



COME & GONE

A True Story of Blue-Collar
Bike Racing in America

JOE PARKIN

AUTHOR OF *A DOG IN A HAT*

AFTER FIVE YEARS OF BUSTING MY ASS IN THE BELGIAN gutters, I said goodbye to Flanders knowing that I might never go back. I never did.

I flew back to the U.S. with empty pockets and no contract. For several years, I was unable to watch a Belgian spring classic without a lump in my throat. I died a little bit watching my teammates in the Tour de France in 1992.

Eventually I landed a spot with the Coors Light team. After the years in Europe, though, racing in the U.S. didn't really do it for me. I was never able to rise to the level of dedication I had mustered each day in Europe.

Until I started racing mountain bikes.

COME & GONE is the highly anticipated sequel to Joe Parkin's widely praised best-seller, *A Dog in a Hat*. Picking up the story of his pro career, Parkin perseveres through three hardscrabble seasons chasing wins on the U.S. road racing circuit before he changes course and tastes victory as a mountain bike racer. A gritty, authentic, and heartfelt personal memoir, *Come & Gone* is also a chronicle of the rebirth of professional bike racing in America.

"Parkin shows you life on the edge of the peloton. We know the great champions' stories, but Parkin's experience is far more illustrative of what a 'pro cyclist' really is." —PODIUMCAFE.COM

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**Praise for Joe Parkin's previous book,
*A Dog in a Hat***

“*A Dog in a Hat* is the most authentic book ever written on making a living as a pro cyclist in Europe.”

—BOB ROLL, VERSUS TV CYCLING COMMENTATOR

“I loved *A Dog in a Hat*. Joe’s stories bring back many memories of racing in Belgium, where I learned how to fight for position in the echelon, to suffer in the gutter while jumping curbs and dodging potholes, and to pound out my guts when it really mattered. Belgium is a hard place to learn bicycle racing, and Joe’s story proves how tough he was.”

—RON KIEFEL

“This plain, self-deprecating memoir has the ring of authenticity at the other end of the sport where—even today—not all the riders are being paid, the hotels are still bad, and the races are just as hard.”

—TINDONKEY.COM

“*A Dog in a Hat* is a page turner. Anyone who has raced in Europe or who wonders what it’s like to jump the ocean on your own should pick up this book. Joe captures the struggle and the intensity to succeed, and the fact that he did it on his own is all the more impressive. Cycling in Europe is tough; doing it Joe’s way is even tougher!”

—FRANKIE ANDREU

“Joe Parkin is a beautiful piece of work, and he turns out to be a better writer than I am a bike racer.”

—BILL STRICKLAND, *BICYCLING MAGAZINE*

“[Readers] have a seat in the middle of the peloton as we see what Joe sees, breathe what he smells, watch as his peers juice up and we struggle with him as he strives to get out in front of it all. Parkin’s words weave a colorful tapestry about living life on the bicycle racing circuit in Europe. Yet that tapestry is soiled and tattered because of the true cutthroat nature of bicycle racing and the absolute grit in the stories Joe relives for us.”

—*DIRT RAG MAGAZINE*

“Is *A Dog in a Hat* the best book we’ve ever read about bike racing? Undeniably yes. The essential truths you’ll learn about Belgian bike racing are timeless. And the self-effacing (and often hilarious) way Joe narrates the absurdity of these traditions will make you laugh out loud. Of everything written about bike racing throughout the history of mankind, Chapter 3, ‘Kermis Don’t Play Fair,’ is the most important 20 pages ever penned. No one should be permitted to own a USA Cycling license without being able to recite this chapter from heart. You’ll be fascinated by Joe’s humility, his determination, and by the warped way domestiques set their goals and weigh success.”

—COMPETITIVECYCLIST.COM

“*A Dog in a Hat* is funny, touching, brave, and honest in its look at the complicated world of the European pro cycling scene.”

—THE *INDEPENDENT* NEWSPAPER

“Parkin has written an eloquent and historic volume. In the very uniqueness of his story, Parkin realizes a universality that gives his recollections a resonance with any cyclist. Do not miss this book.”

—BELGIUMKNEEWARMERS.COM

“*A Dog in a Hat* reads like Joe Parkin was just telling you these epic stories on a ride, up a climb, or at a coffee shop. That’s the beauty of this book. It’s not a hero’s journey, but instead a racer’s tale.”

—BIKEHUGGER.COM

“There’s something very approachable about the underdog, the guy who works as hard as anyone, but never achieves the stardom we all chase. I peeled through *A Dog in a Hat* in a few nights, always wanting to know what was coming next. Joe’s candor is refreshing to read and entertaining as hell.”

—RICHARD PESTES, PEZCYCLINGNEWS.COM

“Written as if you were riding alongside him, Parkin’s *A Dog in a Hat* is a quick, highly addictive read. You can feel the cobbles under the pen.”

—COG MAGAZINE

“*A Dog in a Hat* reads like a novel and serves up an inspiring, compelling, and captivating racer’s tale.”

