

# Sample Chapters

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## Mile 1: Madison

It seems absurd to say I grew up in a rough neighborhood in an idyllic North Shore suburb of Milwaukee, but it's true. Ever since the first day my mom let me out of the door to play with the neighborhood kids to the last time I saw most of my old neighborhood friends at a New Year's Eve gig in 2001, odds were that we we're going to get in trouble. Lots of it.

Our neighborhood barely existed when we moved in, just a reclaimed wetland ten miles north of downtown Milwaukee. My father was the first one to buy property in the Lower Clovernook section of Glendale and every year the 40-acre open field that we grew up next to was taken over by more and more new houses. Not knowing the intricacies of the real-estate market or anything about property values, we just assumed that the field was ours and anyone taking over any part of it was our enemy. Our Schwinn banana seat equipped cavalry attacked with a vengeance destroying dozens of half-built homes and smashing the windows of those just getting ready to show. We didn't see our selves as vandals - we just thought we were protecting what was ours.

The tow-headed John Burns was our leader and he ruled with an iron fist. I was the same age, but his prowess on the football field dictated his leadership role. Although thin as a twig, Burns was lightening quick and could shred any defense the rest of us could muster. While screaming 'Brock' or 'Merc' in reverence to the Packer's John Brockington and the Dolphin's Mercury Morris, Burns could juke out any of the big kids and just pile drive the little ones. I imagine that between 1969 and 1976 when my high school swimming coach forbade me to play any more football, we probably played 1200 four hour football games. We played in pouring rain, mountains of snow and below zero temperatures. Burns lined up everyone at midfield and the two of us picked teams. He always got first pick because he'd always won the game before - all 1200 of them.

While football was our passion it merely served as a way to determine the pecking order for our potentially deadly forays into the newly developing suburb of Glendale. The southern border of Lower Clovernook was a raised railroad track that served as our link with the outside world. Our rock-war enemies lived south of the tracks on Bender Road and as we ventured west we came across the long bridge that spanned the Milwaukee River to Kletzsch Park. One of the rights of passage into our gang was to walk up to the banks of the river and climb the 50-ft steel trestle that led to one of our clubhouses located on a cement pillar above one of the last chunks of farmland left in Milwaukee County. When Burns and I started climbing it we were 12 years old and tall enough to reach over the tops of each steel section and pull ourselves up. But the little guys, Lee, Reilly and my brother Bagus, had to cling to the edges using rivets and welds for grips and footholds. The penalty for slipping was a nice 50 foot drop onto a concrete slab. The climb was difficult for me, but harrowing for those guys. Once onto the trestle you walked your way along four-inch girders under the tracks until you came to our clubhouse on the pillar. The older guys, Ox, Speedy, Toys and another brother Dan, could hold onto the girder over their heads. The little guys, however, had to balance on the lower girder 50 feet above the field. But that wasn't the end of it. In order to be a member of Bridge Club you had to wait for an oncoming train, climb up to the tracks and moon the conductor while the gazillion ton locomotive sped by with the force of an earthquake inches away from your ass. After that what would you fear from a few cops trying to chase you away from a new subdivision?

As it turns out none of us ever developed into good football players, but the Bridge Club did serve me quite well. In order to clean ourselves up after football games our mothers would give us a quarter and send us up to the Nicolet High School swimming pool for free swim. It was always an adventure for us, as we had to dodge the few adequate enemies we had in the wimpy gentrified neighborhood of Upper Clovernook. It was best we got to the pool unnoticed so we could lock our Schwinn stingrays without them interfering. Those guys were of course older bullies and never amounted to anything (ahhh, to the writer goes the glory!). Once at the pool we again asserted our dominance by taking over the diving board at the deep end. While the dweebs from the established neighborhoods of Glendale did little hops and nose plugged jumps, we assault-

ed the plank with a vengeance. We leapt high into the air to catch nerf passes thrown by the life guards and try just about anything they asked us to do - including the brazen belly-button first entry dubbed 'The Gohela' by my older brother Andy, a lifeguard and a member of the Nicolet Swim Team. I can't really put a finger on when, but eventually it became clear that Bridge Club matched up much better with the diving board than the football field.

In 1975, my brother Andy was a junior and a decent swimmer, making the team out of pure perseverance. My sisters Sue and Nari were on the Nicolet Knights Timette squad. The Timettes wore cheerleading outfits, clocked the swimmers, and helped keep things organized for the coaches. Coach Chuck Walter's boys were the reigning swimming powerhouse of the Braveland Conference in Southeastern Wisconsin, but that only drew a slew of parents and siblings to the meets.

The main event (and the one that brought the babes over from the varsity basketball games) was the one-meter diving. In 1975 Walters' swimmers were overshadowed by a pair of tricksters that were ranked first and second in the state. Mark Rosandich was a good spinner and had cat-like quickness, but Keith Potter held all the school records and had the flair of a champion that I'd never seen before. When he stepped up to the board the crowd turned dead silent. All eyes were on the sandy-haired Potter as he approached the end of the board and snapped his iron-tight physique into a high graceful hurdle. His big trick was the front 1 ½ with 2 twists. With a 2.7 degree of difficulty it was the toughest dive in the state, and he knew how to put the thing in the water. He soared in the air, popped into his twists, and then neatly squared out just above the board. He dropped it vertically in the six-foot space between the lane markers.

