surprised to find myself thinking about being back on my bike, at Saint-Denis. After all, it's only July.

» July 7:

The day after the fateful date of July 6: death of Mona's cousin Jocelyn about 30 years ago, Hélène Dussault's death in 2002, the Lac-Mégantic tragedy three years ago and Dr. Saad's announcement of very bad PSA results last year. This time, Highway 20 was closed because of an accident, which meant the trip to Saint-Denis took almost seven hours. Who cares. I managed to forget the pain and drive for almost three hours, work for an hour outside and pedal four kilometres SEATED ON MY BIKE.

» July 11:

Five kilometres with Nathalie. Thirty kilometres an hour with the wind in my back. Am I dreaming?

» July 13:

Yesterday, six and a half kilometres. I can still pedal, but it hurt.

» July 18:

Eleven kilometres along the Lachine Canal on my old Cannondale. It was really happy.

» August 2:

I wonder whether it's a good idea to keep on trying to ride my bike. I sometimes have the impression that I'm rekindling certain pains (especially in the groin and on the right side). Sixteen kilometres today. To the dock at Rivière-Ouelle. No, I didn't climb the 14 percent hill! I've ridden over 100 kilometres since my resurrection as a cyclist and I still don't know whether it's a good or bad idea to keep it up. But is it really so important to decide right now?

» August 8:

The answer is no. Triathlon today: 16.5 kilometres by bike, 7 kilometres of walking with Lyne and Denis and a bit of splashing around in the pool on the roof. I dream of hiking holidays. In the meantime, I'm doing something. I have to. I'm convinced.

» August 11:

Twenty kilometres along Les Berges, the bike path by the St. Lawrence, with Nathalie. A beautiful morning. Almost a miracle.

» August 12:

Dr. Saad seemed pleased to see me today — in shape. My condition and what it conveys are the best sign for him of an improvement. My PSA hasn't gone down much, but the trend has been reversed. I'll never completely beat cancer, but I can win some battles — moral victories that, given the circumstances, are huge. My question is no longer how long, but how I'm going to live. There's a feeling of lightness again, of refocusing on other people and the future.

» August 25:

I've discovered a mathematical law: My PSA level seems to be inversely related to the number of kilometres of cycling. Hence: PSA of 24 on July 14, 11 kilometres of cycling two days later, then PSA of 14.9 on August 24, 23 kilometres of cycling the same day. Conclusion: I'm going to keep up the fight.

» September 15:

In the morning, when I lay out my first 13 pills of the day, I always get a shock. Four Zytigas, followed an hour later by two Tylenols and a Statex (morphine). Then, for breakfast, Naproxen, Pantoprazole, Prednisone, calcium, curcumin and magnesium (the last two are complements and don't really count). Another number: 25 kilometres yesterday. I didn't suffer too much, but there's no denying that I'm no powerhouse and am shorter of breath.

» September 25:

Despite the wind (but in the Bas-du-Fleuve it's a bit like saying despite the day, air or water), I did 23 kilometres. I thus outpedalled my PSA (20). I'm somewhat resigned about my health. Or maybe I should talk about a certain realism, as I haven't given up the fight. I haven't given up, period.

» September 30:

Something that seemed completely impossible happened yesterday. A 30-kilometre ride from Saint-André to Saint-Denis. With the wind in my back, it's true, and with Benoît. Pride? Determination? I wrapped up September with 248 kilometres. Too bad the cold weather's on its way. We'll have to go someplace where it's a bit warmer. A few months of rest and then we'll go to Italy.

» October 15:

How to you end a diary? Perhaps it's easier, given my precarious health. Maybe, or maybe not.

Yesterday afternoon I rode to Lac Saint-Louis. The weather was extraordinary. Flocks of geese flew by overhead. I was happy. In a way, a moment of perfection. I remembered a sentence by Luis Sepulveda: "We come from where we feel the best." Now I'm from everywhere and from right now. I wanted to climb Camillien Houde, one last time maybe. It's no longer a must. Maybe I've done enough, and I'm short of breath. I think it's time to rest.

» November 2:

Twenty-eight kilometres this lovely fall afternoon. I've stopped saying "one last time". The only time that counts is now.

Philosophy 2

*Lo spazio, la libertà, i profumi, l'aria nei capelli e soprattutto pensare*⁴:
Space, freedom, smells, the wind in your hair and, above all, a chance
to think. Cycling is often all that.

There are a number of explanations for the well-being I feel on my bike: I love the movement, the surges of energy, the switchbacks, the simple sensation of riding. What I love less are the bumps and holes in streets and roads, especially since I had my prostate removed.

Cycling can be hard, even brutal, but there's nothing better than a humming derailleur, sharp curves, the wind in your helmet (but not too much), the sounds and smells of nature as you ride through it, and landscapes that inch past during climbs and whoosh by too fast during descents. Glued to the asphalt and flying over it. That's the paradox of cycling.

Slicing through the wind with your legs churning, at 25 kilometres an hour, or at 10 or 60; your breathing adjusts; you get too hot or the cold starts to bite; your thoughts grind to a halt, escape you and start up again in an endless loop; you feel like you're in your element, in yourself, in the world. There's nothing like biking to feel alive. I've never regretted an outing, even in pain, dampness, fog, heat or cold. It took cancer to slow me down, to set limits, and even then, if it weren't for the precautionary principle, I know I could have done more.

⁴ Walter Bernardi, *La filosofia va in bicicletta*.

As Montaigne wrote, to philosophize is to learn to die. On a bike, you die and resuscitate a lot. You crumple and triumph. You cry and laugh. You don't always philosophize — you also mull over your everyday worries and think about the taxes you need to pay, the litre of milk you have to pick up at the store, what you're going to eat when you get home (especially in Italy!). But sometimes, when you're riding alone, your thoughts lead to flashes of lucidity.

Was Laurent Fignon writing about one of these flashes when, at death's door, he wrote that he'd lived the most beautiful life imaginable?

The essence of cycling is being on the road, in nature (even in traffic), endlessly repeating the same movement, both painful and liberating. It's feeling alive, very alive, extraordinarily alive, especially when you've just finished a long climb that leaves you both elated and dazed. Of course, you can always watch a race in your living room, slumped on your sofa. It's a pleasure I too indulge in. But even though you can't simply decide you're a pro athlete, you can trade your plump cushion for a slender bike saddle for a few moments and imagine yourself winning a mountain stage.

On my bike, I certainly released a lot of endorphins (athletes' pleasure and anti-stress hormone) and testosterone (which my body still produces, despite hormonal therapy; I wish it would settle down). But more often than not, I listened to my head, which told me to keep on going even though my body was pleading with me to stop.

Biking and life

There are so many times in my life when a bike has been incidentally present.

I remember riding back from Kamouraska one fine June night, along with Georges. We weren't yet 20. After spending the evening at the Château, a local hot spot, where we drank, danced and probably flirted with the girls, we stopped on the way home near Saint-André to watch the sun come up. Blended smells of the river and evergreen trees, chirps of the Eastern wood-peewee. Then we headed for our respective homes, undeniably happy.

A bike is also associated with the time that I worked in the grape harvest at Marsannay-la-Côte, in Burgundy. I was staying with friends of my cousin Jacques, and they'd lent me a bike for the week. One Sunday, I set out to explore the Côte-d'Or *département*. Château du Clos de Vougeot, Fixin, Gevrey-Chambertin, Nuits-Saint-Georges and Beaune — all of these names make wine-lovers' taste buds tingle, but they meant nothing to me at the time, as I was a wine ignoramus. I stopped at Clos de Vougeot in the morning for a tasting, and I'm ashamed to say that I have a sharper memory of the hors d'oeuvres than the wine I was served. A 70-kilometre ride. It would probably take me days and days today, because I'd stop everywhere for a sip of red.

Speaking of a sip of red, the grape harvest wound up with a big evening celebration hosted by the wine-grower family. We ate incredibly well, no doubt drank great vintages (without me realizing it) and danced well into the night. I biked home with a grape-picker called Martine, whom I'd sort of had my eyes on. We bid each other adieu with a chaste kiss and never saw each other again. Soon after, I left for Granada, Spain, for further "adventures".