—THE OREGONIAN

“I loved *A Dog in a Hat*. Once in, I couldn’t put it down. The book rings of truth, youth, and passion.”
—ANDREAS HESTLER

“Sordid, funny, and engrossing.”
—BIKE SNOB NYC

“Joe tells his story straight. It’s not pretty, but it’s not bitter.”
—BIKERADAR.COM

“A slice of literary badassness. I’ve had a lifelong struggle maintaining an attention span for reading books, but this is a page turner that’s been hard for me to put down. *A Dog in a Hat* is truly captivating.”
—HOWTOAVOIDTHEBUMMERLIFE.COM

“Impossible to put down.”
—MOUNTAIN BIKE ACTION MAGAZINE

“Parkin went native in an era when Americans were still exotic creatures, and not in a good way. This unglamorized insider’s view is what makes *A Dog in a Hat* well worth reading. Parkin shows you life on the edge of the peloton. We know the great champions’ stories, but Parkin’s experience is far more illustrative of what a ‘pro cyclist’ really is.”
—PODIUMCAFE.COM

“*A Dog in a Hat* is not the idealised notion most of us have of the life of a professional cyclist, but it’s all the more gutsy and enjoyable for its self-effacing honesty. I could read it all over again right now.”
—THEWASHINGMACHINEPOST.NET

“In his new book, *A Dog in a Hat*, Joe Parkin gives us a window into the life of someone who was born to be a professional bike racer. It’s not pretty, it’s not glamorous, some of it is a bit of inside baseball, but it’s a great read. I picked up a copy at Interbike, brought it home and read the 232 pages over the course of two evenings. I literally could not put it down.”
—SMITHERS MINNEAPOLIS

“The April 17, 2000, issue of *VeloNews* closed with a typically fervent Bob Roll screed entitled ‘51 Things to Do Before You Die.’ #36. Learn from Joe Parkin’s life story.’ Parkin’s prose fills in all the cracks. Quite

simply, the man is tough as nails and chose the absolute hardest way to break into European professional cycling: just showing up in Ghent with a bike, a duffel bag of clothes, three months' worth of cash, and a phone number to call scrawled on a scrap of paper. You can truly appreciate Parkin's re-living of the squalid truth of late '80s Euro pro cycling."

—BOBKESTRUT.COM

"It's a wild, gritty, page-turning ride: Grab the book, rub some embrocation into your quads and calves, and settle into your couch for a great read as you plot your own future bike exploits." —CYCLO-CLUB.COM

"Joe Parkin did what few other Americans dared do. . . . *A Dog in a Hat* fills a void in cycling literature. Since so few Americans have accomplished what Joe Parkin has, his book stands on its own as an original account of European bike racing, presented from a racing cyclist's perspective."

—USCYCLINGREPORT.COM

"*A Dog in a Hat* is a fast-paced, revealing read, and any cyclist who enjoys racing will be equally inspired and shocked at some of the stuff that goes on inside the peloton. It's a rare glimpse into a world often concealed, and Parkin's struggle to gain acceptance makes the book a truly inspiring read."

—ROADCYCLINGUK.COM

"Written as if you are riding alongside him, this is a quick, highly addictive read. Set in the late eighties, Joe Parkin's tale is of an American who moved to Belgium in order to become a pro racer. Joe's youthful true story documents coming through the ranks of novice riders in pursuit of a professional racing team contract, when Americans in the sport were rare. Quite the no-holds-barred take on professional cycling. Read it if you aren't in denial about what old school pro racing entailed. You can feel the cobbles under the pen. Endorsed by Bob Roll. (What, you need a better endorsement?)"

—COG MAGAZINE

CITIZEN FOREIGNER

“BESTE JOSÉ,” I WROTE AS I HUNCHED OVER IN THE BACKSEAT OF my team’s Pontiac Transport minivan. My head was propped against the seat in front of me, and I stared at my lap. “I am writing this letter to thank you for the opportunity to ride for you,” I continued in Flemish. We’d just finished a small three-day stage race in North Carolina and were heading out. I knew I would likely never finish the letter, much less mail it, but I was homesick for Belgium and this was the only way I knew how to escape the hell I was experiencing. José de Cauwer had been my boss for the past three years, and although I wouldn’t call our relationship anything more than a normal working one, I had an enormous amount of respect for the man who’d barked orders at me from a team car all over Europe.

I stared at the page. Less than a year before, I had been living in Belgium, riding for José’s Tulip professional team. Now I

was in the southern United States and had just ridden the final criterium of a stage race for little other reason than the fact that we were there. That morning, when we had gone to check the race's general classification, my teammate Tom Armstrong and I had found our names at the bottom of the list. We'd been relegated to last place and next to last and were trying to figure out why. We found a U.S. Cycling Federation (USCF) race official and politely asked if a scoring error might have been responsible for our new spots at the back of the race. After cross-referencing our names and race numbers, the USCF official informed us that we had been disqualified from the previous day's stage because we'd crossed a road's center line.

"Seriously?" I asked, trying my best to stay calm. Ever since I had left for Belgium in the spring of 1986, I'd enjoyed the liberty of using all available road, curbing, sidewalks, and dirt paths while racing. Keeping to the right side of a center line was a whole new obstacle. "I find it interesting that only two of the eight or so pros in this race were busted. The whole peloton was over the line at some point or another yesterday." I knew this was going to be a futile argument.

"You were the ones who were caught," the official explained.