The crowd's silence would morph into manic caterwauling that wouldn't stop until the referee blew his whistle - much like a judge ordering silence in the courtroom. Potter would pop out of the water, smile at his coach, Don Osborne, and then calmly return to his seat with another win under his Speedo. Watching him from the bleachers one would have thought he had the body of a tall lean shortstop. But as he approached his friends in the stands, his short stature revealed an inner strength and confidence that projected larger than life when viewed from afar. I was a grade school pipsqueak and I began to see diving as my only way out.

This went on every week in the winter of '74 -'75 until late February when it was time for the public school state swimming championship. The state meet was held in at the Natatorium on the campus of the University of Wisconsin in Madison, about 90 minutes away. I wasn't allowed to go as I was only in seventh grade and this was an overnight excursion for the team and the fans. Hotels were packed, and Madison's State Street became an unruly chaos that was inappropriate for a Catholic grade-schooler.

My mom called from the pool in Madison to tell me that the team hadn't done so well in the prelims but Potter was in the hunt after the first eight of eleven dives. The finals were televised on Channel 18, an unaffiliated local station long before the days of cable. Normally Channel 18 was showing Speed Racer or Gumby but when I pulled on the TV set (no zapper yet either) I heard the announcer say, "Live from the University of Wisconsin Natatorium, The 1975 WIAA State Swim Meet!" My hair was still frozen after running home from practicing some dives at Nicolet's pool.

I tossed down a full package of Little Debbie sugar bombs as the first few swimming events got under way. Then I settled in for the diving. Potter's first dive was his front dive with a half-twist. He confidently took it up in the air, pointed down towards the water then gently made the half turn and sliced the water. The TV camera showed the scores - all 7's and 8's - then panned to the confident look of Coach Osborne on the deck of the pool. "You can't win a meet with required dives," he always said. "But you sure can lose 'em if you blow one."

Next up was his front 2-½ tuck. It wasn't the most difficult dive in his list, but it was one he knew he could hit. He stood it up, spun like a top and kicked out drilling the entry for 9's and taking the lead. I shot off the couch and screamed with my two little brothers Dan and Bagus. Of my seven siblings, four were at the meet and the three youngest were at home watching it on TV. We were a Nicolet swimming family, and watching one of our guys go for the gold medal in Madison was as big as life got. Finally it was time for the big double twister. Up in the air he went spinning as tight as a pencil. He squared out, looked at the water and disappeared without a trace. The three of us burst off the couch and shook our fists knowing that it was over. The TV camera's panned the crowd showing what appeared to be an entire stadium of people doing much the same thing we were doing. Potter collected 7's and 8's then ran over and hugged Osborne with a tear in his eye and his finger in the air. He'd done it. He capped off an unbeaten season with a State Championship and an All-American qualifying score.

Now, along with my dreams of one day playing for the Brewers at County Stadium, the Bucks at the MECCA, the Packers at Lambeau Field, and winning the Olympic, Marathon (I wanted to be Frank Shorter for a while too.) I wanted to win that damn meet in Madison. Whereas the other sports dreams were the same dreams that every kid in my school or neighborhood had, the diving thing seemed to be particularly suited to me. Diving was an adventure into the unknown and untested. Ever since I took my first hike along the railroad tracks that's what I was all about. Every day I had to go a little further. See a little more, climb another tree, scale a different building. Diving was the same thing. Every day I wanted to add another flip, do a different position or try a trick on a higher board or platform. There was always something out there that I hadn't done. As much as I loved the other sports, none of them had that adventurous appeal. When the team came back from Madison, I got to know coach Osborne and started diving with them.

Two years later I ended a comfortable stay at St. Monica's Catholic Elementary School and enrolled at Nicolet. My class at St. Monica's consisted of 60 close-knit friends, only a handful of whom joined me in the new uncontrollable mob of 1,600 at Nicolet. Despite the fact that I still had two older sisters at school - Nari and Barb -- I was petrified to step onto the campus and barely said a word to anyone for three months. But in November, I strapped on my tight black Mike Pepe diving suit and

went to my first practice for the Nicolet Knights. Potter was long gone diving in the Big 10 at the University of Illinois, but Nicolet still had two strong divers, Dave Worth and Andy Klapperich. I'd been told I had some talent, but now it was time to put up.

It was a painful year as I was pushed to take all of my single somersault dives and add another half-flip so that I would go in headfirst. We had a good crop of freshmen and if one of us went for a dive, the other one couldn't back off. If we'd been born 20 years later we would have been skateboarders or snowboarders. But in the cold, flat, nerdy Midwest - we were springboard divers.

I was competing all year with Dan Ullsperger a big kid from neighboring Fox Point. I could twist better, but he could jump higher and spin better. Just like Coach Osborne said, whoever hit their required dives usually did better. Nicolet would send four divers to all the big meets, so with Worth and Klapperich taking up the first two varsity spots that left the final two spots to either Ullsperger, me or Frank Clark a junior who was just growing into his body.

As it came down to the big meets in January I was determined to make my spot on the varsity a permanent one. I did well in a dual meet and made the varsity for the Nicolet Invitational, our big home meet. In a dual meet a diver only has to do six dives, but in the big invitational meets everyone had to do eleven dives. Diving has five categories, front, back, reverse (walking forward and spinning backwards), inward (standing backwards and spinning forward) and twist. For the big meets, everyone had to do one simple dive from each category and one difficult dive from each category. The eleventh dive was usually a high difficulty dive from the diver's best category. Looking at the scores of the divers coming into the meet I had my work cut out for me to make the final cut of 12. I was worried that I didn't have a big 11th dive, but if I made the final and scored some points for the team, I might qualify for my varsity letter as a freshman. Once the warm-ups started, I saw some scared divers and felt my chances improving. We dove in a nine-foot pool and it freaked out a lot of divers who were used to diving into 12 feet of water. As the meet started I rode the board well and only missed one of eight dives, putting me safely into the finals in eighth place. If I had a decent couple of final dives I could conceivably make it into the top five - which meant a medal.

