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ADVENTURE, EXPLORATION
AND THE QUEST FOR EPIC TRAILS

visions of the divide

DURING THE GREAT DIVIDE RACE, TIME AND DISTANCE DISSOLVE INTO MERE DIRECTIONS. FRAME BUILDER RICK HUNTER CHRONICLES HIS LONG JOURNEY SOUTH

I SIT HERE WITH FLAKING, SUNBURNED SKIN, in a red rain jacket and black cargo shorts, blue \$1 flip-flops and talc powder on various parts of my body. Someone sitting next to me counts his change then plugs his laptop into a nearby wall. He shifts through his backpack. I hear brown paper bags and zippers. I have the local NPR station piped into my ears while I wait for the bus to the airport from downtown Albuquerque. The bus station is filled with every mix of person, every mix of sort. A blind man with an escort, new-age hippies with expensive sandals and ice-blue eyes, local street folk, old-timer Indians with mesh football jerseys and warm grins. The *clickety clack* of rolling luggage across brick floors, brown vinyl seats with dowelled oak armrests.

It's a short ride to the airport, and soon I am airborne, the plane jumping into the sky. The slight hesitation and weightlessness of initial flight always spooks me. I counter the

leans and twists of the plane, I want to go one way but the plane goes another. The last two weeks fresh in my mind, the experience fills my thoughts, the hunger and weariness evidence of the journey.

I am returning home to the Bay Area after two weeks of riding and living, trying to race my bike along the 2,490-mile Great Divide route, through Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico. I lived as long as I could out there, as long as I wanted to, before pain and fatigue sent me home. After two weeks of riding through towns, forests and streams, camping and eating, I stopped. I was left with a swollen left knee and an urge to live life a little easier, to be with my wife and dog, to rest. I have mental and physical limits. I overcame the mental limits repeatedly, but the physical needed rest. Two weeks of pedaling through counties and states, valleys and mountains, one National Forest to the next.

🌀 Nervousness quickly exits once the race begins. It feels soothing to start riding, get the legs going around, get this tour underway. Before the race, I spent some time looking at the route maps, not knowing the relationships between the distances drawn and measured, or the conditions involved. Ten miles could be measured in minutes or hours or days. Once underway, I keep rolling as best as I can, juggling various compromises between pace, motivation, stomach contents, time of day.

Early days in Montana are filled with vibrant bear grass, fields thick between the trees, water spilling from the slopes, thoughts and sights of grizzlies, goofy deer with flopping white tails bounding stupidly through the fern and bramble. Streams tumbling with copper green water, boiling with trout.

On the fourth morning I eat breakfast at the Grasshopper Inn, near a table full of old locals talking about hand-feeding the neighborhood



moose, hunting and fishing. They talk about a faded VW with “Crystal Light hippies” from San Jose digging up gems from nearby Crystal Mountain. I keep quiet and chuckle inside, as I have an old VW and live a half-hour from San Jose.

Rolling away from Crystal Mountain, dirt roads splitting mountain ranges, following streams, paralleling power lines, crossing cattle guards, loose gravel to wind-blown hardpack to silty washboard roads. I climb slowly with the sun baking and burning my arms, the elevation and wind cracking and swelling my lips. I descend over the pass with great speed, letting the brakes loose, letting the bike and gear bounce over the loose rocks. I let it drift through the soft edges of the road, let the washboard rumble fade through a loose grip on the bars. I stop and take a dip in a small stream, its water dark and slow.

I pedal the rest of the way out of the byway, then 10 miles of frontage road along an interstate, east toward Lima, Montana. I make it to the post office with a half-hour to spare. I pick up a mail drop of Clif bars and other space food, a spare chain and some extra tubes. I eat a salad and a huge misshapen hamburger at the local diner.

I put the new chain on and drink a tall boy below the gazebo of a gas station’s rest area. I coast out of town, passing storefronts shielded by newspaper and plywood, past an old bar that advertises “Grill Your Own Meat.” A black hole of time and space, a place where lives are spent hiding from problems and blowing snow. Mov-

ing on and out of town into a basin filled with wetlands and a shallow lake, cranes, herons and sandpiper-type birds pecking at the lake’s edge.