"I find that hard to believe," I countered. He shrugged. Dejected as I was, I would have been content to end the discussion there, but he then told us in which laps our respective crimes had occurred. I had been disqualified at the beginning of the second of eight laps.

"Are you kidding me? Why wasn't I told? I would have quit."

"It would have been unsafe for the motorcycle official to do that," he offered.

It was a lame excuse, in my opinion. I had gotten used to bumping into the hordes of TV, photo, and police motorcycles that work the major races.

“Then you should have yelled at me from the start/finish line.”

“You wouldn’t have quit,” he said.

“Yes, I would have.”

“We’ve tried that before,” he explained. “No one ever quits. They just think they can argue their way out of it after the race.”

“I would have quit. I think I should have been given the benefit of the doubt.” I was fully aware that no reversal of our sentence was going to be granted. The first thing they teach you in umpire school is to never, ever change your call, even if it is the worst one ever made, and I assume USCF officials are given similar advice. He was doing a good job of handling an angry bike racer, and I was doing a pretty good job of being polite, albeit with a dash of condescension.

“I should have been told,” I argued again. “It was 100 degrees out there yesterday. I would have quit. I am not out here for my fucking health.” I caught a slight hint of confusion in his eyes and began to understand that I was a type of bike racer he had not previously encountered. The notion of intentionally dropping out of a race is foreign to most bicycling enthusiasts. We’ve all seen the images of Tour de France riders having to endure the ceremonial stripping of the race number from their jerseys before they climb, heartbroken and shamefaced, into the dreaded broom wagon that sweeps the tail of the race. Europe’s one-day races, however, are an entirely different scene. If you’re not with the leaders, or at least within a giant peloton close to the finish, ending a racer’s suffering early is not only commonplace but almost

preferred by sponsors and directors. The heroes of the day are out in front showing what they can do, while the workers and also-rans stay out of the public view and rest up for tomorrow.

As I stared at my letter to José, I knew I wouldn't get many more words onto the page. As cruel and inhumane as the racing was in Europe, in many ways it was much harder in the States. In Europe I knew most of the riders I raced against, either from events in which we all competed or from reading about them. In the New World I was learning the names and faces as I went along. From time to time I raced with someone I'd known in Europe or read about in the U.S. magazines, but for the most part I was breaking new ground. In addition, the life of a European bike racer was a fairly simple one: race, eat, get a massage, sleep, eat, and then find your way to a perfectly cleaned bike that your mechanic had carefully parked alongside your teammates' perfectly cleaned bikes. In my freshman year of American pro bike racing, this blessed routine was gone, and I was left to fend for myself. It was terrifying.

My return to the States had come just a few months earlier—October 13, 1991, to be exact. At that point in the year, the season was over for me, and for the first time since turning pro I had no team and no contract for the following year. I wasn't alone. I have always referred to this episode as “the Great Purge of '91” because the pro peloton was reduced by almost 25 percent for the next season. Riders like me, who didn't have a lot of points from the sport's governing body, the Union Cycliste International (UCI), were kicked to the curb because the ones with the points were

demanding all the money. And rightly so: If a team could put together a cadre of big-points guys, it could be assured a spot in all of the Grand Tours as well as the Classics. It is a hell of a lot easier to sign huge sponsors when a Tour de France berth is a fact and not just a distant possibility. But just because I understood the business of the thing didn't mean I had to like losing my ride.

When I went to Belgium the first time, I had a big duffel bag full of clothes, my bike, and a spare set of wheels. Now, after hundreds of races against the best cyclists in the world, miles of scar tissue, memories of a hundred crashes, and a working command of several different languages, I was heading to the States with nothing more than a duffel bag and a couple of bikes—bikes that I would come to find were second-rate. When I began my big European adventure, I had a couple of addresses in my pocket but was not completely sure where I would end up living. This trip was not all that different.

That October I headed to Minneapolis, hoping everything would magically fall into place when I got there. I had spent two weeks in Minneapolis the previous July and had gotten to know the guys at the Flanders Brothers bike shop. While I was in Belgium, I'd been keeping in touch with Charlene, my high school girlfriend, who'd visited me in Philadelphia earlier that year. We had laid out a plan for me to stay with her for a while, although it was a vague plan at best. But then she'd gone dark, moving and changing phone numbers after having her apartment burglarized three times in a week, so we had not spoken for several weeks before my flight.

My flight originated in Brussels and landed in Chicago. Having developed the style and mannerisms of a person from northern Europe, I was generally offered the Dutch-language newspapers.

I usually took them, as they would (in most cases) protect me from having to talk with any overenthusiastic American vacationers wanting to educate me in the European history and culture they'd become expert in over the course of the preceding six days. Though I was free from sitting next to any of my fellow Americans, there was a gaggle of them behind me and across the aisle. The most notable of the group was a giant of a man in his 50s or 60s. He spoke slowly and loudly, with a bit of a drawl that suggested he probably came from Oklahoma or Texas. By the way he carried himself, practically swaggering as he sat in his tiny airline seat, I would have bet money that he'd been a good football player back in his day. He was with his wife, I guessed, and several other couples about the same age. I listened as they recounted their trip at a volume so loud that I felt people might also be hearing them from the ground.