My first dive in the final round was a half-twist. By now the judges liked seeing a freshman doing well and paid me off with the first 7 of my life. Next came my front double tuck. I wasn't a strong front spinner, but I skied it grabbed a tight tuck and stepped out of it for 6's. My last dive was a back somersault with 1-½ twists. I'd just learned it the week before but it was a pretty easy trick for me. I jumped up in the air, twisted it up, and finished it looking straight at the starting blocks on the opposite end of the pool. Again I collected a bunch of 6's and 6 ½'s so I was sure I'd moved up to fifth place.

I looked into the stands at my father, a professional math wiz for an insurance company, who kept score for every diving meet he'd ever been to (not just for me but everyone in the meet). He was grinning, and my mother, who had to take time off from her weekend shift as an X-ray technician, was on her feet waving three fingers in the air. I almost passed out. I'd moved all the way up to third place right behind Worth and Klapperich. I didn't just score a couple of points for the varsity; I'd scored a whole shitload of points for the varsity. All of the sudden the big senior swimmers who lead the cheers and dated senior timettes were throwing me around slapping me upside the head. The next thing I knew I was kissing the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, taking the bronze medal from her hand and stepping up to the third place podium. When Worth grabbed his first-place medal he motioned for Klapperich and me to come up and join him on the starting block in front of lane 1. The swimmers led the crowd in a deafening cheer of "One-Two-Three!" while the three of us pounded the same number of fingers in the air. I didn't even make third string on my grade-school basketball team and here I was nine months later getting a huge roar at a big-time high school swim meet. It changed me forever.

But it also overwhelmed me with responsibility. Now I was expected to score points all the time. And that didn't happen for a long time. It was a good enough moment for me to get my varsity letter, but I didn't topple that score my entire sophomore year. I placed well enough in the meets and managed a fourth place at the Nicolet Invitational, but Ullsperger beat me regularly.

I needed help, and in came Hobie Billingsley. I'd heard coach Osborne talk about the great Indiana coach whose divers had won the Olympics and swept the NCAA meet time after time. It was a tradition for the Nicolet divers to go to the summer diving camp at the University of Wisconsin in order to get used to the Natatorium boards, but I wasn't satisfied that I was getting the best coaching there. The UW Coach, Jerry Darda, was one of the best coaches in the country but he wasn't in town for most of the two weeks I'd been there.

I decided it was time to contact the great Hobie Billingsley at the University of Indiana. I asked my guidance counselor if she could help me find the address, and sure enough, she came up with the information for Hobie's Heroes diving camp in Bloomington, Indiana. That summer my parents drove Ullsperger, Scott Heyen (the third member of our class) and Jon Debelak (who eventually ended up being a multiple national barefoot water skiing champion) to Bloomington, Indiana. The next two weeks were absolutely terrifying.

When we showed up at the pool at 7:00 a.m. a semi-bald, mustachioed man with thick glasses walked on to the deck and began talking to the group of college divers who acted as camp counselors. I thought he was one of the Indiana janitors talking about turning on the lights and opening up the locker rooms, but he turned out to be Hobie Billingsley. And as unassuming as his exterior was, his interior was just as focused and unwavering. Hobie wasn't interested in developing good one-meter springboard divers. He wanted to develop three-meter springboard and ten-meter tower divers. And, on top of that, he had a bunch of kids in camp - elementary school kids - who had already learned college-level three-meter dives. These dives were some of the scariest ones to learn, and the place where most divers quit the sport. At that point I was still

afraid to bounce on the three-meter board and even more afraid to do even the simple required dives. But Hobie didn't push divers like a drill sergeant. He just showed you the proper mechanics, taught you the tricks on a trampoline, and then said you were ready to do the trick. If you didn't do the trick - he sent you home.

It was that simple. He was there to train divers, not baby-sit rich kids on vacation. You did your tricks, or he asked you to call your parents and have them pick you up. No malice or pressure was involved. If you weren't into it by yourself, for yourself, well this just wasn't the place for you. There were plenty of other camps in the country but in order to put on this camp's T-shirt, you had to toss some tricks.

And Hobie wasn't just sending in his college divers to coach us either. He was there at poolside every morning to give us a pep talk and make sure we were ready to toss those big tricks. Every night he either gave us a physics lecture or showed us movies of the all-time greats, all of whom were his closest friends. I remember thinking at the time that I'd never been in the company of such greatness before. Twenty-five years later I can't think of anyone who comes close.

As the time with Hobie continued I began to realize that as deep down as I could feel in my soul, I was a diver. I liked to jump, I loved the sensation of spinning and, more than anything else, I loved the way water could fool gravity. I could drop four stories, and as long as I kept tight and lined myself up, I could land without feeling a thing. I could go in forward, backward, on my head or on my feet. I had the sensation that I was fooling Isaac Newton. I should be getting crushed doing these tricks, but instead I was emerging from a cool inviting element to the amazement of most of the people around me. The other sports dreams I had before meeting Hobie Billingsley disappeared. All I wanted to do from here on out was dive - and win that damn state meet.

I returned from Hobie's Heroes a changed person. I wasn't going to just win that damn state meet - I wanted to crush it. I wanted every record in the book. The school record, all the pool records, the conference record - even the state record. My junior year started out well with Ullsperger and me blowing up the Braveland Conference. We went one-two in every meet including the early-season invitationals. Ullsperger was still getting the upper hand, but I could feel my time was coming. I was tossing harder tricks, and I just needed to do them a couple hundred times apiece before I was going to pull ahead.