I also recall a ride along the St. Lawrence Seaway with my Little Brother. The capital letters are important, because I was his Big Brother (member of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Montréal). I don't have any precise memories of the outing, but I do painfully remember what happened to Alex about a year after we were paired together: his mother was murdered by her jealous spouse, right in front of Alex. I heard about it from Michel, the man in charge of our mentorship. It made the front page of the *Journal de Montréal* the next morning.

I saw Alex again twice after the murder, before and during the funeral. I don't know what's become of him. His father lived in Bolivia, and maybe he went to stay with him. I've never understood why life dealt him such a horrible blow. I've never understood and never will understand why life can be so cruel.

Italy 1

My first bike outings in Italy (in 2009 in Lucca, on a Wilier racing bike that I was afraid of damaging and was my initiation to all-carbon double-crank technology) were laborious. I was a bit stunned by the dense vehicle traffic, but nevertheless enjoyed a few notable climbs and a few rounds of the Lucca city walls.

Shoulders are an unknown concept in Italy. You have to clench your bum when you bike on the busy roads. It's not so bad when the cars are behind you; at least you don't see them coming. It's less OK when oncoming cars pass each other. Luckily, there are a lot of small roads — so many that you can get lost. They are quieter and generally steeper. In Italy, like in France (in the regions I've explored by bike — Brittany, Provence and Auvergne), the countryside changes quickly, and exploring it at bike speed lets you appreciate the diversity. Happiness. Over time, I built up enough confidence to feel very much at ease, like the swarms of cyclists in colourful jerseys who invade the roads on Sunday mornings.

In Tuscany and Umbria, drivers don't overuse their horns (I'm told that things are completely different in the south), but they drive fast. During one of my first outings, at Castiglione Fibocchi, close to Arezzo, a local cyclist rode with me for a while. While pedalling on my left, solidly planted in the lane, he recited the conjugations of the verb *andare*, the most important in the Italian language according to him. There was a lot of traffic, but the drivers passed us without losing their cool.

Not all of the roads are well maintained. They're often very rough, and you can feel like all your pedalling is getting you nowhere. Some of them have potholes, which are nonetheless tiny compared with Montréal's. But it's still better to avoid them. You can ride for kilometres and kilometres without seeing a house or car. The countryside is so wild, you have to pinch yourself to realize you're in Tuscany.

I often told myself that maybe I was born to cycle in Italy. Despite the heat, crazy drivers, lack of shoulders, traffic circles that you have to get through along with dozens of vehicles, cars that appear from nowhere and nose into the traffic, holes, bumps and endless climbs, I couldn't get enough. I can think of very few experiences that are more enjoyable than riding along a narrow Italian country road early in the morning, surrounded by heady, sometimes overwhelming fragrances (like the scent given off by the shrub called broom).

Olmo

2011

After an initial contact by e-mail and, especially, Nathalie's crucial help with the language, I rented a bike at Vagheggi, a friendly shop in Arezzo. When we got back to our apartment I felt a bit like an eager young groom bounding up the steps of his new home with his bride in his arms. I'd never heard of the Olmo make and was unfamiliar with the surrounding roads, but I found my way around fairly quickly, often covering the same path in both directions.

Little by little, I got to know Olmo (giving your bike a name is a good way to break it in) and the region. It was February. I saw tree buds swell and little flowers start to poke upward. The vines were getting green. The air smelled of pine trees and rich soil. And burning olive tree branches. I did my first



Drawing by Guy Bonnefoy (La Foce)

climbs (Valico della Scheggia, Scopetone, Foce). The ascents impressed me and hurt at the same time, as I wasn't quite in shape, and it was cold and damp. I started to build up a bank of images of Tuscany, like postcards.

Scopetone is a hill 15 minutes by bike from central Arezzo. Climbing it takes about 20 minutes, and it soon became my playground. The summit is a busy place, to say the least. Young women (all of them African) offer their services to drivers and even cyclists as they pass by. I dubbed it "Col de la Scoupitoune⁵". More than once, as I neared the top, I was welcomed not by an enthusiastic crowd of fans, but by explicit invitations: "*Vieni*", "*Tsssit-tss-sit-tsssit*" (whence the expression "to get tsssitssited"), "*Fiout-fiout*" (not sure about that one — maybe it was a squirrel). On the other side of the hill, African chants. A client gets out of his car. His prominent belly keeps him from seeing the focus of all this activity. Poor humanity.

When I returned Olmo to the shop for good, both of us were despondent. Together, we had chalked up 1,200 kilometres, three flat tires (two of them probably caused by vengeful bees, which had poked a number of small holes in the rear tire). We'd battled the cold, wind, heat, gravel, with often difficult climbs and descents and heavy traffic. But above all, we'd had a lot of pleasure — pleasure at seeing nature gradually awaken and fill with smells and colours, pleasure at discovering an extraordinary landscape when we rounded a hairpin turn, also pleasure at catching our breath during the turn, pleasure at riding through a remote, silent village, and, I have to admit, pleasure at finally arriving at the top of a climb and heading back home after a long ride, knowing that an excellent *piadina*⁶, a beer or a gelato awaited.

⁵ Translator's note: In Québec French, a *pitoune* is a bimbo (rough translation).

⁶ *Piadina* is speciality of Romagna. It is a flatbread made of wheat flour, lard or olive oil, salt and water, cooked traditionally on a terracotta dish or on a metal baking sheet or stone surface. It is served folded over, filled with ingredients like ham, cheese, sausage and a wide variety of vegetables.

Giallo

2012

A Bianchi, an emblematic Italian make. It may have been bright yellow, but it was certainly no lemon. Fairly low hung and stable, it felt a bit like Olmo. I found it in a shop called Biking Team (a very Italian name). A friend of the shop owner rented it to me for a reasonable price. Everyone was happy.

Giallo was so reliable and efficient that I almost forgot it was there, even when I was sitting on it. Its “customer service” was discreet and attentive, and it made me forget its predecessor, much more emotional and surly. In short, a business relationship. It nevertheless showed a hitherto concealed playful side on a few occasions, hiding among the yellow turnip flowers that filled the fields at that time of year.

La Verna and Passo della Consuma

2012

Second trip to this sanctuary, where Saint Francis of Assisi received his stigmata and often withdrew to pray. After a long but voluntary detour via Castiglione Fibocchi and Talla to warm up my legs, it took me about an hour and a quarter to cover the 15 kilometres, with 10 percent gradients, between Rassina (300 metres) and La Verna (1,120 metres). The kilometre markers crept by slowly, oh so slowly, and, supreme torture, there were markers every 100 metres for the last three kilometres. It was Sunday. There were a lot of the people at the top, including a number of monks, one of whom was sipping a small glass of white wine at the refreshment stall.

I went back a third time in 2013, and the next day I added Passo della Consuma (1,050 metres, difference of 680 metres in altitude over a distance of 21 kilometres).

Two splendid days, with great weather and over 160 kilometres cycled. Later, I went back to Passo della Consuma with Carlo to take in a stage of the Giro d’Italia. The weather was supposed to be fine all day, but soon after the cyclists went by, the sky opened up. We rode down in the rain and cold, and spent an hour under a small roof, waiting for the storm to blow over. Carlo phoned Rosita to ask her to come fetch us by car. Conclusion: Amateur cyclists too are sometimes entitled to star treatment. When Rosita got up to us, Carlo braked in the middle of the road. A cyclist who had just passed me at top speed was heading straight for him but, miraculously, managed to brake on the wet pavement. Carlo still blames himself for his blunder. Second conclusion: Amateur cyclists too are entitled to miracles.