This was the first time in years that I had seen a group of traveling Americans, and I was surprised at how much culture shock the experience was giving me. Other than the insane volume level, there was nothing offensive or ugly about these Americans. In fact, I believe I have traveled with more ugly Europeans than ugly Americans. These people were talking about the food and the weather and the buildings they had seen and the beds they had slept in. They missed home and were tired of European food but nevertheless were happy to have experienced other countries and cultures, however touristy their trip had been. As I listened, I began to wonder what it was going to be like to live in a foreign country, even though I had a passport that said I was one of its citizens. I'd spent six years in Ursel, Belgium, more time than in any American town or state I'd ever lived in. My room on the third floor of Albert and Rita Clayes's

Café Sportswereld had become my home, and I wondered how long it would take to become homesick. As I would come to find out, it didn't take long at all.

I slotted back into American life slowly, opting to keep my European daily ritual intact. Each day I would get up, have coffee, bread, and jelly, get suited up, and then go for a ride. The problem with cycling in Minnesota in the late fall is that the weather can go from bad to worse in a big hurry. That was exactly what happened at the end of October, when 31 inches of snow dropped on the Twin Cities in just 24 hours. Minnesotans are a tough lot and accepted the snowfall with typical Nordic stoicism. For them, it meant a rare day off from work or school, maybe even a chance to play in the snow. But I was nearly paralyzed. All I could envision was all the hours I would now be spending indoors, riding my bike nowhere atop the training rollers while watching terrible talk shows.

On the day after the big storm, I grabbed my mountain bike and headed off to the Flanders Brothers bike shop to lament the end of riding for the foreseeable future. Much to my surprise, the guys were giddy about this fresh snowfall, explaining that we would now be able to ride on the snowmobile trails. As the son of parents born and raised in Michigan, I had seen snowmobile trails only on trips back to the Motor State, where we had ridden them on one of my cousins' old Ski-Doo or John Deere sleds. I had a hard time picturing bikes on the same trails. The guys straightened me out, though. At the right temperature and with the proper tires, they assured me, a mountain bike could

not only ride on top of the snow but could also be a lot of fun. I agreed to trust my new friends and let them prepare my bike for a training ride on snow.

When Sunday arrived, the temperature was pushing into the 20s, with lots of bright sunlight to soften things up further. It seems that the ideal temperature for mountain biking in the snow lies somewhere between 5 and 15 degrees Fahrenheit. Warmer temperatures, though better for my body and overall disposition, are hell for riding. As the temperature inched upward toward freezing, the snow began to melt into a thick, sloppy slurry, making every pedal stroke feel like I was reliving a muddy Paris-Roubaix when my wheel was broken and both brakes were dragging on the rims. The melted snow also created a watery film atop the ice that provided zero traction, and just as on the muddy cobbles of France, suddenly and for no apparent reason the bike would point 90 degrees in a different direction and my body would hit the ground before I had a chance to react. The only part that differentiated the Queen of the Classics from this Sunday ride from Chaska to Belle Plain and back was that the crashes on the snow happened at a top speed somewhere around 18 miles per hour, as opposed to the 20 to 30 that could be expected in the Hell of the North.

I rode this round-trip Chaska–Belle Plain loop almost every weekend from the beginning of October until almost the end of January. The trek always took somewhere in the vicinity of four hours. It did not matter if it was 24 degrees or minus 14 degrees; the ride always lasted about the same amount of time. In warmer temperatures, you had to pick yourself up from a crash every few minutes. In colder temperatures, traction could be incredibly

good, but what time we gained in not falling we lost in stopping to get warm. Our hands and toes would lose feeling so fast that we'd stop every few minutes to run and clap our hands together in the hope that some blood and feeling would come back into them. They say every important European race win takes a year off a rider's life. I am pretty sure each snowmobile-trail ride on mountain bikes from Chaska to Belle Plain and back does exactly the same thing.

After the crazy Halloween snowstorm heckled Minnesota in 1991, we road bike riders were treated to some uncharacteristically dry conditions for the remainder of the winter. That meant that we were actually able to ditch the snow riding for road bike riding by the beginning of February. I was a man on a mission to pile up as many miles as possible so I could hit the U.S. racing circuit and make my mark quickly. Almost all the pro bike racers I've ever known possess a creature-of-habit gene that causes them to resist too much exploration, opting instead to train repeatedly on routes they already know. Being no different, I learned new routes usually only on Sundays, when I rode with the Minneapolis Bicycle Racing Club (MBRC).

I had grown used to riding alongside any strange combination of pro bike racers in Europe, but riding with the MBRC gang took a little getting used to. In Europe when we were training, riders would pair up and take equal turns riding at the front of the group. In large groups I only had to put my nose out in the wind every hour and a half or so. Our MBRC rides were not the same.

For many, the goal was simply to survive the ride, and they were not following the old Belgian protocol. Others planned to turn off early, cutting the ride to 45 miles. In other words, the military precision of a training ride in Europe was not happening, and my nose was in the wind a lot of the time. At first I was scared that I was going to be working a bunch and then also get worked over at the end, but I didn't, and I grew to like the extra work; it made me feel like I was back in the Tour de Suisse, setting tempo for my team leader as I had done the previous spring.