After a two-week stretch of three-a-day Christmas workouts we came up to the Racine Invitational, the first big meet of the season. I was on all day and I knew it was my time to finally get over and win one of the big ones. It came down to my 11th dive and I saved my reverse 1 ½ pike, one of my best dives. I jumped it in the air but didn't pick my legs up fast enough. The next thing I knew I was flat on my back looking up at 2 ½'s and 3's from a panel of judges who were just aching to throw out a 9. Ullsperger dropped his final dive in the water and again beat me by a few points. I was furious and he dangled the medal in my face and laughed all the way home. Dan was a great guy but I was done losing. I never lost to him again.

I made a great run at the end of my junior year and swept all the big meets leading up to the state meet. In Madison, I had a decent lead after five dives but I started to get a little sloppy and ended up in fourth. I was pissed-off because I wanted to win that meet right then and there, but losing it just made me work harder.

I'd played baseball for Nicolet my first two summers, but I spent most of the summer before my senior year in Bloomington, Indiana. Ullsperger decided he didn't want to go to college and dive so there wasn't really any reason to continue. It was a tough blow for the team, but we had to move on. In his place, Scott Heyen and I convinced one of our younger teammates, Pat Kuehn, to cruise down to Bloomington with us. Pat was great on the trampoline, and we knew he'd try anything Hobie would throw at him. I went to camp a few weeks early, and then Pat and Scott joined me for the last session. By the end of the summer I felt like I was ready to crush my senior season. Hobie held inter-squad meets at the end of each two-week session and I won both the high board and the low board at the end of the camp, even though I missed the last five days with an inflamed head after cracking my hand against my skull on too many three-meter dives.

Before I left camp I walked over to Hobie and said, "Hobie - I'm gonna win that damn meet for you."

"You better," he said, "I don't want to see any of those Darda kids beating us!"

Now I felt like I was on a mission from God - or at least the god of diving. Hobie never bullshitted anyone. He told me I was ready to win the damn thing. Who was I to disagree?

I started off the season by breaking Keith Potter's school record for six dives on my second dual meet. Nicolet's swim team was still O.K. but not the powerhouse it had been in the past. The only class swimmers on the team were Bill Eisenstein, who had won the State 200 freestyle title the year before and Hans "Ox" Landwehr whom I'd shared a back yard with since the age of four. Ox was probably the greatest paradox in the history of Nicolet High School. He came from a college educated white-collar family, but he felt obligated to be blue collar. While he struggled with the pre-college academics of Nicolet he ended up receiving the Golden Hammer award given to the best industrial arts student. And then, in swimming, one of the preppiest sports on campus, he was again the best in his class.

While Bill and Ox won most of their events, I was winning all of mine. By the time the big meets came around in January, I'd set the pool record at every pool I dove. That streak came to a halt when I cracked my head on the board doing a reverse 2 ½ in the warm-ups of a dual meet. It was the same kind of dive that Greg Louganis did when he cracked his head during the Seoul Olympics. I still won the meet but I can't remember a thing from it. Practice during the next two weeks was brutal, not because of the dome shot, but from a dislocated jaw and a couple of bruised ribs that came from crashing my head into my chest.

By the time the state sectional meet came along, I'd almost made good on my promise to rewrite the record books. I'd broken all but a couple of pool records with the most gut wrenching exception being the Nicolet 11-dive pool record. I had

my worst meet of the year during my home invitational and Keith Potter kept his name on the pool record board. I was furious with myself after the meet, but when I went to practice the next Monday and saw his name still on the pool record board, it brought a smile to my face. Any self-esteem I had came from his example. It was best that his name still hung around that pool. Everything came together during the sectional meet though, and I cracked the magical 500-point mark which had only been done by one other diver in Wisconsin history, the State record holder Ray Klitzke.

Nicolet was used to taking a swarm of swimmers to the state meet but this year there were only four of us. It felt odd not having a full team at the meet, but as long as Ox was there I was happy. Ox swam the 500 and I'd been his lap counter ever since either one of us can remember. A few weeks earlier we both won the Braveland Conference Meet and we swapped medals. He said he always wanted to win a diving meet and I said I always wanted to win a distance race, especially after being one of the worst four-year cross-country runners in Nicolet's history.

Osborne and I drove to Madison and went through a workout the day before the state meet. My big competition was one of Jerry Darda's divers, Craig Sheldon. Sheldon pulled ahead of me on the last dive of the state meet the year before, but we hadn't met each other since. We'd been 1-2 in the rankings all year, and this was the big showdown. I felt great in warm-ups, and all the Milwaukee area coaches came up to me and told me I had it licked. I thanked them for the support but was quick to point out that I wasn't scoring any points in warm-ups.

The meet started early on Saturday morning with only a few parents and coaches in the stands. In a few hours the place would be packed, but only teammates and parents showed up for the prelims. I started out hot and nailed my first five dives opening up a commanding lead. As we got to the semi-final round I missed the finish on my inward 1 ½ which was disappointing as it was usually a high scorer but put the two required dives away for 8's. Going into the last round I'd saved my three highest scoring dives, and I had a commanding 30-point lead. It was pretty much in the bag, but I still had to dive out the set.