Forca di Presta and Castelluccio

2013

The Sibillini Mountains. I atoned for my sins. From Arquata del Tronto to Castelluccio, by way of Montegallo⁷, only 35 kilometres, but 20 of them climbing (total vertical of 1,400 metres). It was gruelling. The road was in poor condition, and all my pedalling seemed to be getting me nowhere (I was giving my 100 percent, 110 percent, any percent you want). But I finally got to the top, and, even though a *col* can sometimes seem inaccessible, once you summit, you dry off as you head back down. And the exertion was worth it, as Castelluccio and the plateau of the same name are one of the most beautiful sites I’ve ever seen.

⁷ On August 24, 2016, the region was struck by an earthquake that caused a number of deaths and terrible material damage in places like Arquata del Tronto (over 50 victims). The centre of Italy, unspeakably beautiful but with a high seismic risk, had trembled once again. Three years after visiting the region, I was shaken.

Seasons

Fall. As the days go by, cyclists are becoming as sparse as the leaves in the trees and, like leaves, are sometimes swept away by gusts of wind.

When you start stealing hours from the darkness,
When you stop wondering which jersey to wear, and wonder which jacket,
When setting out in bike shorts is irresponsible,
When your bike begins to squeal like a piglet about to be slaughtered
each time you brake,
When you already start thinking about next year,
The season or the cyclist is almost at the end.

Winter. The cyclist in me dreams a lot. I churn away on a stationary bike and need more imagination than motivation. Between four walls, I draw inspiration from music to create or re-create inner landscapes. Sometimes I close my eyes, and when I open them again I'm surprised to find the humdrum reality of steel and concrete. The notion of time is totally different.

Spring. After spending months shut up in the basement, vulgarly dangling from the ceiling, my bike is eagerly looking forward to the first outings, and almost bounds like a cow when it steps out of the barn for the first time since the winter. Spring means piles of snow, mud, sand, gravel, detritus of all sorts. New potholes since last fall. And wind, which is nothing new. In Québec, spring is a between-two-seasons season. You can cross-country ski and go biking the same day.

Summer. I prefer spring and fall. Too much traffic: motorcycles, RVs, convertibles. Vehicles that we don't have to see or hear during the off-season. Route 132, for example, becomes a real boulevard. But it only lasts a few weeks.



Pastel by Denis Bourque (Summer)

Competition

What's great about cycling is persistence and continuity, and the pleasure you feel once you get the rhythm. A pleasure that Lance Armstrong and other doped cyclists forfeited when they gave in to the lure of ultra-performance, hyper-competitiveness, easy money and winning at all cost.

Doping has always been present in cycling and probably always will be. The list of products and procedures is long: cocaine, amphetamines, steroids, cortisone, hormones, beta blockers, EPO, autologous blood doping, etc. Up until the 1980s, no cyclist had ever generated more than 400 watts during a long climb. Lance Armstrong boasted that he could churn out 500 watts for 30 minutes. That's superhuman and inexplicable, other than by blood manipulation or some other magic. Today, people talk about mechanical doping or technological fraud, which may explain the incredible bursts of speed by Cancellara a few years ago and, more recently, Froome (who generated 1,000 watts on his way up Mont Ventoux without any significant increase in his heart rate).

Created from a natural hormone released by the kidneys, synthetic EPO stimulates the production of oxygen-carrying red blood cells. But it's a dangerous solution, as it thickens the blood and riders have to keep moving to avoid a stroke. A terrifying image: riders get up at night to exercise because EPO slows down their heartbeat too much.

Personally, I've never eaten much beef (contaminated with clenbuterol — see the Contador affair), drunk excessive amounts of coffee (Italian cyclist Gianni Bugno was caught with a caffeine level that would have awakened the dead), accepted candies from my aunt (they could contain traces of cocaine — see the Simoni affair), taken medications “without the knowledge of my own free will” (see the Festina/Richard Virenque affair) or been manipulated and abused by my coach (see the Geneviève Jeanson affair). Most of the time, I've had to settle for chocolate, energy bars, wine and pâté as my main energy sources. I tried Gatorade, but it did nothing for me. Full confession: I downed a whole bag of Saint-Fidèle cheese curds during my ride through Charlevoix and have enjoyed a soft ice cream cone from time to time. Dairy, but legal.

Pressure

How can you expect them not to dope if you want them to be gods? That's the eternal quandary. Already in 1910, after climbing the Col du Tourmalet, Octave Lapize yelled, “You're murderers!” at the Tour organizers. In 1911, Gustave Garrigou called them bandits. In 1924, champion Francis Péliissier told reporter Albert Londres that pro cyclists run on “dynamite”: cocaine for the eyes, chloroform for the gums, boxfuls of pills, etc. The next day, Londres published his famous article “Les forçats de la route” (“Convicts of the Road”), which is still just as topical.

That year, during the final descent of the Rio Olympics road cycling event, Vincenzo Nibali had a terrible fall a few kilometres from a highly probable victory. He crashed into a low wall and landed in the middle of the road with a broken shoulder blade and wrist. Richie Porte and Sergio Henao also suffered brutal falls. And the next day, as he sped towards a win, Netherlander Annemiek Van Vlueten had a terrifying accident during the same descent. Concussion and a fractured vertebra. Québec competitive cyclist Hugo Houle has this to say: “I'm not super enchanted with the idea of an itinerary where we risk our lives at every turn. There comes a point when you have to set limits. We're not circus animals.”

How did we get to where we are — and not just in cycling? Maybe it's because, as Pierre Foglia writes, “Their little deaths make us forget our own, or the fear of our own.”

Up we go

I was never a remarkable climber, but always like the challenge of a good ascent. I was the type of cyclist who “gets on the bus” and does part of the climb seated, part of it standing on his pedals, slow but steady, with a few spurts of speed to pass a laggard or try to catch up with someone who’s faster. During a climb, a cyclist has to be in his own bubble and pedal at his own pace, or he’ll never make it. A few years ago I came across a book on Europe’s 50 greatest climbs. Unfortunately, I was only able to do four of them. It’s my own fault: I started too late. Anyway, here’s a list of the hardest climbs I did (once or more) in my life.

Four out of 50

Izoard
Mont Ventoux
Cime de la Bonette
Gran Sasso

The others

Col de Cayolle
Forca di Presta
Jay Peak
Joy Hill
Covey Hill
Camillien Houde Way and Mount Pleasant Avenue
Côte de l’Aéroport at Notre-Dame-du-Portage and Côte de la Station
by Saint-André, all the little roads with gradients from 16 to 20 percent
(Lac Trois-Saumons, Saint-Pascal, Saint-Bruno) and the 23 percent slope
in Mount Royal Cemetery.

Passes galore

September 2012. A week of mountain passes. A Quebecer and a Breton tackle the southern Alps and Mont Ventoux. A total of 450 kilometres, including 150 kilometres of ascents and three mythical *cols hors catégorie*⁸. Twists and turns, slopes, gradients, climbs, dizzying descents, summits. Landscapes that change as the metres click by. Forests, waterfalls, deserts. Wind at the summit. Sensations, emotions, discouragement, recovery. Solitude, silence, breathing, heartbeat. Sweat and water. No EPO. Sometimes the best way to manage pain is to accept it. A *col* is a bit like a suspended desert.

After a flight from Montréal to Lyon, with my bike packed cosily in its cardboard box, I was greeted by Jean-Yves at Saint-Exupéry airport in the wee hours of the morning. We left the box in the parking lot and headed for the southern Alps, via Gap. From time to time, I dozed off. We stopped at the Serre-Ponçon dam on the Durance and arrived in the late morning in Jausiers, where we were to spend the next five days. My first meal and, above all, first nap.

We reassembled my bike, put the pedals back on, adjusted the handlebar stem and pumped up the tires. I felt in surprisingly good shape. I’d scarcely slept in the plane, but I didn’t feel sleep deprived.

Pra-Loup

Average gradient of 5.3 percent over 9.4 kilometres. Vertical: 500 metres.

Jean-Yves went to warm up while I napped. Then we left for a 40-kilometre jaunt on a sunny Saturday, off to explore the Ubaye valley, Jausiers and Barcelonnette, with its 50-odd Mexican-colonial-style homes built between 1870 and 1930 by locals who had amassed a fortune in textiles in Mexico.