As the new year of 1992 rolled in, I was beginning to feel a glint of race fitness, but I still didn't have a team. The money I had saved from my Euro team salary and race winnings was running out, and my Tulip team clothing was getting threadbare. In fact, my two-tone green Tulip bib shorts had dime-sized holes where the chamois was stitched to the Lycra, exposing a view of my butt for all of my riding partners to see. I desperately wanted some new clothing and a team, but no one was calling.

Before Johnny Tomac had won the UCI Mountain Bike World Championship in Il Ciocco, Italy, in 1991, he had talked about putting a small team together, including Bob Roll—"Bobke"—and me, to compete in selected road and mountain bike races. Tomac had ridden with the Motorola road team in Europe with Roll, and combining our talents on a stateside team seemed like a good fit. After he won the worlds, though, he became a one-man empire, and any talk of building a team around him disappeared. Bobke became Greg LeMond's Z teammate and sole mountain bike racer. I started thinking about moving over to the mountain bike side of cycling, but never having raced a mountain bike was not helping to open any sponsorship doors. I started thinking about trading in my USPRO professional racing license for an amateur one.

I telephoned the USCF in Colorado Springs to find out if I could regain my amateur status. Without too much button-pushing hassle, I found myself talking with the correct person. I asked if it was possible to obtain a USCF racing license after having had a professional racing license for the previous five years. The nice woman assured me that I would be able to race as an amateur once again, no problem. I jokingly asked if I'd have to start all over as a Category V, the beginner's category.

"No," she explained. "Usually we start you back as a Category II or III. If you feel you should be a Category I, you'll need to submit a résumé for review."

"Serious?" was all I could come up with.

I had never understood the distinction between the top two USCF categories, since they are typically combined at all but about three races on the calendar. I thought it was even stranger that in giving up my professional status to race as an amateur, I'd have to prove my mettle as a bike racer via résumé before being allowed to race in the top amateur category. Imagine a Nextel Cup driver, even one who has never won a Nextel Cup race, being asked to submit a résumé before getting to race in the top category in a Friday-night dirt-track race.

I had stayed in touch with John Eustice over the course of the winter, picking his brain for available rides. John had been one of the American pioneers of European cycling; he had raced in Europe as a 19-year-old junior, turned pro on a French team with Sean Kelly in 1982, and won the first two USPRO Championships in 1982 and '83. I looked to him for advice on returning to the domestic racing scene since he had done it himself. I called John and told him about the conversation that I'd just had with the woman at the USCF.

“Joe, no,” he said. “Don’t do it. You are a pro. You’ve been racing as a pro. As long as you want to continue racing, you need to race with a pro license.”

A few days after the conversation with Eustice, I got a call from Kyle Schmeer, the owner of Cycles BiKyle, a boutique bicycle shop in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, one of the wealthier suburbs on Philadelphia’s Main Line. With his shop’s proceeds Kyle and a Philadelphia auto dealer, Rip Scott, had been fielding a team of professionally licensed cyclists for the CoreStates USPRO Championship, held on the streets of Philadelphia since 1985. Now they were ready to step up their level of commitment and have a regionally based pro team campaigning the entire season. The core squad was to be a small one, made up of Tom Armstrong, Matt Eaton, Dan Fox, Jeff Rutter, and me. Additional riders would be brought on board for selected stage races and the bigger one-day races. The offer from Kyle was a bike, clothing, shoes, and other equipment and \$4,500 for the year.

It was a miserable offer. Had I just returned from Belgium, that amount of money would have broken me. I know I would have declined on some misguided principle alone. But now I just wanted to race again and was being given the opportunity to do just that. I had already been presented with several better offers, but all of them were from teams that were still trying to secure sponsorship, and each offer was contingent on deals being struck that were out of my control. I slept on Kyle’s offer, and I accepted it the next day.

Riding for Scott/BiKyle required me to go to Philadelphia so that I could travel with my teammates. I’d hoped that I would just be able to fly in and out of Minneapolis, meeting up with the guys in Philly or some other convenient spot, but this was not

going to be part of the deal. There wasn't enough money in the budget for that, so I was expected to base myself in Bryn Mawr for the season. With most of my cash gone, I was forced to buy a one-way Greyhound bus ticket to get me from Minneapolis to Philadelphia. I packed my well-worn Tulip team Koga-Miyata bike in my even older TVM team bike bag, filled my hard-sided suitcase with clothing, stuffed some music, magazines, and other essentials in my backpack, and headed for the bus station. I'd ridden the dog before, mostly on shorter trips such as Minneapolis to Chicago, but this was to be a 34-hour adventure of pain, boredom, and stink, the likes of which I had not previously experienced.

I don't know if it was the time of year or some sick Greyhound promotion, but on every leg of the trip the bus was full. For the most part, Greyhound riders are not adventurous kids with little money or old ladies scared to fly. In fact, most of the people with whom I would share the stale bus air were downright disgusting.

The ride from Minneapolis to Chicago took close to 9 hours and included a snack break at McDonald's in Tomah, Wisconsin. That leg of the trip was the easiest. In Chicago I had to change buses, and the real pain began. Two guys I came to think of as the Smoky Brothers climbed on board in Chicago. I'm pretty sure there's a cigarette-company exec enjoying a yacht moored at some private island somewhere who owes at least a letter of thanks and maybe a free carton of smokes to the brothers for enriching his coffers. At each stop the smoking siblings would suck down as many heaters as possible, practically bathing in the exhaled smoke from their foul-smelling brand of choice. Miraculously, we would somehow find ourselves sitting way too close to each other each time we reboarded the bus after a stop.