It was then that I started to do what no athlete should ever do. I stopped thinking of diving and started to think of Ray Klitzke's State record of 540 points. It was in reach if I zipped my last three dives. "I'm really going to have to go for it on these hurdles If I'm going to get the son of a bitch!" I thought. One of Hobie's rules is to dive practice like it's a meet and dive the meet like it's practice. In other words, make each dive count in workout - and dive normally in the meet. I was going for big dives, and it almost cost me.

My first dive was the front dive with a half-twist. Ever since Potter used that dive in the finals every Nicolet diver used it in the final. It was my highest scoring required dive, and I'd collected 9's on it a couple of times during the season. I went for a big hurdle but didn't get my arms above my head on take off. I was late initiating the dive and had to pull like hell just to get vertical. Some of the less experienced judges still gave me 7's but I also collected some 5 ½'s - not what the guy leading the state meet is supposed to do.

Sheldon nailed his dive and probably cut a good 10 points into my lead. My next dive was a front 2-½ pike. I usually didn't do this one very well in practice, but it always seemed to come around in meets. I went for another big dive but I got stuck in the spin. Luckily I'd been in this position hundreds of times before. I just squished my face between my knees and stayed in the pike as long as I could. I sprung open just before the water and managed to get my hands together and stretch my legs high into the air. Two dives - two horrible take-offs. At least I scored fairly well on the 2 ½.

Sheldon did a better 2 ½ but mine didn't really cost me much. Now I had the damn thing won. I would have to land flat on my ass on my best dive and that wasn't going to happen. I'd learned my lesson on going for the big hurdle. I had a reverse 1-½ with 1-½ twists left. I'd nailed it the week before in the sectional meet and hadn't missed it all week long. All I had to do was go for a normal hurdle and I was going to walk away with everything. I relaxed before my approach, went for a normal hurdle then rode the board high into the air. It ended up being the best hurdle of the day. I tossed my arms above my head, began twisting and the toughest dive in my list was floating through the air as if I were on a pulley. I squared out of the twist and looked at the board only to discover I'd never gotten that good of a top on a reverse twister in my life. I was done with the dive with two meters to fall. I wasn't going to blow it, but I was going to have to put on the brakes and go for a big underwater save.

While I was underwater I could hear the roar of the crowd but I was still kind of pissed because I'd actually missed the dive - just not that badly. I needed to nail that last trick to break Ray Klitzke's 500 points, and I didn't, but I was the state champ nonetheless. I came out of the water to a deafening scream but was still thinking of the dive. Then I looked up at my family in the stands and over at coach Osborne. The whole thing swallowed me up and took over my body. I remembered Keith Potter's face on the podium and Hobie's matter-of-fact expression when something he tells someone works out. After seven long years of training now I could justify those expressions. I walked over to my bag and Ox was there to give me a huge Ox hug. Osborne was next to run over and we hugged each other and the tears started to flow. Before things got out of hand I found Craig Sheldon, congratulated him on a great season and thanked him for pushing me all year long.

The next thing I knew there was a TV camera on us and a couple of reporters asking questions. I felt like I'd just won the Olympics. A few minutes later they announced the results and presented the medals at the awards podium. I wasn't aware of it but before the meet started Osborne had been selected to hand out the diving awards. He didn't want to tell me because he thought it might put extra pressure on me. I climbed the podium, he put the medal around my neck and I said, "This could have really backfired on you?"

"Not a chance," he said. "You weren't gonna lose this thing."

I looked into the stands and the entire Nicolet contingent were waving old political yard signs from my dad's school

board campaign "Haig for Nicolet Board" they read.

The long process that I'd started years earlier had come to a fruitful conclusion. After the podium ceremony I rushed for the stands but was mobbed before I could get there. Nearly everyone I knew was in Madison forming a circle around me in a big group hug. I was so overwhelmed I almost passed out. I apologized to everyone for diving poorly in the finals, but nobody put an ear to it. All they wanted to do was get home and start the victory party. They would have whisked me away right there too had I not reminded them that I had to count for Ox's 500. That night I went to a small gathering of my closest friends and had a drink for the first time in five months. Then I had another, then another. Then more than I could count. Diving and partying began to go hand in hand and it stayed that way for the next twelve years.

## Mile 16: Acapulco

The bike trip was in the books, 1,425 miles in 17 days with three of those days logging little or no mileage. That was a good pace for someone riding an empty bike, but with all the gear loading me down I felt really good about how much ground I'd covered. My original projection had me landing in Houston in 27 days, so I obviously had ten more days to kill than I'd anticipated. It also meant that I had some time to rest my left heel and Achilles tendon, which were too sore to pedal even one more day.

John came home from his business trip a couple days after I arrived. By then Belinda and I had become fast friends. She'd introduced me to their circle of friends, most of whom hung out at a Houston underground freak bar called Lola's. She treated my like visiting royalty, giving me free reign of the house and the fridge which she kept stuffed full of beer in my honor.

After filling John in on all his old friends in Les Avenières he put a plug of Copenhagen in his mouth, leaned back and asked, "So what the hell do you think about on a bike all day?"

It was strange, but during the entire trip I was never at a loss for things to think about. I was always concerned with where I was and how I felt, but for the most part, I just let my head wander. Songs would drift in and out, people would drift in and out, and exotic locations would take the place of the often-boring terrain. I tried to keep my internal dialog in French as often as I could, but eventually it would slip back to English, and I'd have to up my concentration. Whenever I got close to a city I took on the voice of Patrick Chene, the French T.V. announcer for the Tour de France. I was in an imaginary group sprint or a fabulous breakaway trying to hold off the peloton. As far as I can recollect I won about 30 stages during my 17-day ride.

