

Where There's a Will

Hope, Grief and Endurance in a
Cycle Race Across a Continent

Emily Chappell



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You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

(from 'Postscript', by Seamus Heaney)

Prologue



I woke up on my back. All around me the long grass quietly tossed and turned in the wind, and above me the moonless sky was fading from indigo to grey. For a moment or two I was blank, not knowing where I was – perhaps not quite remembering *who* I was – and lacked the energy to wonder how it was that I might have ended up here, in the corner of this field.

I turned my head to the left and saw the outline of my bike, lying in the shelter of the hedge. And there beside it were my orange helmet and my cycling shoes, neatly lined up as I always left them when I stopped for these brief snoozes. Now I remembered. I was in a race.

I had crossed the border into Slovenia a few hours before, and suddenly the world had darkened and quietened. Italy's ubiquitous mopeds and bustling late-night gelaterias gave way to a smooth road that led me calmly through lightless

villages, only discernible because my headlamp caught the yellow road signs that announced their presence, and past grassy fields, which I regarded with indecent longing until I finally, inevitably, gave in to my exhaustion, stepped through an open gateway, took my shoes and helmet off, and lay down on the ground.

The previous evening I had noticed myself becoming obsessed with sleep, the way an anorexic obsesses about food, unable to think of anything but what I denied myself, constantly making plans I wouldn't allow myself to carry out, appraising every garden and grass verge I passed for its sleeping potential, but forcing myself to push onwards until I found the next one. I despised myself for my weakness whenever I caved in and lay down. The race leaders were only sleeping twenty minutes a day. I had had over an hour in a park in Treviso that afternoon. That ought to be enough.

I had been following a long, straight road that ran west to east, just north of Venice, and although it only passed through a few settlements large enough to be mapped as towns, it seemed constantly populated along its length with hamlets, and houses, and restaurants, and supermarkets, and where there weren't any of these things there were farms and orchards and vineyards, mostly fenced off or separated from the road by a ten-foot ditch with water at the bottom, all apparently designed to prevent an exhausted cyclist from getting a moment of the sleep she persistently denied herself.

As the night drew on I stopped ever more frequently, for an espresso to keep me going, or a gelato that I only ate so that I could more legitimately ask the heavily made-up waitresses if I could use the bathroom, and if they might fill my bottle. Since the bottle was an aerodynamic, spaceship-shaped affair, designed to fit onto the aerobars of my

bike, I usually had to explain, using pidgin Italian and sign language, what it was and how it was filled, and as closing time drew near I clearly failed at this, because a few miles down the road I discovered that the last waitress had in fact handed the bottle back empty.

I slept for ten-minute stretches on the grass outside a deserted garden centre, and in the woods between a shopping mall and a playing field, disturbed by a curious hedgehog who came snuffling through the scorched grass and very nearly walked into my leg, before turning tail and scuttling off into the darkness. Sometime after midnight I was woken up by two sets of headlights shining straight onto me, and when I opened my eyes, blinking into the unexpected blaze of light, I saw a couple of silhouetted figures staggering towards me as if in a nightmare, while muttered conversations from the two cars, and a piercing female voice asking '*esta male?*' told me that I had been wrong in my assumption that no one at this out-of-town restaurant would notice an exhausted cyclist and a well-laden bike, briefly resting in its gardens. I leapt apologetically to my feet, grabbed my bike, and was on my way again before they were even back in their cars, wondering what they must be saying to each other about what they had just seen, and whether it would be with curiosity, disgust or downright pity that they remembered me.

Now I had left the clamour of Italy behind me, and Slovenia was silent. Few cars passed me – they were all on the motorway, which curved along the higher edges of this valley, often crossing a gulf or gully on enormous concrete stilts, while my smaller road edged gradually upwards along its floor. Alongside me, nothing but empty fields and darkened villages. Above me, the fading sky. All around me, the bullying wind.

When I checked the time on my phone, I was only slightly surprised to see that, despite my sense of waking from long slumber, it was only eleven minutes and twenty-nine seconds since I'd set the alarm, for a generous twenty minutes, before resting my head on the grass, and falling into deep sleep so violently that it felt like dark claws were reaching up from the depths to snatch me under. Sometimes I would hear myself groan aloud as I sank into this whirlpool – but I would always awaken, cleanly and suddenly, between ten and twelve minutes later, staring up at the sky, wondering where I was and how many hours I had lost, then turning, standing, putting on my shoes and helmet, and getting back on the bike, because really, there was nothing else to do.

Once, in a field outside Verona, I had awoken to find that dawn was breaking above me, and an ant was doing laps of my neck, round and round and round, on and on, wondering if she would ever reach the end.

I had lost sight of the end myself. Istanbul was still over a week's ride away, so impossibly distant that there was no point fixating on it. I thought about the next town, the next bend in the road, the next sleep, the next meal. I reminded myself, as I had many times before, that if I just kept going, eventually my destination would appear.