Into the darkening dusk and brightening night sky I go, bouncing and skipping, the wheels rolling as long as the pedals keep turning. Into the night I ride with the thin moon turning black into gray, giving shadow to the washboard and gopher holes, the road an opaque strip of vagueness. A handful of houses and singlewides line the dirt road, warm yellow light filtering past curtains and doorstops. I make it to a campground 15 miles away. This day finally ends 160 miles from the Grasshopper Inn and Crystal Mountain. I give up for the night, park the bike, set up my tarp, eat my food, listen to a little radio.

➔ The next morning I find a pipe with a running spring and fill my bottles, splash my face. I make it into Idaho. Riding along an old rail bed filled with sand, littered with deep whoops and pumice. I walk stretches, get hot, pissed off. Pressing on into Wyoming, with the Tetons coming into view like a black ax blade slicing the clouds with its sharp jagged edge. A long, rambling climb follows a stream, skirting the border of Yellowstone. I pass some good old boys towing a fifth-wheel to God knows where, their monster truck idling as they try and fix a trailer flat on a steep hill. Out to the highway by twilight, I shift up and try to let it fly. I pass Ansel Adam’s spot at Oxbow Bend, nice evening for a picture, though I

just want to get out of there. I want to eat and sleep, get off the road before I get spread across it. I make it out of the park, find a trailer park campground, sneak back to the outer limits and find an empty spot to lie down and sleep.

I work my way into Wyoming, out of a barren valley, a sandstone road to Union Pass. Distant rock peaks form a huge watershed toward the northeast, an enormous crown of rock and mountain, snow and ice. The Green River starts here, dense and smooth, finding its way slowly and fairly. I cross the river and out onto the pavement, the Cora highway, an incredible place of muted afternoon light.

Somewhere in this valley are mega mansions with gates of wealth and power. Farther down the river’s path lie miles of pumps and oil fields. I twist up and over the eastern ridgeline and ride toward Pinedale. I settle at a campground a few blocks from the main drag. The campground is a mix of trailer storage and RV dwelling, with more than a few residents. I lay out my gear between groups of Mexican oil-field workers, their large tents pitched, covered with tarps, picnic tables with double-burner stoves, laughs and jokes between tired men. I clean and shower, my sunburned arms hot under the water, the skin tight and thick, the back of my hands red and puffy.

I retreat to a pizza place, order a pie and walk across the street to the gas station. I eat an ice cream sandwich and drink a Gatorade, make a few phone calls. I see cowboys with Carhartt

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jeans pulled up to their armpits, hat and boots pinched to a point. I walk back and enjoy my pizza. A West African lady washes pizza pans, this town a crossroads of cultures and colors, mountains, fields, streams and desert. I sleep on the grass lawn back at the campground, the night cool, leftover pizza in a box by my head.

➔ I wake and eat a greasy plate of eggs and textured ketchup. I put on a bigger front tire and

shuffle some gear, bungee the pizza box to the side. I spin out of Pinedale and make it back onto a wide gravel road, a rolling, chattering strip of sand and stone. Quarry trucks chug by pushing

up clouds of dust. The road teasing the golden foothills of the Wind River range.

I run into two cyclo-tourists heading north. We stop and smile, exclaim excitement and relief upon seeing another like soul. We take pictures of each other and relay stories of road conditions and water supplies. They tell me they have caught onto the race, and they have only seen two other guys in front. They admire my Spartan bike set-up. Their bikes are loaded to the gills, one-wheeled trailers spilling with 2.5-gallon wa-



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ter jugs and a guitar. Two guys from Pittsburgh and Columbus, Ohio, they've been out living on these dirt roads since early May, chasing the fair weather north, constantly fighting the wind and grades. They look thin and weathered, their eyes bright, wired. White tape covers the nose of one. I tell them about the campground in town, and that I guess I should get going.