After three or four days off the bike my heel felt better, and I went out on a short test run. There wasn't any pain, but the Achilles still felt like a loose rubber band. I called my brother Dr. Andy, and he said that I probably wasn't getting enough blood circulating through it during the ride. I began keeping a heating pad on it while I slept and stretched out extra long before riding. My legs were the strongest they'd ever been but I wasn't so sure how they would react to explosive jumping.

Since I was in town for almost three weeks and John's company was hiring temporary workers, I pulled a couple of shifts at his software office. The bike trip did a number on my bank account, and I probably would have been doing some kind of temp work had I stuck it out in Wisconsin, so it worked out perfectly. It also helped me afford a few luxuries. I bought a \$20 front row scalper seat to see the Oilers beat the Bengals on Monday Night Football. Luis Zendajas hit a last second field goal with Sam Wyche ripping his hair out on the sideline. Jerry Glanville almost cracked his head on the ceiling of the Astrodome when the ball dropped through the uprights. A couple of nights later, John and I caught Jethro Tull at the Houston Summit. We went to Lola's after the show, and the warm up band was sitting at the bar completely shit-faced. I would have gotten hammered if I were them too. They were dog crap, and Tull made everyone forget they'd even played. Nice work if you can get it, though.

The best part of the stay was going to John's mom's cattle ranch outside of Abilene. We were buried so far in the middle of Texas that I thought I was going to sprout longhorns. We spent the weekend hunting and fishing and playing games with John's extended family. The last time I'd fired a rifle was when I was a 13-year old at Boy Scout camp in Wisconsin. At Camp Lefeber, we were on a firing range and things were strict. In Abilene things were a bit looser. At one point John flushed out a pocket of grouse and started shooting when I shouted, "Stop!" from a bunker just below him. I thought I was going to take some buckshot from a friend like Lemond had. Needless to say, we didn't hit a thing all weekend except a sick old jackrabbit that John put out of its misery. Our poor marksmanship didn't squash our buzz one bit. I just felt great wandering through Texas with a rifle on my shoulder. I felt like an outlaw.

After Thanksgiving, I started going over to the swimming pool at the University of Houston to practice pushing reverse somersaults as far out into the pool as I could. In regular competitive diving, you're supposed to take every dive straight up in the air so that you can enter the water as vertically as possible. After warming up on the springboards and showing the team I could dive, they thought I'd gone nuts when I went up to the towers and started launching my body towards the middle of the pool. I could still feel my tendon a little, but even with explosive leaps there wasn't any pain. It was time for the cliffs of Acapulco.

Three weeks after arriving by bicycle in Houston, I left for Mexico on an airplane. As I crossed over the country through the air, I looked down at the terrain I would have been covering had I continued on my bicycle. I was happy to be rested and sitting in the plane. Someday, I ventured, I could go on a long trip in a third-world country but not until I had the language skills and become a better bike mechanic. I doubt there are many shops along the route that supply Cannondale parts.

I landed in Acapulco, and a wave of humidity struck me as soon as I deplaned. Six of the divers arrived at the same time, and the Hotel La Cabrada (The Cliff Hotel) picked us up in a minivan. I had the Cannondale with me, and I was tempted to assemble it at the airport and ride away, but Juan Obrégon, the president of the Union des Clavidistas, the club that manages all the Mexican divers, told me that the roads of Acapulco weren't meant for my tires. As we pulled out of the airport and around the cliffs that surround Acapulco Bay, I saw what he meant. There were plenty of sections of unpaved road, and glass was strewn like confetti at a parade.

The Acapulco Cliff Diving Contest not only served as a great promotional vehicle for WWP, it also served as our first Christmas party. The three principals, Mickey, Chip and Bruce were there as were most of the show captains. We'd all seen each other a few times over the years, but we'd never all been in the same place before. Dene Whittaker, Dan-Bob and Bob Torline were there from my Far-Eastern Tour. Darren, Jeremy and Johnny McPadden were there from Harderwijk. Randy and I represented the French contingent, and Roland McDonald, a tremendous high diver, came in from Caneva Sport in Italy. Filling out the team were two old WWP vets, Mike Murphy and Craig Lesser. They even flew in Nancy Clark, Cathy McPadden and Bruce's fiancée, Maaike (also a show diver) as a perk and for moral support.

The van drove the Acapulco strand, and then climbed the eastern cliffs leading us to La Cabrada, the most famous venue in all of diving. From the moment I set eyes on the cliffs they sent a streak of terror up my spine. The height was nothing to fear, but when Bruce told me I had to jump 33 feet out to clear the rocks, he wasn't exaggerating an inch. The cliff drops fairly straight off the top, but as it reaches the bottom it slides out into the channel. Every time I looked at the cliff it seemed to slide out further and further. I had my mind set on the double gainer, but I had to start thinking of a plan B. I had no idea what I was up against.

We had a big team dinner the first night in town, and it turned into a sloppy drunken affair. We had a week to practice before the contest, so nobody was in a big hurry to get serious. Everyone was talking about what dives they were going to do, but Bruce told us we'd all change our mind once we stood in front of the Clavidista's altar and took a look at the landing area. We weren't diving off a ladder, and we weren't landing in a show tank either. The only thing that was normal was the height - and that used to be the scariest part. Whittaker was the first to go for tequilas, and by the end of the night we'd all had way too much to drink for what we were going to attempt the next day.

The first practice session was scheduled for 11:00. Bruce took us to the spectator's platform on the opposite side of the channel.

"Before you go off this thing," he said, "you've got to know what the hell you're landing into. We've cleared away most of the coral and sea urchins but there's still plenty of jagged rocks down there. Who wants to check it out?"