We bounded up the *col*. At 1,620 metres, a ski resort. This is the ascent where Eddy Merckx’s reign ended abruptly in 1975. “The Cannibal” broke down during the climb (which didn’t seem all that awful to me) and was beaten by Bernard Thévenet, who kept the yellow jersey all the way to the Champs-Élysées.

⁸ Translator’s note: Climbs too difficult to fit into any of the established categories.

Cime de la Bonette

Average gradient of 6.6 percent over 24 kilometres. Vertical: 1,600 metres.

Sunday. We set off from Jausiers. After larch forests, mountain pastures and Lac des Essaupres, the road opened onto rockslides in a huge natural amphitheatre, arid and beautiful, where the only sign of Man was the dreary Restefond barracks. A single stop during the climb, to let a flock of sheep go by. Almost a summer day. Never in difficulty, except during the last 300 metres, where the altitude (2,802 metres) and gradient (15 percent) joined forces to make the going tough.

Motorcycles and sports cars — noisy show-offs, sometimes claiming more than their share of the narrow road. You feel so small on a bike, especially in this colossal landscape. It was a bit mind boggling at the summit: sweaty cyclists, leather-clad motorcyclists, car passengers in their Sunday best, taking pictures of each other, proud of their “feat”. From the top, you can see some of the southern Alps: the Queyras range, Monte Viso and Col d’Ubaye — and maybe even the Mediterranean.

We stopped a few times on the way down to feast our eyes and take pictures, and for a bit longer at La Halte 2000, a restaurant situated quite logically at 2,000 metres. I heard a marmot’s whistle (whistler’s whistle?) and watched birds of prey glide by. My first *col hors catégorie* made me feel confident.

Col de la Cayolle

Average gradient of 4.1 percent over 29 kilometres. Vertical: 1,200 metres.

The *col* looked easy — but it’s nonetheless at 2,327 metres. Rain stopped us at kilometre 18 during our first try. We shivered for an hour in a charming shelter/rubbish dump. The fog rolled in; all we could do was head home.

We slalomed down between small and not-so-small rocks that the driving rain had dislodged from the cliffs.

The next day, we tried again. The world below got smaller. Very few cars. More fog. On the way down, a flock of sheep guarded by three big sheepdogs and a shepherdess, her face weathered by the sun. A wild, agricultural pass. Time stood still. The ride home, between cliffs and river, was a charm this time.

Col d'Izoard

Average gradient of 6.9 percent over 15.9 kilometres. Vertical: 1,300 metres.

We set out from Mont-Dauphin. One of Jean-Yves's tires burst with a bang within the first few metres. When you pump too much air in your tires... Already, a small climb to Guillestre. Then a real ascent, more than 30 kilometres. After another small climb, 17 kilometres alongside the Guil, the last 14 kilometres to the Col d'Izoard seemed endless. The climb got tough when we got to Arvieux, and again at Brunissard (altitude of 1,760 metres: another 600 to go).

The last 10 kilometres were epic. No rest for the weary. Larch forests. Switchback roads that never levelled off. Kilometre markers: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5.... 3. The sadists forgot or had hidden the 4-kilometre marker. An eternity between 5 and 3. Three kilometres from the top, I knew I was going to make it. Casse déserte⁹. A short descent that forced me to stop and do up my helmet, and then the final ascent, enough to make a cyclist weep with fatigue and emotion. Moonlike landscape. Another planet at 2,361 metres. An unforgettable moment.

Strangely enough, it was on the way down that I realized the scope of what we'd done. From the top of the pass to Guillestre, I almost never had to pedal.

We also felt a bit awed by the legend around this col. A memorial to famous cyclists Louison Bobet and Fausto Coppi made us shiver: "Is it really me who's here today?"

⁹ Translator's note: A desolate, magical site with rock slides, deep ravines and strange, monolithic rock formations (explanation provided by Jean-Yves).



Acrylic by Mona Massé (Col d'Izoard)

The Col d'Izoard may be where Italian democracy was saved in 1948. After shaking off all of his competitors during the Cannes-Briançon stage of the Tour de France, Gino Bartali took the yellow jersey and kept it for the rest of the race. The day before, in an Italy still devastated and destabilized by the war, the secretary-general of the Communist Party had been shot. The country was on the verge of civil war. The prime minister of Italy phoned Bartali to ask him to pull out all the stops to win the next day's stage, so that instead of killing each other, Italians would rally together behind their champion. And that's exactly what happened.

Mont Ventoux

Average gradient of 7.1 percent over 22.7 kilometres. Vertical: 1,622 metres.

There are three different ways up Mont Ventoux. The hardest starts at Bédoin, cyclists' Mecca. That's the way we chose. Peaking at 1,912 metres, Ventoux is a sort of geographical anachronism. It's closer to the Alps than the Pyrenees, but doesn't resemble either mountain range. You can't miss it: it's visible from 100 kilometres. It's the world's most popular summit for cyclists. In the summer, thousands of riders climb it — or try to.

We got to Bédoin in the afternoon, after lunch in an outdoor café in Malaucène, oozing with Provençal charm. We went for a short ride, which ended up being a multi-kilometre climb. I told Jean-Yves that we should think about heading back, that tomorrow was another day.

We got an early start. A good dozen kilometres through a forest of oak, pine and cedar, with an average gradient of 9 percent. You're best advised to hold back at this stage; if not, you can be in for a lot of suffering later on. We reached Chalet Reynard, at 1,440 metres. We soon got over the urge to linger there, but the summit still seemed far away. The landscape became barren, moonlike, and stayed that way for six kilometres. Except in a few places, the gradients became slightly less daunting. The weather was ideal: a sunny day, not too hot, almost no wind. At that height, some cyclists were really struggling. One of them looked like he was being tortured with each pedal stroke. Another one was walking next to his bike. Others looked distraught. But some of them were still pedalling along "normally".

All of us, without exception, felt a bit glum as we passed the monument to Tom Simpson, who died there in 1967, less than three kilometres from the finish line. The British rider had gorged on amphetamines and other horrors, and his heart couldn't take it.

A 10 percent ramp, one last bend, and we were there. We'd done it, and ended with a sprint. We were on the roof of Provence. At our feet, the Vaucluse. To the east, snow-capped Mont Blanc.

On the way down, we stopped at Chalet Reynard for a beer and French fries, and to watch others suffer. Then a 20-kilometre descent, via Sault, and back to Bédoin through the Gorges de la Nesque (a canyon about 12 kilometres long) — a place we'd never heard of before, which turned out to be absolutely stunning.

In the evening, we felt proud and surprised to have "conquered" Mont Ventoux so easily. I often think back on that day.

Italy 2

After Mont Ventoux, we left for Italy: an eight-hour drive, with tunnel after tunnel through Liguria, and then we got to Arezzo, where we met up with Nathalie. Three hundred kilometres of roads, already familiar to me, awaited us. In a single day, along a very hilly 120-kilometre itinerary, we visited the village where Michelangelo was born (Caprese Michelangelo), the place where Saint Francis of Assisi withdrew to pray (La Verna) and the Buriano bridge that Leonardo da Vinci painted in the background of the Mona Lisa. A full day, one might say.

And so ended the adventures of a Quebecer and a Breton on their faithful steeds. The Quebecer left his bike in Italy, just in case! The Breton was dazzled by these Italian outings. I saw Carlo the goldsmith again, and already started dreaming of the Stelvio, Mortirolo and other Italian mountains, other chances to rise to the occasion.

5,000

By the end of that extraordinary year of 2012, I'd reached my target of 5,000 kilometres at age 55. Five thousand kilometres at an average speed of 25 kilometres an hour, equivalent to 200 hours of cycling, or 8.333333333333333 days, or 12,000 minutes, or 720,000 pedal strokes (based on a reasonable estimate of 60 strokes a minute). It's no surprise that my knees protested from time to time.