I got back on the bike, and I kept going.

Chapter One



‘What are you *doing* here?’ exclaimed my father, tucking his nightshirt into his hastily fastened trousers, and beaming as he forgave me for dragging him out of bed to answer the door at 8 a.m. ‘You’re soaked to the *skin*! You should have phoned me – I’d’ve picked you up from the station.’

‘I haven’t ridden from the station,’ I replied, and watched his face change again as the penny slowly dropped.

He hustled me inside, grimacing as he hugged me and the water audibly oozed from my clothes, lit the wood burner, made me a cup of tea, and settled down for a blow-by-blow account. I had left London shortly after lunch the previous day, stopped off for a cup of tea at my brother’s workshop in Oxford, and then carried on through the rainy November night towards Mid Wales, fretting about my front light, which was already on the blink, with twelve hours of darkness to go.

I had turned to Twitter.

On overnight ride and front light failing. Can anyone in Chipping Norton, Evesham, Worcester lend me a spare? (Will post back.)

I didn't hold out much hope that this would work, but I entertained a fantasy that someone like me, familiar with the trials of long-distance cycling, would answer my plea, and offer me not only a light, but also a couple of minutes of meaningful encounter with someone who *understood* why I might be cycling 200 miles through the rain, unlike the oblivious staff of the petrol stations I occasionally stopped in.

As it turns out, this was exactly what happened. A few cycling acquaintances retweeted my plea, and within an hour a user called @SirWobbly had replied, offering to lend me a light if I was still anywhere near Worcester. And a few miles out I became aware of a car parked up ahead of me, and a shadowy figure standing in the middle of the road, flagging me down.

'Are you looking for a light, by any chance?' asked the figure.

'Funny you should ask,' I grinned, pulling into the layby.

I couldn't quite believe that a person would drive out in the middle of the night to lend a bike light to a stranger, but things became a little clearer when he explained that he was a long-time audax rider and, as such, perfectly accustomed to hanging around in lay-bys at odd hours, in the company of sleep-deprived people in Lycra.

Although it originates in France, I can't help but think of audax as a peculiarly British phenomenon. It's an amateur sport in which participants ride extremely long distances, completing a prescribed route within a predefined time limit. The minimum any audaxer will consider

worthwhile is 200km, and the most popular distances are 300km, 400km and 600km, along with hallmark events such as Paris-Brest-Paris, which takes place every four years, attracts riders from all over the world, and covers 1,200km in just ninety hours. There are no winners in audax. Success is measured simply by whether you complete the ride before the cut-off – and despite the incredible achievements of its riders, it has successfully dodged the limelight for years, partly thanks to the self-acknowledged stereotype of the audaxer as a socially awkward middle-aged man, powering sternly through the rain on his Dawes Galaxy, and carefully avoiding eye contact as a volunteer serves him his cup of tea and plate of baked beans in one of the draughty village halls that typically host audax controls.

I had fallen in with a crowd of audaxers soon after I took up cycling, and although I had only been on one or two of the shorter rides, I had developed a strong admiration for these riders, who covered the sort of distances each weekend that most people would consider a lifetime's achievement, worthy of sponsorship and media coverage and universal admiration. Often, when I read of a new round-the-world record, or when a roadie friend would boast about the 200km sportive he was training for that summer, I would think of the audaxers, many of whom will quite happily cover 400 miles in a weekend, before heading back to work on Monday morning, simply because they claim to enjoy it.

Although he was more gregarious than the stereotype, my new friend seemed in many ways a typical audaxer. He was in his fifties, bald and slightly stout, with no physical indication whatsoever that he might be capable of cycling hundreds of miles a day. And yet, he informed me as I sorted through the collection of lights laid out in the boot of his car, he would be riding Paris-Brest-Paris for the fifth time that

August. I should have a go at it myself, he suggested, telling me of the festive atmosphere that follows riders from Paris all the way to the coast and back, villagers cheering them on and shops and bars opening through the night to fuel them.

‘It’s like nothing else,’ he said. ‘Can you imagine that happening in this country? It’s something you should experience at least once.’

‘Ah, I’d love to,’ I replied, ‘but I’m planning on doing the Transcontinental.’

I hadn’t fully known that this was the case until I let the words out of my mouth. The Transcontinental was a race across Europe – covering the unfathomable distance from Belgium to Istanbul. It had only existed a couple of years, and was strikingly different from any other bike race I had heard of. Riders were forbidden outside support (unless it was unplanned and spontaneously offered by people they met), so would have to carry everything they needed (or buy it as they went), and there wasn’t even a set route – just four checkpoints, spaced out across the continent. Unlike the bloated monsters of the Tour de France and the Giro, the Transcontinental had no publicity caravan, and almost no spectators, save for a few family and friends who would turn up at the start to set the racers off, then watch online as their satellite trackers crept across the map.