He held up a mask and snorkel, and I volunteered to hop in and scout out the bottom. I dove into the channel and was immediately tossed 20 feet beyond the landing area by an incoming wave.

"Don't underestimate the waves," Chip said. "The water can be as deep as 15 feet or as shallow as eight. It's easy to time the waves, but you really don't want to miss one."

I swam back to the landing area and found a thick stalagmite shooting out from the cliff right at the base of the takeoff rock.

"Damn!" I shouted up, "there's a fucking spike right at the bottom of the cliff,"

"Sure is," Chip said, "sometimes it's out of the water, and sometimes it's buried. It's always there though."

I snorkeled along the edge of the cliff and saw hundreds of long-spiked sea urchins covering the wall. I came up to report it when a huge wave crashed into me, taking my breath and scraping me along the underwater cliff. My hip grinded against the jagged rock, then suddenly my foot felt like it was on fire. I came up and could barely get the message out,

"Stay away from that frickin' wall," I gasped, "It's armed!"

I swam to the viewing cliff and climbed back up to the divers. I looked down at my foot and there were more than 50 black sea urchin needles sticking out of it. Juan took one look at me and his eyes opened wide in horror. "Quick," he shouted in Spanish, "Get me the first aid kit."

"Don't panic," he said. "If we get them out quickly they won't do any damage." He started pulling out the needles as the rest of the team stared on in disbelief. Not only did they have to jump past the cliff and avoid smashing their feet on the bottom, they also had to worry about being poisoned.

Mickey Barnett walked over to me, put his hand on my shoulder and asked me how it felt. "It hurts," I said, "but I'm not feeling any heat flush from the poison."

"Do you know what you have to do?" he said, "You have to go into the bathroom and piss on your foot."

"What?" I said, "Piss on my foot?"

"Yup," he said, "The uric acid will neutralize the poison,"

"That's fucked up," I said, "I'm not going to go piss on my foot just so you guys can get a laugh off me."

Just as I said that one of the Mexican divers came up to us with a bucket. "He's right," Juan said. "You gotta soak your foot in piss."

I thought Mickey was giving me shit but Juan had no reason to. He passed the bucket over to me and pointed to the bathroom. I hobbled passed a line of tourists into the bathroom then pissed on my foot in the bucket. The four Mexicans waiting in line for stalls thought I'd lost my mind. I let it soak for a couple minutes, then washed it off in the sink and came back out.

Nancy and Maaika sat down with me for the next hour jabbing sterilized sewing needles into my foot trying to release the spines. My foot was a bloody mess, but fortunately the spikes only hit the top of my foot. My sole, where I'd be pushing off from, wasn't affected. Once all the needles were pulled out it was a bizarre looking but superficial wound. Apparently the piss trick worked too. I never felt any of the effects of sea urchin poison.

In the meantime, the rest of the divers had taken their turns checking out the wall, albeit from a safer distance. The Mexican divers went along the cliff and removed as many sea urchins as they could. I was hoping they could plant some dynamite under that big stalagmite and blow it out of the water too.

The next order of business was getting up to the diving platforms. In order to participate in the contest each diver had to climb the cliff at least once. The Mexican divers grew up on the cliff and could scale the wall like giant spiders, but I was having trouble just getting out of the water. I had to wait for a big wave to lift me high enough to grab a rock then hold on as tight as I could while the water receded, leaving me dry-docked. If I didn't get a good grasp and cling to the cliff, the next wave would come by and knock me back into the channel, hopefully far away from any sea urchins.

After three tries I pulled myself onto the cliff and scurried above the level of the waves. Watching the Mexicans scamper up the cliff made it look like there was a nice easy route to the summit, but I struggled the entire way. The first 20 feet was manageable, but from there the cliff shot up 30 feet before bending back slightly towards the top. A wiser man would be using climbing shoes, rope and a harness, but I was barefoot wearing only a Speedo. I started inching my way up the cliff, at some points supporting my entire weight on a few fingertips and toes. As much as I loved mountains, my body type is more like that of a rugby player than a free climber. I'll go all day on a steep incline with a full pack, but this vertical wall just wasn't my gig. A couple of times I was caught dead in my tracks, and one of the Mexican divers had to scale down from the summit and direct me. At one point a diver pointed out the finger holes he used, but when I tried them it was obvious my fingers weren't going to support my weight. I had to traverse the cliff back and forth to find cracks big enough for me to at least get my whole hand on. After nearly an hour of struggling, I made it to the top. My foot was bleeding, as were both my knees. I left a trail of red all along the cliff.

"We all know where Tom's been." Jeremy said.

I took a peek off the summit and put an image of the double gainer in my head. I wasn't ready for it yet, but at least I had a visual image. Before going off the top, I wanted to toss a dive off the lower level. The contest consisted of two dives, one from a 50-foot perch and the second from the top, 20 feet higher. I wanted to make sure I hit my first trick to build confidence for the double gainer. I scaled down to the 50-foot perch and sized up a flying reverse somersault layout. It was an easy trick that I could rip even after the most festive nights at the Platanos. The channel didn't look as imposing a leap from the 50-foot level, so I called out to everyone that I was going and popped off the cliff. One factor that I hadn't considered was that the ladder perches, although seemingly solid, have a slight spring to them. The cliff is as solid as solid gets, and I felt deadness in my knees where there usually had been a slight pop. Normally I didn't bend my knees at all when doing a flying gainer, but I had to tuck this one on the top, and I barely had enough flip to get it around. Nothing would come easy in Acapulco.