Off I go, north to south. I find a place to eat my leftovers, a knoll of aspens with a few rocks. I eat the last of the pizza, gnawing cheese and toppings off the inside of the box. The day continues, mostly east through rolling grassland blown dry and golden. I stop at a rest area once I reach the next highway. I lay down on the cement in the shade, put my feet up on the seat of a picnic table, and fall asleep with the warm wind blowing. I hear drivers coming and going, talking, little dogs being walked around my head.

When I wake and remount my bike, I try and recall why I want to do this. The aches and pains sometimes magnified to the point of tears and screams, other times ignored as the miles click



by. I find a soda machine in South Pass City and down two cans of Coke, back to back. After a few minutes I feel alert with a slight tremor of a buzz, an excitement. Another few miles to Atlantic City where I enter the bar looking to fill my water bottles and come out with a stomach full of hamburgers and beer.

I make a wrong turn leaving the bar and climb a hill toward the highway, turn around and finally find the road into the Great Divide Basin



SCENES OF SOLITUDE
In a moment of repose, the author enjoys a cold one



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where 120 miles or more of treeless, waterless wasteland are waiting for me, a concave punch of space void of most things. The evening light even and warm, the smell of sage, intense and invigorating. I keep riding toward the night. The road and washboard get worse. I am anxious to complete this stretch as quickly as possible, curious about what lies ahead. Darkness falls. I put on my jacket to avoid the chills, the road meandering, maintaining an inconsistent direction. I pitch camp and lay out on a lumpy mess

of dirt and scrub brush, the eighth night of this trip is as quiet as a padded room, no buzzing or clicking, just silence.

➔ Morning arrives with a million stars disappearing, one at a time. Angled light starts to wrap up and over the eastern hills. A pair of coyotes gallop across the long shadows. I get rolling later than I had hoped. I realize I'll still be in the basin at the heat of noon; realize how far

I have to go, today, tomorrow, for the next week or more. My legs feel heavy and slow. My pace is a rolling stumble. My attitude sinks with each approaching rise and distant vista. Trailers and stock fences litter the barren gray landscape. I come across a small trailer set off the road, its door open. A hand waves acknowledgement, a face still inside, shadowed. What a place to spend your summer, 106 degrees warm at 7,000 feet above the oceans. The day gets hotter and hotter as the wind picks up. The coolness of the



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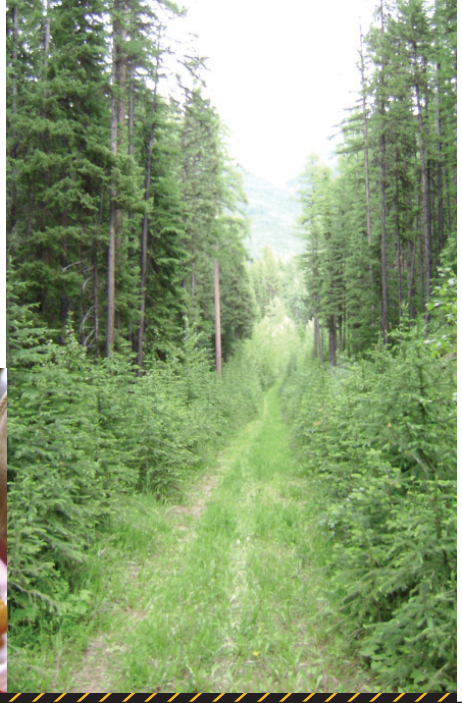
morning is over. Flies buzz and bite when the wind and speed allow.

When I start riding again, I feel a little nervous about ever getting out of this basin, this crossing, this depression of soil, suitable only for antelope and wild horse. The dirt road I'm riding ends in 13 miles, and from there it's another 40 on paved, service-less tarmac to Rawlins. I find shade and solace under an empty water tank, lying on railroad ties under its white belly. Blood drips onto my shirt. My nose is bleeding, the dry air cracking and splitting the inside of my head. I

sit down holding my bandana to my face.

At this moment Pete Basinger catches up to me, out of the blue. He looks strong, steady, positive. We say hi and shake hands. He was following my tracks all morning, a serpentine path with intermittent footprints. Pete had to hole up for a day with food poisoning. I passed him somewhere around Union Pass without knowing it. He was in the woods puking his guts out. It's good to see him even though I hardly know him.