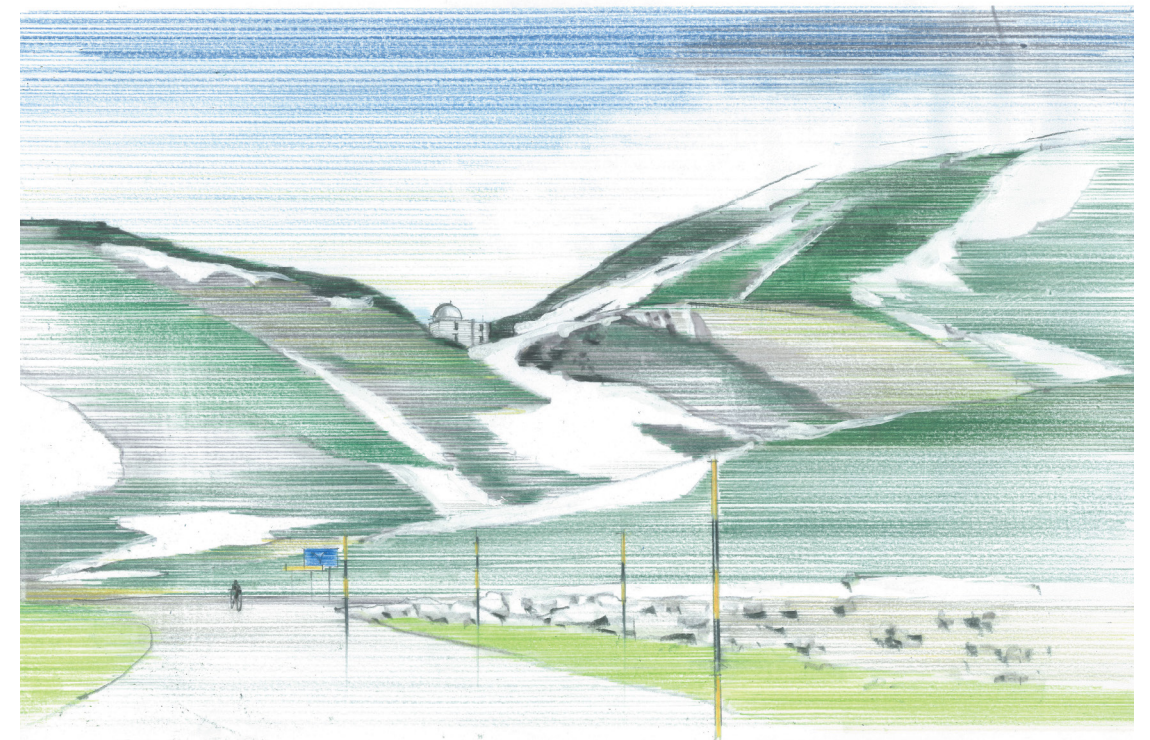
Gran Sasso

Spring of 2014. I tackled Gran Sasso, the biggest mountain in Abruzzo. I felt very small during the long climb, a good 30 kilometres, with a bit of respite here and there. I arrived at an altitude of 2,100 metres after crossing the immense Campo Imperatore plateau, fairly rough but covered with pretty flowers in this month of May. I had the place people call *Il Piccolo Tibet* almost all to myself.

It was misty, damp and rather deserted. And the last two kilometres were terribly steep. A German tourist bus loomed ahead of me in a hairpin turn, and I scraped by under its side view mirror. The route was lined with dirty snowbanks over two metres high.

In the shadow of the Corno Grande, 2,912 metres, I was happy to find Nathalie waiting for me. The climb had been awesome, and the landscape was both beautiful and a bit frightening.

Up there, everything seemed abandoned; there wasn't much to look at, other than an astronomical observatory. In a big tumble-down building, now used as an inn and restaurant, Mussolini was detained for a while after the fall of his regime in 1943, before being freed by German pilots and parachutists. Hitler still believed in victory and thought that Mussolini would be useful. Luckily, history decided otherwise.



Drawing by Fabien Nadeau (Gran Sasso)

2006, a vintage year

Spain

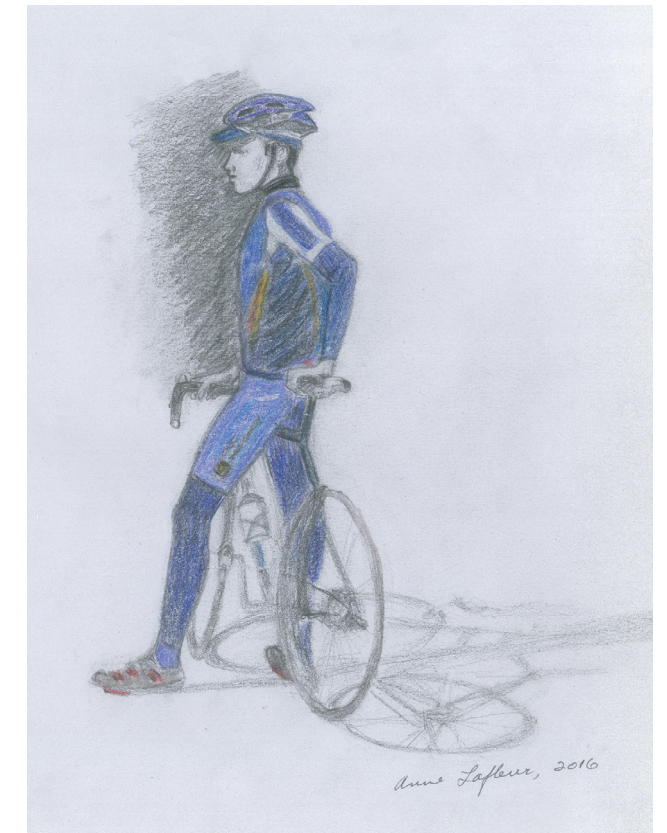
The year I turned 50. Vincent was 16. End of February, early March, we spent two weeks in Spain with our bikes (my “Flying Steed” and Vincent’s Trek). Before we left, Théo the dog checked out the two big grey boxes cluttering up the living room, in which our dismantled bicycles were slumbering.

We arrived in Denia, in the province of Valencia, and settled into our friend Loles’ condo. At that time of the year the Costa Blanca was deserted. The condo was chilly and there were a few episodes of very strong wind during our stay. After a few modest outings, we tackled the Vall de Gallinera, a valley lined with high mountains and dotted with pretty, “authentic” villages: Fornal, Beniramma, Benissiva, Beniali, Alpatro, Alqueria d’Asnar, Benimarfull. We discovered a wild region, little frequented by cars and bikes (at least at that time of year). Up, up we went in a landscape of orange trees, lemon trees, cherry trees and pines, and then the road headed down again, freezing cold and windswept in places. Lower in the valley, we encountered armies of buzzing bees, luckily too busy gathering pollen to care about us; some of them ended their days squashed against a bike helmet.

Between mountain passes — Rates (6.5 kilometres, 5 percent gradient), Vall d’Ebo (8 kilometres, 6 percent) — copious meals. Tapas, meats and French fries. Spanish fare, as in Benimarfull, where the owner explained the list of tapas. We also stopped at an outdoor café in Benissiva to eat sausages and salad. The owner’s children played next to us and the inevitable grandpa tried to stay warm by shifting his chair to stay in the sun. Two or three cars went by, along with a tractor and a few cyclists. In these peaceful villages — almost all of their names start with “Beni” (“son of” in Arabic) — the feeling of strangeness soon gave way to a feeling of belonging.

We then drove to Jumilla (great wine!) to take in the time-trial stage of the Vuelta a Murcia. After touring Murcia and Elche, site of Europe’s biggest palm grove, where the wind was deafening, we were happy to climb back on our bikes in Denia. We were also happy to be back inland. The Costa Blanca is hideous. It’s invaded by Northern Europeans and, quite often, no one speaks Spanish. I know that Spain doesn’t care what I think, but in my opinion the country has headed down the wrong path by allowing itself to be invaded by hordes of tourists and surrealistic real estate projects.