For what seemed like the longest stint of the trip, however, I sat next to a very large, very drunk, and very sleepy man who found it completely acceptable to lean his head on my shoulder as he fell asleep and to snore in the direction of my face. In addition to his rank breath, the rest of him exuded a combination of BO, cheap booze, cigarettes, and some other foul funk that I couldn't pinpoint. Each time he nodded off, his mouth would open and his head would tilt in my direction. As soon as I felt hair touch my shoulder, I would elbow the guy in the ribs, he would wake up, and the process would begin again.

I arrived in downtown Philly in the midmorning, tired and a little sore from sitting for so long. The experience reminded me of when I had arrived in Belgium for the first time and had to figure out what to do. As my English was still coming back to me at this point, it even seemed like I was in a foreign country. The overpronounced vowels of Minnesota were now replaced by the choppy accents of the eastern United States. I hopped on a Paoli Local commuter train bound for Bryn Mawr and managed to get off at the right stop. Once on the ground, I walked the quarter mile to Cycles BiKyle, bike bag on my shoulder and suitcase in tow. I am sure Kyle and his employees were not so sure about the pro bike racer they'd hired to represent them when I walked in. I certainly wasn't dressed like a bike racer, and with the weariness in my bones from riding the dog, I looked like a refugee. In many ways, I was.

My teammates and I traveled south to do some racing. It was already past Classics season in Europe—Paris-Roubaix, the Tour

of Flanders, and Ghent-Wevelgem were long gone—and I had yet to race my bike. It turned out that the huge amount of miles I'd been riding through the Minneapolis winter wasn't the right way to prepare for American racing. Flogging my legs in the cold and wind might have made me tough, but it was a grinding sort of toughness that would have been good for the Ronde van Vlaanderen or Paris-Roubaix. The southeastern U.S. circuit we'd be tackling was made up of a series of superfast criteriums—circuit races of many laps of a mile or so each, often around downtown squares or office parks. To do well in a U.S. criterium, you had to be pushy and aggressive in the corners and be able to accelerate repeatedly during all the yo-yoing in the pack as it sped up and slowed down for each corner on the course. When I went to Belgium the first time after learning my racing chops on the U.S. crit circuit, I was amazed at how much more slowly the Belgians rode through the corners than the pace I was accustomed to. In fact, I used to shoot up the inside before most turns, taking the front spot just to see what kind of gap I could put on the next guy as I came out of the corner. It was incredible; I could sometimes take as much as four bike lengths without even really pushing it. Back in the States, though, I was now wondering whether my cornering skills had lapsed to beginner levels. In the first race that I rode with my new team, our man Jeff Rutter took the win. Although I was happy for Jeff, I was more than a little concerned that I hadn't lived up to my end of the bargain.

Even though my criterium speed was lacking and my cornering skills a bit rusty, I still kept up my long mileage training program. People—including me—assumed that someone who had raced in the professional ranks in Europe should be able to step back into the domestic racing scene and win races at will. In my case,

that simply was not true. I believe that part of my problem was a lack of the familiar flow of the day-to-day life as a bike racer. But I think it was also the fact that despite my birth certificate, passport, and driver's license saying I was an American, I felt like I was in a foreign country. In fact, in America I was like a Belgian who was asked to ride somewhere else. When we traveled from Belgium to any number of lesser races beyond the border, my teammates would lose all motivation to suffer hard enough to perform well. They weren't racing in front of their local fans, and they weren't racing on roads they knew; quite often they simply went through the paces, racing hard enough not to lose face or endanger their jobs but not really caring about the outcome. I had never felt this way when I lived there because, I guess, I considered all of Europe to be my goal. But back home in the States, I was finding that I was not all that motivated.

There was another problem too. In Europe I had a job to do. It was my responsibility to control the race and work for the team. My teams had star riders who relied upon the help I could give them. I didn't have that with the Scott/BiKyle team. It was a great group of guys, and had there been even one star on the team, we would all surely have risen to the occasion.

Meaning and purpose were not far away, however. Our little team was not even on the radar for a spot in the multiday Tour DuPont stage race that had a prize list glitzy enough to attract some of the sport's major teams. But the perfectly respectable Thrift Drug Classic in Pittsburgh, the Kmart Tour of West Virginia, and the CoreStates USPRO Championship in Philadelphia that followed DuPont were on our agenda. Knowing that the guys who had raced the Tour DuPont would all either be flying (in which case they'd be untouchable) or completely wrecked (in

which case they'd be dangerous to be around), I wasn't looking at Pittsburgh or West Virginia as anything but training. It was a good thing too because in Pittsburgh I rode about as well as a first-year junior.

West Virginia, on the other hand, was different. After nearly being arrested by a local cop for "playing on my highway" while we were out on a training ride, we arrived in Morgantown, West Virginia, and survived the prologue. After a few stages the Coors Light team needed some help. Coors Light had succeeded 7-Eleven as America's top team, and it was stocked with stars—one of whom, Scott Moninger, was now wearing the leader's jersey. Roy Knickman, who was the Coors team's tempo-setting strongman, had been worked over by the Tour DuPont, so Len Pettyjohn, the Coors Light team director, found us. These deals always involve money, but truth be told, I would have ridden myself into a coma just to feel like I had something to contribute to the race. Riding to help protect Moninger's jersey was amazingly motivating—cathartic, even—and I found myself riding better than I would have if I had just been pack filler.