Pete's presence gives me a second wind. We ride within sight of each other into Rawlins. I





crack pretty badly on the interstate, run out of water with semis hurtling past, my knee shooting with pain and swelling. This is the first time since the start of the race when I actually feel like I'm racing—not racing to drop Pete, but racing just to be around another human, racing to be

able to call it a day in Rawlins. Cold Pepsi fills my mind, ice cubes in bubbling cold blackness.

I make the city limits and follow Pete to McDonald's. We drink milkshakes and sodas, eat hamburgers and fries. I go into the bathroom to wash up. I don't look so hot. A weariness and look of exhaustion makes any dirt or blood secondary in appearance. My arms are sunburned and the tops of my thighs are covered in water blisters. Embarrassed and disgusted, I put on my windbreaker to cover the bubbles.

We split a hotel room. I stay for the night, Pete is up and out the door at midnight, eager to make up lost ground, eager to be competitive and try to make up a day. Second place rider Matt Lee is about a day ahead. I wish Pete luck, and joke that I'm going to be hot on his heels. I fill up the hotel ice bucket with generic Cheerios and pour a can of fruit cocktail on top. I watch a show about crab fisherman on the tube, and fall asleep again.

Six o'clock Sunday morning, I'm not feeling too bad. I flip on the weather channel and crunch some more cereal. I'm on the road by 7, Pete has at least six hours on me. I slow-pedal through downtown Rawlins, where everything is closed. I'm looking for a cup of coffee, but none's in sight, just some truck stop miles out of the way. Motivated to make it into Steamboat Springs that day I pedal into a headwind with the caffeine slump well on its way. A series of steep, stair-stepping climbs, my wheels spinning on loose gravel, the headwind pushing back. I falter and start walking, start getting down on myself.

The route continues forward as ever, climbing

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into the trees and streams, aspens again. Up into Colorado, finally leaving Wyoming. The afternoon is warm and pleasant. My legs come back, telling me to push harder, telling me to cover some ground. A soft tailwind escorts me up the climbs. I round sandstone switchbacks with aspens fluttering and spinning, singing birds playing in the quiet breeze. Dust starts to drop from the cloudless ceiling of blue, the moon a bright crescent of ice in the southern sky. The road enters a series of meadows, I hear animal noises, beeping, blurring, strange sounds. I see one elk, then a dozen, then a hundred. The herd is slightly alarmed, moving away from the roadbed and stream, stomping and crunching away from me. I pitch camp that night on the downhill side of the peak. I crawl into my bag next to a creek spilling over the road, happy to be at the top of a mountain with the stars swirling and my eyes closed.

➡ Colorado has spread its wings in front of me, dark clouds and brilliant white peaks sunning themselves all around. I settle into a groove of constant pedaling, eating and resting. My mind is full of lonely thoughts, an outsider looking in, a voyeur scanning the faces of people, my heart and legs connected to a rhythm of ache and exhaustion. I'm tired, wearing out, and slowing down from the miles and hardscrabble living. I take refuge in one motel for every state, with Idaho being the exception. The rest of the mountain nights I sleep on the ground, hugging and twisting on a small foam pad I keep trimming bits off to make smaller, trying to make this ride easier.

Things do not get easier. I spend a morning in Steamboat Springs regrouping, pick up another mail drop, buy a chain tool at the bike shop replacing the one I lost somewhere in Wyoming. I go into the 7-Eleven for a phone card and some junk food. I start talking to a man outside who is stoked to see some chump like me, packing light and riding bikes. He gives me

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5 bucks as a gesture of good luck. I don't know how to react. I take the money and say thanks, feeling funny about it. All I can think is that he knows what is happening, he knows that I am riding myself into the ground every day, he sees that I am tired, he knows how I am feeling because he has done something like this himself. He remembers something in his past through my tired eyes and thinning face.