At the end, Vincent told me that the descent — fairly long and cold — towards Alpatrò was the most wonderful he’d ever experienced, and I knew deep down that the trip had been an excellent idea.



Drawing by Anne Lafleur (Vincent)

New Zealand, land of the long white cloud

New Zealand isn't exactly next door. It took us 23 hours by plane to get to our destination, Christchurch. First observation: the New Zealand accent is certainly unique. Sometimes I had the impression that I was hearing a totally unknown language.

On the Web, Nathalie found a one-week bike tour organized by a small local company. Everything was provided: bikes, panniers, maps, reservations. Seven days and 500 kilometres on the South Island (daily treks of 38 to 94 kilometres). We had to get used to riding on the left. It didn't take long and, thanks to biking, it was a lot easier for us later on when we rented a car. Mostly sunny, but sometimes rainy, especially the last day, when the rain became frankly unpleasant on State Highway 1. The traffic can be quite dense and fast at times on the country's small number of main roads.

We often felt like we were pedalling in a botanical garden and zoo. Everything was so different. At the same time, lots of images came to mind: Auvergne, because it's so green, Nova Scotia, Vancouver, California, Vermont, the Gaspé Peninsula, the Eastern Townships, Spain, Florida and even Guatemala.

Everywhere, we saw rhododendrons, azaleas, broom and tree ferns. Also some of the country's 40 million sheep (for 4 million people), cows grazing along the shore of the Tasmanian Sea and tame deer. Sometimes, all we had to do was stop for a few minutes along the water to spot seals, fur seals and sea lions. Our eyes and ears became accustomed to a new environment; bird species like the weka, pukeko, kea and tui, which must have the world's strangest call, soon became familiar to us.

Among the trip's most notable discoveries, Nathalie now knows why it's better to wear nothing under Lycra bike shorts and can confirm that having a stinging bug hit your tongue at 30 kilometres an hour can be very painful. I pulled out the sting and she downed two Benadryls to stem off an allergic reaction. Generally speaking, mosquitoes and other insects love her company, and she just needs to be there for them to make a beeline in her direction. But this one went too far.

At Lewis Pass (864 metres, a 400-metre climb over five kilometres), we crossed the great divide between the western and eastern coasts of New Zealand. Very damp beaches and forests (some places get up to 11 metres of rain a year) gave way to bald mountains, pasture land and vineyards.

From Amberley to Christchurch, we finished the trip by car. We didn't want to pedal in traffic and then through soulless suburbs under constant rain. Our Christchurch landlady's husband offered to come get us, and we accepted without hesitation.

Over the next three weeks we explored the island by car, visiting places like "the end of the world", aka Waipapa Point, 1,500 kilometres from Antarctica. At Haast Pass, we were treated to a free carwash for kilometres and kilometres. Improvised waterfalls gushed forth after the night's torrential rain. And then there were albatrosses, yellow-eyed penguins, little blue penguins, Fiordland crested penguins, Cape petrels, oyster-catchers, New Zealand pigeons. And magical places like Hokitika, Doubtful Sound, Nelson, Wanaka and Abel Tasman National Park.

It's trips like this that you think back on the most. I'd do it all over again, exactly the same way. Minute by minute. Is that happiness?

I saw

Live

Last stage of the 1988 Tour de France, near the Louvre, rue de Rivoli, Paris. Pedro Delgado won the race, even though he failed an antidoping test. The incriminating product (probenecide, which masks anabolic steroids) had yet to be added to Union Cycliste Internationale's list. For years, I thought that Miguel Indurain won the Tour that year, but the cyclist known by some as "Big Mig" or "El Extraterrestre" was only a team member at the service of Delgado.

Tenth stage of the 2000 Tour de France, at Laruns, in the Pyrenees, with Nathalie, Anne-Solange and the kids. We saw very little of the race, but the children enjoyed the Caravane du Tour. Candies, giant PMU hands, rain slickers, giveaways of all sorts. A real washday: non-stop rain and Armstrong, who mopped up his rivals, including poor Pantani, in the ascent to Hautacam. Only the winner of the day, Javier Otxoa, was able to resist. The following year, Otxoa and his brother Ricardo were hit by a car. Ricardo died and Javier spent months in a coma. He eventually got back on his bike and competed in the 2004 Paralympics.

A stage of the Vuelta a Murcia, at Jumilla, with Vincent. We saw Vinokourov, Iban Mayo, Valverde, all the riders we'd followed during the Tour de France, year after year.

A stage of the Giro d'Italia, at Passo della Consuma, with Carlo, who kept searching for the ideal spot to watch the cyclists arrive in the hairpin turns. Like in a nightmare, I was afraid I'd find myself in the middle of the road and get in the way of the race. I told him *Va bene così*, and refused to budge any more. Up near the top, fans were drinking joyfully.

Several editions of the Grand Prix Cycliste de Montréal, including the one in 2013. I saw my favourite cyclist, Alberto Contador, at the end of the race. He looked like a normal guy heading home after work.

From my sofa

Last stage of the 1989 Tour de France. Laurent Fignon started the day with a 50-second lead over Greg Lemond, but lost the Tour by eight seconds during this time-trial stage. Eight seconds that have become part of the legend of the Tour. It's the episode that most people remember from Fignon's career, even though he won two Tours de France and a Giro d'Italia. After he retired, he became a television consultant and Tour de France commentator. He died of cancer three weeks after the 2010 edition, at age 50. Many people point to doping and draw a parallel with Jacques Anquetil, dead at 53 from stomach cancer.

Steve Bauer finished fourth in the 1988 Tour de France, and probably inspired many Canadians to watch races and take up biking.

Jens Voigt had a terrible fall during the 2009 Tour de France. In 2013, the same Voigt doubled back on the way up Alpe d'Huez to tear a strip off an adult fan who had pushed a little boy aside to grab the water bottle that Voigt had just tossed by the roadside.

In 2016, Chris Froome had to jog up Mont Ventoux after a fall caused by a motorcycle and unruly fans.

Also in 2016, Mont Blanc in all its splendour. Even more spectacular than the race, with Team Sky's assured victory. The best paid cyclists. The best doped?

A little white dog had a close shave crossing the road just before the arrival of the peloton during a stage of the 2013 Tour, in Corsica.

Peter Sagan, probably the most spectacular rider of his generation, streaking down the Col de Manse, near Gap, during the 2015 Tour. A former mountainbiker and 2015 world champion, he looked like he was really having fun.

Vincenzo Nibali, *lo Squalo di Messina*, winning a stage under the snow at Tre Cime di Lavaredo (three peaks of Laverdo) in 2013. The same year, the intrepid Nibali caused pink jersey Steven Kruijswijk to crash into a snow bank during the Colle dell'Agnello descent. Kruijswijk's bike flipped over several times in the air. A frightening yet somehow beautiful spectacle.

Speaking of unpronounceable names, Uzbek rider Djamolidine Abdoujaparov had a horrible fall at 70 kilometres an hour on the Champs Élysées during the 1991 Tour, after bumping into a barrier.

All of you

Yannig, who always showed a lot of determination (a 126-kilometre return trip between Saint-Denis and L'Islet, where a soft ice cream cone saved his life, the Tour du Courage, numerous climbs up Camillien Houde Way, Scopetone in Italy).

Peter, who may have suffered a lot in Mount Royal Cemetery and on Camillien Houde thanks to me, but who nonetheless accompanied me on a number of treks (Montréal–Bromont, Jay Peak, Vaudreuil–Soulanges, Bas-du-Fleuve). On top of that, he's the mountain pass champion: Col de l'Aubisque, Col du Tourmalet, Mont Ventoux, Pas de Peyrol, Galibier, Col d'Aspin, and the list goes on. Lucky him!

Simon, with whom I shared the longest ride of my life — 185 kilometres along the Petit Train du Nord bike route between Sainte-Agathe and Mont-Laurier (the last 20 kilometres in the cold and rain and with an aching knee), and Montréal–Québec, without too much trouble.