I began feeling better, too, as the race wore on. It got to the point, in fact, where Roy continually asked me to slow down. I understood where he was coming from, but I was channeling my Tulip-green-clad self from the Tour de Suisse the year before. I wanted to ride everyone into the ground. It was a great feeling.

After I had spent a couple of days helping the Coors Light guys, Len asked me to come talk with him. I entered the hotel room and sat down with him and Alexi Grewal, another Coors star who had won the 1984 Olympic road race. They asked if I was available for the following season, meaning they wanted to hire me, full time, for the job I was doing for them in West

Virginia. For them, I'm sure it was all straightforward and normal. For me, it was surreal.

They said, "Are you free next year? Would you like to come ride for us?"

But I heard, "Would you like your death sentence overturned to come frolic in paradise?"

Moninger won the Tour of West Virginia, and I got a new lease on life.

Nineteen ninety-two marked my second trip to Philadelphia for the USPRO Championship. I really wasn't looking forward to it. When I had come to Philly the year before with the Tulip team, I had been overlooked by the media and out of shape. Despite the fact that my teammate Michel Zanoli won the event and another teammate, Adri van der Poel, finished fifth to add to our grip of cash, it was a very uncomfortable experience. I was a stranger in a familiar land, and it sucked.

When John Eustice asked if I would be willing to wear an earpiece and microphone in order to give in-race updates for the live television show, I was ecstatic. Now I had a purpose. Today, two-way communication between bike racers and team directors or the media is commonplace, but in 1992 it was cutting-edge. Maybe too cutting-edge because at the 1992 CoreStates USPRO Championship, it was a mess of cumbersome technology that didn't work very well. Basically I was wearing an earbud that was attached, by wire, to a receiver that was only slightly smaller than a shoebox. The transmitter consisted of a microphone that was clipped to my jersey, a wire, and another object that slightly

resembled the first Walkman I ever saw. It had a bunch of knobs and dials that apparently did nothing—twist and turn as I might, nothing happened. I shoved all of this incredible technology into two of my three jersey pockets, leaving just one for the all-essential race food, and cut holes into the new jersey that I'd been saving for this particular race to allow a cleaner routing of the various wires. But even with all of this broadcasting equipment situated, no one could give me a clear answer as to when they were going to talk to me, if at all. Still, I was excited to have the assignment.

The race started, and I listened carefully for any instruction the commentators or show producers might be barking my way. I listened and listened. I turned the volume up and down. Several times I spoke into the microphone: “Check, check, check . . . hello . . . is this on?”

Nothing.

I listened to the sound of static and the voices of the commentators for as long as I could before finally yanking the earbud out and rejoining the race—for what it was worth. I honestly can't tell you who won or what else happened, but I can tell you that I was deaf in my right ear for about a week.

Back in Minnesota I began to feel sorry for myself and was angry that the form I had found in West Virginia was starting to rot. So when one of the brothers from the bike shop, Scott Flanders, called to invite me on a ride from Minneapolis to Duluth, I was suited up before the telephone call was even disconnected. Riding 180-plus miles in a day was exactly what I needed.

We launched at 5 A.M. from Minneapolis. We rolled out through the 'hood and headed toward the long and lonely road north. As soon as we got out of the city, a headwind kicked in, so we opted for a Trophy Baracchi—style attack on our ride, each of us exchanging turns at the front while the other tucked in tight behind and slightly to the side to escape the wind. Riding with Scott was easy because we both enjoyed about the same tempo, and neither of us was overly enamored with idle chitchat. After about a hundred miles, we stopped for lunch in Askov, where the vibe was strikingly akin to the café scene from *Easy Rider*. I felt as if all eyes in the place were burning holes in the back of my jersey. I wolfed down my food as fast as I could and hurried Scott to do the same. We paid the bill and got out of the café unscathed. Although the last 60-mile leg of our ride was definitely the most beautiful part of the journey, I was half expecting a clapped-out pickup truck with shotgun-wielding rednecks to show up at any minute, so I kept my eyes and ears open to avoid becoming a stain on the side of Highway 23.

Originally the plan was for us to ride to Duluth and hang out with Scott's in-laws for the weekend. Scott and his wife, Linda, would give me a ride back to Minneapolis Sunday evening, or I could take the bus. But with 180 miles of headwind behind me, I figured my best choice was to head back home by myself the following morning.

We woke up early, and Scott guided me out of town. Of course, as soon as he left me the wind started to pick up. It shifted from being the glorious anticipated tailwind to an evil, morale-killing headwind. I plodded along just fine until about 40 miles from home. That was when the wheels came off the wagon. Suddenly it wasn't possible for me to find a gear selection that worked; it was

either too big or too small. It got to the point where the only thing I could get to work was a 53×14 at a ridiculously low cadence. I was also out of fuel, and my reserve tank was overdrawn. I had to stop at every convenience store I saw to buy another can of Coke and two-pack of Twinkies, doughnuts, or whatever other refined sugar product I could find. But after almost 11 hours and a half-million stops along the way, I found home.