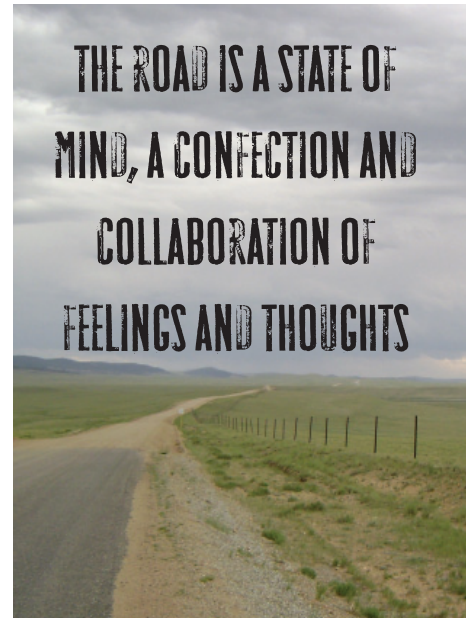
I am retreating into my head. This long road is forever turning upward, my eyes trained on the repetition of gravel and dirt and road signs. I accept this repetition with gritted teeth and swollen knees. From Steamboat the route stretches south, the Colorado River and I-70 just small slashes on my map, hopefully with bridges over both. I ride into the night, with lightning flashes in the east toward Winter Park. I cast nervous glances east, watching, not wanting to get caught in a storm of rain and fire. I remember the days and summers of my youth, racing mountain bikes at Winter Park 15 or more years ago, a NORBA national. I still remember the climbs and rocks and twists through the trees. Memories becoming dreams, or is it the opposite.

This road is a state of mind, a confection and collaboration of feelings and thoughts. I have no idea what I'm doing, no idea what purpose all this pedaling and pain serves. My only respite is the incredible beauty of this journey, the satisfaction of pushing myself further and deeper into a place I have never been before. Though the deeper I fall into that beautiful hole, the more I want to climb out and escape, to sit down for a day or a week and exhale.

The next day I pass through Breckenridge. I feel nauseated, Range Rovers and white dudes with dreads and designer shopping bags, glitz and glam. The towns are becoming more exhausting than the mountain passes. Boreas Pass above town is a gift to my spirit, as I fly up it, my legs feeling like pistons, my heart pumping blood to my flapping limbs. A long descent into the next valley follows with a rainy tailwind blowing me across the ranch roads and abandoned subdivisions. I hide out in a roofless log cabin while lightning skewers the ground, the thunder booming. I make it into Salida that night by 11:30 and check into the first motel I find.

I sleep in the next morning, waiting for my laundry to dry. I stop by Absolute Bikes and talk with Tom and Scot. Scot helps me with some new tires and a nice tour of all the old junk they have in the rafters and under the floor. Shop owner Shawn Gillis offers some encouragement and psyches me up for the rest of Colorado and New Mexico. I waste as much time as I can, and am sad to leave. I choke up some after shaking hands and saying goodbye. The warmth of these

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people is honest and wholesome, but I don't dare let myself fall apart in front of them. This is just a dumb bike race I decided to do, this is not a serious part of life, this is optional, and yet I feel like a dying dog limping back into the woods to find peace, to relieve the confusion of emotions.

➔ I don't make it much farther than any dying dog should. My knee is wasted and double in size, the pain from that is enough for me. Another day-and-a-half of limping and soft pedaling, grimacing and muttering. I call it quits in the town of Del Norte, less than 100 miles from New Mexico, 700 miles from the end of the race. That's it for me. I've leap-frogged from Pepsi machine to Pepsi machine down the Great Divide, covering roughly 1,800 miles in 13 days. The two leaders are days ahead, Pete Basinger dropped out somewhere and the people behind are who knows where. I make my last phone call and drop out. I call my wife and hear her sweet voice. I stick out my thumb and find a quick ride to the next town. I box up my bike like a slob and dump it at a bike shop, walk a mile in my cleats to the Greyhound station. I'm in Albuquerque that night. The plane leaves the next day.

The extraction process is easy. I'm home on the porch before I know it, the Fourth of July parade passing by on the street below. I walk around with my goofy hound dog enjoying the smell of hot dogs and exhaust from classic cars. Mary-Anne is off having fun, riding her bike. The dog and I walk into the woods and nap on a stump of old-growth redwood, the sound of the drunken patriots filtering through the shady trees. 📍