Anne, who pedalled beside me in 1988 in Provence (Luberon–Apt, Lourmarin, Saignon, Baux-de-Provence, the Camargue) and Brittany (Douarnenez, Concarneau, Pointe du Raz).

Sylvie, who always served as a foil for me, given the age difference; in a moment of meanness, I once pushed her into a pile of cow dung, not on a bike, but in a kids' wagon.

My mother, who is a beacon.

Benoît, who rode with me on Route 132, country roads and the Petit Témis trail, and who knows the Bas-du-Fleuve better than anyone.

Daniel, who I suspect loitered behind me a lot of the time to avoid hurting my feelings, or maybe he also hates wind.

Pierre, who rode with me to Jay Peak and all the way to Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue.

Claude, who introduced me to the Oka region by bike, and who I had a lot of trouble keeping up with.

Anne, Mimi and Geneviève, who rode with their “stepfather” in the Kamouraska region and along the Estriade trail. Together, Geneviève and I also discovered the exotic villages of Saint-Onésime and Saint-Gabriel.

Alain, with whom I spent so much time playing baseball and street hockey that there was no time left for biking. Instead of a yellow jersey, we set our sights on a yellow plaque, a seemingly insignificant object that had great meaning for us.

And all of you who encouraged me, supported me, comforted me.

Philosophy 3 — Twilight

Of course it’s tough no longer being able to climb. Seeing cyclists change gears, focus and stand on their pedals at the start of a climb, any climb (my last ascent was on Atwater heading up to René Lévesque Boulevard, which is far from a mountain pass), makes shivers run up my spine. It’s a moment that’s both terrible and extraordinary. Today, I’m experiencing *collus interruptus*. It seems I’d just begun tackling mountains and dreaming of them.

If some day I’m no longer able to ride a bike, it goes without saying that I’ll be sad as I travel along my roads in Italy and elsewhere, by car or otherwise, as I see the places again that make me nostalgic. But they scroll past in my mind; I can almost touch them. And I can say how lucky I’ve been!

Sometimes, especially at the end of the day, I feel deep sorrow, a sort of existential funk. Is it just my circadian rhythm? Or hormones? Or despondency due to illness and the limits it imposes on me?

Obviously, things could be worse. As André Comte-Sponville wrote, “It’s also not very helpful to think of people who are worse off than us. We can always find them, and in great numbers. But that has never comforted anyone and, at the end of the day, so much the better... On top of which, thinking about the worst also means thinking that it’s possible, always and everywhere possible. Parents know what I’m talking about.”¹⁰

¹⁰ André Comte-Sponville, *Le goût de vivre et cent autres propos*.

I haven't given God much thought recently, even though the context has been ripe. Once maybe, on my bike. Today, I realize that, without putting it into words, I've already put into practice that I need philosophy, not God. I need words that speak to me, that require an effort and soothe me at the same time, that sometimes console me, that raise me up while letting me penetrate further into myself. I'm not the only one.

All of humanity could use more philosophy and less religion; philosophy has never killed anyone, and religion continues to do so. At the same time, it's easy to write all this when you've lived a privileged life, when your existence hasn't been a daily struggle for survival. Can you offer yourself the luxury of philosophizing when you don't know whether you'll eat that day?

Back to twilight. On the other side of twilight, there isn't just night or day: there's life, the life we live, for better or worse. Life isn't split into night and day, misfortune and happiness, sickness and health; it's sufficient in itself and will always be stronger than anything, stronger than us.

Bike mechanics

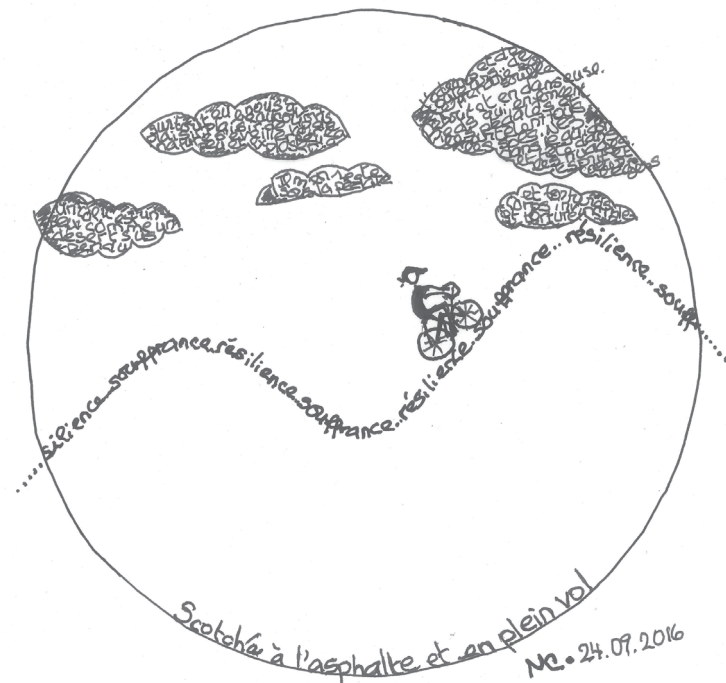
I've never been much of a mechanic. However, I've always had a certain aesthetic sensibility, and I remember (or rather my sister Sylvie remembers) that I spruced up a fixed-sprocket coaster-brake bike (a very trendy model today) that was also used by my father and brothers with a coat of gold paint. Later, during what must have been a psychedelic period, I repainted the frame red and wound black tape around it, leaving regular spaces to create a stunning effect. Around age 16, I entered the supersonic era by spending \$30 on a CCM five-speed with a gear lever on the frame. I used and misused it a lot (see [Crash Landings!](#)).

One day, having taken a bike maintenance and repair course, I thought I could dismantle and reassemble my five-speed. I didn't get past step 1. It ended its days as a pile of parts, cruelly left behind in a Rosemont basement. I have to say that in the meantime I'd bought a Vélo Sport 10-speed, which I also rode extensively in town and country. After that, I had a Minelli hybrid, used mainly in the Eastern Townships (outings with Nathalie and Vincent, including a two-day expedition from Bromont to Frelighsburg). I'd opted for a hybrid because of my back problems, and despite the best of intentions, that was probably my least active cycling period. Back pain, always back pain.

Around 2002, things changed, probably linked to the fact that Vincent had started competitive cycling and my back problems seemed to be on the mend. After a bit of hesitation, I bought another hybrid, a Giant Pegasus (nicknamed *Cheval volant*, or "Flying Steed"), with a carbon fork and, above all, a time-trial handlebar that let me alternate between aerodynamic and more upright positions, to save my back. I added a pannier rack and used the Flying Steed for long outings, including Saint-Pascal to Notre-Dame-du-Lac (120 kilometres) via the Petit Témis trail, and from there to Trois-Pistoles (about 75 kilometres), Montréal to Bromont at least three times, Saint-Denis to Île-aux-Grues and back with Nathalie, Yannig and Amélie, and Saint-Denis to Saint-Eugène with Nathalie. The Flying Steed also travelled in Spain, and then all the way to the Gaspé Peninsula with Vincent. Unlike the Minelli, which was stolen in Montréal, its useful life isn't over. After a three-year stay in Victoriaville, it's still going strong, near Hemmingford, sometimes bravely towing my granddaughter, Camille, in her bike trailer.

After my back pain was gone for good, around 2005, I bought a Cannondale Synapse 3 road bike. A real workhorse, which has never let me down and, unexpectedly, even returned to active duty this year. It's become my Montréal bike, while my Italian bike languishes away and my new Opus impatiently awaits a regular rider in Saint-Denis. Poor thing, it no doubt expected to be used a lot more.

All that to say that apart from aesthetic care, cleaning, oiling and adjusting of brakes, I've generally ridden without giving much thought to the working parts of the machine carrying me. I've always preferred to leave that to others who know what they're doing and are more patient. I've nonetheless been good at fixing flats — except the times I forgot to bring an inner tube and the necessary tools along with me. That has meant long hikes next to my bike (from Sainte-Dorothée, somewhere in Laval, all the way to Montréal during a return trip to Oka, a few times on the way home from Mount Royal, and I'm sure I've forgotten a few), along with a ride from Cap-Rouge to Sainte-Foy in a pickup truck.