Thirty riders had competed in the first year, setting off with minimal fanfare, and mostly camping in fields as they flitted across Europe, riding up to 400km a day. The following year many returned, more joined them, and it was rumoured that 2015 might see over 100 competitors.

I had never entered a race before, let alone one 4,000km long, and I was puzzled by my growing conviction that this was something I wanted to do – that I *could* do. I wasn’t a stranger to long-distance cycling. I had worked as a bike

messenger for several years, riding around 300 miles a week, and when that initially impossible challenge mellowed into a daily routine, I'd spent eighteen months cycling across Asia. But I had never thought of myself as an athlete. Couriering was a job – albeit a fairly active one – and bike touring had felt more like an indulgent backpacker lifestyle than a physical challenge. Until now I had looked on my strength and fitness as enjoyable side effects of my chosen lifestyle, rather than assets in themselves.

Admitting my ambition to race the Transcontinental felt dangerously presumptuous, yet I recognised the vertiginous feeling of saying it out loud. I had felt the same when I got a job as a cycle courier, worried I wouldn't last the first week – and when I tremulously set out to cycle round the world, hoping that in doing so I might turn myself into the kind of person who was capable of such a thing.

I knew Sir Wobbly would have heard of the Transcontinental, though in classic audax fashion he offered no admiration, acknowledging my intention with a nod and a grunt and continuing to extoll the delights of PBP. This stranger was now under the impression that I was someone who would casually announce 'I'm planning on doing the Transcon', as if I spent every summer cycling 300km a day across Europe. It was starting to become official, and I now had less than a year to live up to myself.

I accepted a bright front light, thinking as he handed it over of all the miles of tarmac it must have illuminated, and Wobbly convinced me to take a spare back one as well, tutting maternally over what might happen if my only other red light fell off and I didn't notice.

'Would you like a chocolate-covered coffee bean?' I asked, anxious to offer him something in return for all this generosity. 'Or I've got some squashed bananas?'

‘Oh no,’ he replied. ‘I’ve got piles of food for *you!*’ And then, concerned he had been slightly dismissive of my offerings: ‘although that’s the best offer I’ve had in the last ... fifteen seconds.’

He gave a cheeky grin, and handed me a pack of Snickers bars, and a bag of dried fruit, and some energy bars, gleefully piling up the food until I could carry no more. Then he checked the lights were securely fastened to my bike, gave an approving nod when he saw I was riding fixed, told me to get in touch if I needed rescuing within the next two hours, and sent me on my way, passing me with a cheery toot of his horn a moment later.

The following day, as I basked in paternal pride and the glow of the wood burner, relishing the comfort of dry clothes and remembering how horribly my sodden shorts had chafed over the last fifty miles, the entries for the Transcontinental opened.

The race was the brainchild of Mike Hall, a Yorkshireman in his early thirties who had set a new record for circumnavigating the world by bicycle, covering the requisite 18,000 miles in ninety-one days of cycling. The day he rode triumphantly back into Greenwich I was battling into a hot headwind in the Taklamakan Desert in China, and a couple of months later I still had over a thousand miles to go to Tianjin, where I planned to take a ferry to South Korea and, thanks to China’s reluctance to grant me any useful length of visa, only eleven days before I had to leave the country.

I had ridden 100-mile days before, but never eleven in a row, and never with 50kg of luggage on my bike. I was buffeted by wind and rain, diverted by roadworks, slowed down by an unexpected mountain range, and as I struggled through China’s industrial heartlands, found my eyes

itching, my lungs rasping, and my skin powdered dark grey by the chemicals hanging in the air. After a few days of non-stop riding I set out each morning as exhausted as I had felt the previous evening, panicking over the miles still to come. It felt impossible that I could ride another century (and then another, and another), but I had no choice. Outstaying my visa would provoke a bureaucratic nightmare I didn't have it in me to handle. And tempting though it was to shorten the day, and tell myself I'd make up the miles later, I knew I'd only end up falling behind, and making matters worse.

I often thought of Mike Hall during that ride, imagining him (from the reports I'd read of his achievement) as one of the gruff elderly gentlemen I'd followed on audaxes or chased unsuccessfully through the Peak District, knotted legs pumping metronomically astride their hand-built steel frames, faces inscrutable beneath their beards. The knowledge that someone had done something so much harder than I was attempting helped to bring my woes into perspective. If he had covered 200 miles a day, for three months, with legs and lungs and bicycle, then I could surely get through this. I would picture him riding as I rode – occasionally alongside me, but more often in that curious way our minds have of simultaneously witnessing and inhabiting that which we imagine. I wasn't yet convinced of my own strength, but I was of his, so I relied on him to prop me up through my periods of misgiving and self-doubt. But most of all, I looked to him as a new pinnacle of achievement, towards which I could aspire without any particular hope of competing with what he had done, but with some promise of getting farther than I might have otherwise. As far as I was concerned he was a pioneer, breaking a path into unknown territory – 200 miles a day! – that I would

never have had the courage to forge myself, but knew I might one day want to follow.