Next on the Scott/BiKyle agenda was a little three-stage omnium in Cincinnati, Ohio, called Cyclebration. Stage one was a 1-kilometer uphill time trial, so we set out by bike to ride the 20 miles from our hotel to the start. As is often the case when planning a bike ride in an unfamiliar town, we picked the worst possible route. Road construction turned the four-lane road into a two-lane nightmare. On top of that, the start of the race was scheduled for late afternoon, which meant we were riding in rush hour, and people in cars were not all that pleased with us. Nevertheless, we kept ourselves in a single-file line as close to the right side of the road as we could. But that is never really enough.

“Get off the fucking road!” came a scream from the passenger-side backseat of a Ford Explorer. The voice was so hateful and the scream was so intense that I could smell what the man shouting it had eaten for lunch. I was the last one in our single-file line, so I took the brunt of the assault, and something snapped in me.

Without even thinking, I swung to the left and started to chase. I was in my biggest gear, mashing out as much hate as I could with every pedal stroke but brewing up as much hate as I was dispelling. I chased for a couple of miles until it seemed stupid to continue; with a 50 mph speed limit, they were gone. But just as I sat up, ready to throw in the towel, they caught a red light, so I put my head down again.

I rolled up to the SUV, ready to kill. The driver's wife saw me first and slunk down in the front passenger seat until I could no longer see her. The perpetrator of the assault, a very large man in the back, opened his window. I wanted to unleash a rabid soliloquy, but I was wrecked from the effort of the chase.

"What . . . were . . . you . . . thinking?" was all I could get out. I was hanging on to the doorpost by that point and was not about to let go without some form of satisfaction.

"Why the hell are you guys riding in road construction? You need to go ride somewhere else," the driver said.

"You think we did that on purpose, asshole?" I yelled. "We're not from here. We didn't know there would be construction. Don't fucking do that again."

I kept hanging on to the Explorer until I got an acknowledgment. When it came, though it lacked contrition, I let go and soft-pedaled until my teammates caught up with me. It must have been the warm-up I needed because I completely murdered the rest of the field in the prologue.

Stage two was a neat little circuit with a winding climb through a city park. There was no leader's jersey for me to wear, but leading this "stage race" was all the motivation I needed, and I rode away from everyone else to win in the best manner possible. When I crossed the finish line, there was no one else in the photo.

Since accumulated points instead of time determined the overall winner, the final stage was not a formality. I would need to work to defend my lead. But for the first time in my cycling career, the rest of the team rode for me. It was a role in which I was not completely comfortable, but it was interesting nonetheless. In an unexpected twist, former Milk Race champion Matt Eaton did the lion's share of the domestique work for me. In its

day the Milk Race was an extremely important event on the elite amateur cycling calendar, a test that could almost be likened to a Tour de France proving ground. Had Matt refused to do any work to help me in this small race, I would not have been surprised. But he did, allowing me to go home with the overall victory even though I didn't collect the final stage win.

I had heard countless tales of Chequamegon since coming to Minnesota. The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in northern Wisconsin is home to both the American Birkebeiner cross-country ski race and the Chequamegon Fat Tire 40, a 40-mile, point-to-point mountain bike race. Chequamegon is sometimes criticized by mountain bikers as not being a true mountain bike race—until, of course, they ride the event, when they find out just how devastating the varied and undulating terrain can be. In the previous two years Greg LeMond had made the race his own, and his presence had boosted the event's prestige immeasurably. LeMond had fallen sick and was skipping the 1992 race, but other fast guys, including Tom Schuler, had signed up.

Before the race I managed to pull together sponsorship from Gary Fisher Bicycles and RockShox, makers of the suspension forks. Hearing that there would be a lot of mostly dry dirt roads on the course this year, I had the tires pumped to almost 60 pounds per square inch of pressure. I lined up in the “preferred start” group just before the giant peloton of 1,600 riders rolled out of downtown Hayward behind a lead ATV. I stayed as close to the ATV as possible until we hit the first section of Birkie trail at a place called Rosie's Field. As soon as we were officially

racing, I put my head down and went as hard as I could, hoping to eventually end up in the front group. As luck would have it, that group consisted of just three of us.

Locals Erik Ringsrud and Dewey Dickey had both spent time racing as elite-level amateurs in Europe, so I felt that I was in good company. Erik was also an accomplished mountain bike racer who had won a fair amount of races around the Midwest. We rode as if we'd made the decisive breakaway in one of the Classics; everything was smooth. The miles clicked past, and as I'd done so many times before, I counted my breakaway companions—one, two—and banked on finishing no worse than third.

But as we entered the final 3 miles of the race—a twisty section of double-track, complete with some short, steep climbs—my years of riding on the front, fighting with the wind, or simply holding on for dear life got the better of my breakaway companions, and I rode away from them. At the top of the last descent I could see the crowd gathered for the finish. Although they numbered in the hundreds, to me it was as good as if I were soloing in for victory in one of the Classics or the World Championships that I'd raced in Belgium; my eyes saw hundreds of thousands of spectators. I adjusted my jersey and saluted the crowd just as a great champion would.