Drawing by Nathalie Cartier (Suffering and resilience)

Epilogue

Once upon a time there was a little girl called Camille, who always asked "Why is that?". Big people, her parents and grandparents, sometimes had answers, and sometimes not. Sometimes, they said "Because that's how it is."

Once upon a time there was a grandfather called Roch, who always wondered "Why is that?". Sometimes he had answers, and sometimes not. He didn't talk to Camille about the questions he asked himself. She'd have time some day.

If she'd asked him:

» Why is life?

He might have answered:

» To live our passions, and maybe leave a small bright trail behind us.

Doing puzzles together, they chatted back and forth:

» Why is the moon in the sky? asked Camille.

» To remind us we're not alone.

» Why do camels have two humps?

» So we can tell them from dromedaries.

» Why do dromedaries have one hump?

» So we can tell them... No that's not it. It's to keep them from sleeping on their backs, because they snore.

- » Oh. Why do you ride your bike, Grandpa?
- » To forget that I'm a bit old. One day, in a long while, your Grandpa will go pedal in the sky.
- » Why is that?
- » Because I'll be tired and will want to escape Earth's gravity.
- » What's Earth's grabbity?
- » It's why we're not ready yet to go pedalling in the clouds.

Time went by. Above them, clouds glided by in a sea-blue sky and, on the horizon, waves splashed in a grey sea. Grandpa said:

- » I wish this day would never end.
- » Why never?
- » Because always Camille, always!

Readings

ANONYMOUS. *Je suis le cycliste masqué*

The book may not have been penned by a cyclist. The author may be Antoine Vayer, a former Festina team coach, now dedicated to tracking down cyclists who dope.

ARMSTRONG, Lance. *Every Second Counts*

"I have a will to suffer."

ARMSTRONG, Lance. *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life*

H'm!

BERNARDI, Walter. *La filosofia va in bicicletta. Socrate, Pantani et altre fughe*

Some books are written just for us. From Cioran, who pedalled hundreds of kilometres to tire himself out and sleep, with smoke breaks in cemeteries, to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who walked in Italy and France to help his thought process (not his digestion).

BERNARDI, Walter. *Sex and the bici*

The book focuses more on crushes and flirting than sex, but nonetheless discusses the pros and cons of sex before a big race (a taboo in the world of sports). Cycling has always left very little room for women. Alfredo Binda, cyclist and then team manager, summed up the situation in a stinging sentence: "*Uomini in bici, donne in cucina!*"

BLANC, Jean-Noël. *Le grand braquet. Le Tour : 23 étapes de légende*

All the ingredients of great drama.

BRUNEL, Philippe. *Vie et mort de Marco Pantani*

Too many grey areas: doping, Mafia, dealers. Pantani never got over his disqualification at Madonna di Campiglio in 1999 due to an excessive blood haematocrit level.

CHAMBAZ, Bernard. *À mon tour*

A solitary Tour de France, just before the real Tour in 2003.

CHAMBAZ, Bernard. *Petite philosophie du vélo*

Short texts with a touch of philosophy by a poet, novelist and cyclist.

CHRISTEN, Yves. *Lettre ouverte à Lance Armstrong*

Gino Bartali talks to Armstrong and doesn't forgive him.

COMTE-SPONVILLE, André. *Le goût de vivre*

A bedside book for life.

CYRULNIK, Boris. *Sauve-toi, la vie t'appelle*

An incredible tale of survival and resilience. Cyrulnik wasn't one to make up his mind too quickly: "Believers worry me. Doubters reassure me."

DELERM, Philippe. *La tranchée d'Arenberg et autres voluptés sportives*

Lyrical.

FIGNON, Laurent. *We Were Young and Carefree*

An engaged, enraged cyclist.

FOGLIA, Pierre. *Le Tour de Foglia*

A pleasure to read and reread. "It's crazy to say, but today, the Tour is only vibrant when it pays tribute to its dead."

FOOT, John. *Pedalare! Pedalare! A History of Italian Cycling*

A mixture of history with a capital H and cycling history. Foot wonders whether he should have ended his narrative in 1998, because according to him, the focus since then hasn't been on cycling as a sport: it's been on doping and the decline of cycling.

FOTTORINO, Éric. *Petit éloge de la bicyclette*

"Postpone the twilight. That's enough. Legs that turn on a world that turns: that's life pushing its limits, expanding its borders."

FOURNEL, Paul. *Anquetil tout seul*

Anquetil was the aristocrat of cycling. He pedalled the way others star in movies or on stage. A day after the night before, Anquetil was fading during the first 50 kilometres, before resuscitating and leaving everyone else behind (champagne in his water bottle?).

FOURNEL, Paul. *Besoin de vélo*

Settle down in pain to be able to continue. Biking as a means of expression, a way of life.

FRIEBE, Daniel. *Eddy Merckx*

The Cannibal. In a class all by himself.

FRIEBE, Daniel and Pete GODING, *Salite in bicicletta*

Magnificent, blood-curdling climbs.

GUÉRIN, Michel. *Les grands mots de la petite reine*

An impression of "déjà lu", but entertaining.

HAMILTON, Tyler. *The Secret Race*

One of the first to break the law of silence imposed by Lance Armstrong. Courageously, he tells all: "What people don't understand about depression is how much it hurts... Depression simply hurts too much."

LABORDE, Christian. *Le Tour de France dans les Pyrénées*

"These foul-mouths who vilify riders." A bit of stylistic overkill! Epic duels: Coppi-Bartali, Anquetil-Poulidor, Armstrong-Ullrich, Merckx-Ocaña.

LONDRES, Albert. *Les forçats de la route*

Tour de France. Tour of suffering. Climb almost all of the Pyrénées passes in a day, and then the Alps.

MALAPARTE, Curzio. *Coppi et Bartali*

A famous rivalry, perhaps because it was chivalrous.

MEUNIER, Mathieu. *Un vélo dans la tête*

Escapades on the U.S. west coast. Naive and carefree, like me a long time ago.

MURA, Gianni. *La fiamma rossa*

Tours de France covered by one of Italy's greatest sports reporters.

RICCARELLI, Ugo. *L'Ange de Coppi*

Short story. Back after a serious accident, *Il Campionissimo* battles an angel in the mountains

TRONCHET, Didier. *Petit traité de vélosophie*

Great title. Biking in Paris.

TURCHI, Athos. *La bicicletta e l'arte di pensare*

Philosophical cycling in the Val d'Orcia.

WALSH, Davis and Pierre BALLESTER. *L.A. officiel*

Much later, their theories about Lance Armstrong proved to be true.

WEGELIUS, Charlie. *Gregario*

Pro cyclists have a hellish life, but they're always ready to get back on the saddle.

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Roch Michaud

There's Nothing Like Biking to Feel Alive

The author's passion for cycling turns out to be an antidote against adversity and provides the narrative thread of his memories and reflections, sometimes philosophical, about life, nature, friendship, our world. The diary of a merciless battle against cancer conjures up headwinds and long climbs that test a cyclist's mettle.

"I was often haunted by the image of a long, high mountain pass to climb."

The book is also a marvellous trip through the countryside. You can smell the wind, sky and nature! *"The vines were getting green. The air smelled of pine trees and rich soil. And burning olive tree branches."* Route 132, Mont Ventoux, Forca di Presta, Lachine Canal bike path, Cime de la Bonette, Les Éboulements, Gran Sasso: the reader accompanies the cyclist on his travels and shares his thoughts. *"On a bike, you die and resuscitate a lot. You crumple and triumph. You cry and laugh. You don't always philosophize (...). But sometimes, when you're riding alone, your thoughts lead to flashes of lucidity."*

One thing is certain: this highly personal narrative is one of those flashes of lucidity, and it's wonderful that the author was able to share it with us.

NC – October 2016

Glued to the asphalt and flying over it. That's the paradox of cycling.