When I met him, shortly after flying home from Japan in 2013, he wasn't quite as I'd expected. I'd hung back nervously at the start of the evening, a high-profile charity event organised by adventurer Alastair Humphreys, as the other speakers mingled, introduced themselves and swapped stories. I was one of only two women (and had in fact been asked to talk specifically about my gender, as though that were my specialist subject), and everyone else seemed to be a tall, muscular young man with a chiselled jawline. I wondered which of them would turn out to be Mike Hall. The hero I'd thus far known as an abstract collection of strength, endurance and achievement was about to manifest himself in flesh, as if he were a normal person like the rest of us.

Eventually I asked Al to point him out, and was agreeably surprised when my gaze was directed to a man, shorter and stouter and scruffier than I'd imagined, sitting alone at the other end of the row – as if he were as shy as I was. His fuzzy brown hair was in need of a cut, and his gut bulged an inch or so over his belted jeans. I was captivated.

I think, had Mike Hall really been the Greek god I'd imagined, I could only have been less impressed once the flickering image I'd held in my head solidified into flesh. I'd quickly have realised that, like the avenue of young men stretching between us, he was insurmountably different from me, and therefore no longer a valid figure of aspiration. No matter how hard I trained, or how far I cycled, I would never be one of these men, with their expedition beards, their rangy limbs and their broad shoulders. Even at my strongest, six months previously, as I pedalled frantically through China, my days of lean muscularity had been

regrettably brief. Now, after two months of couch-surfing in a wintry London, I had settled into the despair that had hovered like a dark cloud over the final month of my trip, and reverted to pale podginess. My hair was lank and dull, and I had nothing to wear but a laddered base layer and the stained hiking trousers I'd bought in Esfahan a year previously.

'I thought she'd be wiry and waif-like,' remarked a friend, in an online interview he published around that time, 'but she looks sturdy, stocky and strong' – which my unhappy mind translated as 'much fatter than I expected'. I couldn't help but think I was failing to live up to my own reputation. And now here was Mike Hall, apparently failing to live up to his, but I liked him all the more for it.

I was too shy to talk to him for most of the evening, then mustered my courage at the last possible minute, and pursued him up the stairs of the auditorium as he and his friend reached the door of the cinema, shrugging on their jackets. I caught up with him in the foyer and introduced myself, even though presumably he now knew who I was from my talk. I didn't like to assume he'd have paid much attention to someone whose achievements were so pedestrian compared to his.

'And I think I just wanted to say ...' I said, mainly because I had to say *something* to him, now that I had his attention, 'that I really am amazed by what you've done – because I know from what *I've* just done how hard it must have been, and I know I couldn't do it.'

He thanked me with an air of polite surprise, seeming as embarrassed as I was. Through his moustache, I spied the ghost of a harelip.

'How have you been?' I asked. 'I mean, how are you coping, since you got back?'

‘It’s not been the easiest,’ he mused. ‘I wasn’t on the bike much for a bit. I’ve picked up a few days’ couriering in Cardiff now, in fact,’ he said, with a nod to indicate that we had this in common, ‘and ... well, I’m taking the antidepressants.’

His candour surprised me, and for a moment the different versions of Mike Hall jostled against each other in my head – the record-breaking hero, versus this softly spoken, melancholic man who’d had trouble leaving the house. I was still a few weeks away from admitting I was in a similar state myself, but then, he was a little way up the road from me, having finished his ride six months earlier.

‘But it’ll pick up,’ he told me. ‘You know, when you’re going through a really bad patch on the bike, and you tell yourself “this won’t last”.’ He paused, and smiled for the first time. ‘And you know, when you’re going through a really good patch, you know that won’t last either.’

We both laughed, and he turned to the man beside him, as if to apologise for the hold-up, then back towards me.

‘We’re going for a pint, if you fancy it?’

I fancied nothing more than sitting in the corner of some booming central London pub, quietly exchanging stories with one of the few people who wouldn’t expect me to behave like the prodigal cyclist, but I reluctantly excused myself and rejoined my friends, who had pub plans of their own. I failed to keep up with most of their conversation though. The talk I’d given, even though it had only been six minutes long, had wrung all my language and energy out of me, leaving me no verve with which to respond to people’s questions, or follow their tangents. I excused myself after one drink, and gladly got back on my bike to pedal through the cold night, to the spare room in south-west London where my four panniers and their contents were currently piled.