I climbed out of the channel, and this time it took only 45 minutes to reach the top. My toes were bleeding so much at one point that I was actually slipping off the cliff. There was a quarter-mile path around the hotel to the take-off perch, and after that dive, I always took the hike instead of the cliff. My next attempt from 50 feet went much smoother. I used all the strength that 1,400 miles of cycling gave me to fling off the cliff and stick a nice tight pose. It still wasn't completely laid out, but I put the trick in the water with just a slight tuck at the finish. I had a week to work on it, so I was confident that I'd hit it in the contest.

As I was concentrating on my efforts, the other divers were flinging their bodies all over the channel. Only a handful of them had ever been off the cliffs before, and I wasn't the only rookie to make mincemeat out of my body. Johnny McPadden was the first to try anything more than a front flip off the top. He went for a double somersault with a half twist, normally a required dive in a high diving contest. He pushed out over the cliff but didn't have nearly enough momentum to get the spin going. He tried to bail out half way through the trick and ended plummeting uncontrollably into the channel. He hit with a nasty thwack that none of us wanted to hear. That was his last attempt at the double half. Jeremy was next to toss a big trick. He stood backwards on the top and launched the first-ever back triple off the cliffs. Unfortunately he got so much going on the trick that he ended up doing close to a back 3 ¼. He wrenched his back so hard he could barely walk. Jeremy was as good a high diver as there was in the business, and La Cabrada had just taken him to the cleaners on a trick he could do with his eyes shut.

With those two unsettling dives in the back of my head, it was time for me to start working up the gainer double. I found



a perch on the viewing cliff that was about 20 feet above the water but a good 15 feet from the channel. The first time off I simply leaped like a long jumper to see if I could clear it. I made it easily into the water, so I climbed up again and went for a gainer flip. This time I was going to have to leap like a long jumper, then tuck over a flip spinning back into the cliff. I was pretty sure I could make the trick, but any errors would lead to a concussion or at least a broken foot or leg. I took a couple deep breaths to collect myself then popped off the flip. Again, the cliff wasn't as generous as the high dive perches, leaving me with much less rotation than I'd expected. Nonetheless, I put the trick safely in the channel. I did one more lead-up and was ready to take my bloody body up to the top of La Cabrada.

After my first hike up to the top, I sat next to the altar to the Virgin Mary that the Mexicans prayed to before each dive. I watched as some of the most experienced high divers in the world sized up their new nemesis, and tried to figure out how they could foil it. Everyone except Jeremy, Roland and I had given up on tossing a big dive off the top. Almost the entire field of trash-talking high divers had caved in and decided to hurl the easiest trick in the book, a flying front somersault. At least Whittaker, the oldest guy in the field, stuck to a front double with a half twist - and even that was still a required dive.

I stood on top of the cliff and looked down at the spike tucked in the landing area. All I had to do was clear that spike, and I had a trick that could win the whole thing. Then again, if I didn't clear it, they were going to carry me away in a body bag. It was that simple; succeed or die. I'd imagined trying to dive out of the pool in Les Avenières, and I was positive I could do that. The challenge was being able to toss two flips back towards the cliff from a non-springy take-off. I went through the dive in my head and was positive that if I put every pedal stroke from Milwaukee to Houston into the jump, I could clear the cliff. I was rested, light, and feeling as strong as I'd ever been in my life. It was time. I knew I had the trick. I toed the edge of the cliff and raised my arms above my head. All of a sudden my legs started shaking like an alcoholic with the DT's. I was ready to go, but my body was doing a double take. The last time this had happened was the very first time I'd been off a ladder in Osage Beach. I stepped back from the takeoff platform and tried to collect myself. Stepping off the cliff was not where I wanted my head to be. I wanted to be strong and aggressive, not timid and scared. Nobody had ever attempted this trick before, and the committee would have to give it the highest degree of difficulty in the contest. If I could put it in the water, I was going to win the contest. That's where I wanted my head to be. I just had to convince my legs to stop shaking.

I redressed the cliff and thought of the dive the same way I had the Mifflin St. 3 ½ in Oman. Nobody had ever done this trick, and nobody was going to tell me how it was going to be done. I was the one who had trained for it, prepared it in my head and done the successful lead ups. This was my trick, and I was going to get it. I raised my arms above my head and again my legs started to shake. They really didn't want me to toss the trick. But this wasn't their choice. It was mine. I shook them out then tightened them like a taught rubber band ready to explode. I took one last look in the channel for a wave but realized that wave watching was futile. I couldn't stare at the incoming water to do this trick. I had to keep my head in line looking straightforward. Looking down and sideways was counterproductive to the spin. There would just have to be enough water when I got there. I couldn't worry about it.

I swung my arms up in the air and blew off the cliff with 50 million pedals worth of pop. Just as I was sure I'd reached the full potential of my jump, I snapped my ankles above my head. The jump felt good, but this was one slow spinning gainer double. It was spinning enough though, and 70 feet is a long way to fall. I opened up the flip after the first somersault and checked out how I was doing. I expected to see water at the end of my toes, but all I saw below me was a pile of sharp jagged rocks. I'd blown it. I was going to eat it. I'd gone one step too far. Thirty-three feet was, in fact, too far to toss a gainer double. I was about to slide down the cliff and take that spike right up my ass from 70 feet. For the final 50 feet of the dive I was a living dead man. I was experiencing the last fatal seconds of a plane crash.

I stuck my feet down and closed my eyes, wondering if I would feel the pain or just simply die on impact. Before my life had time to pass before my eyes, I slipped through the water and landed on a flat rock on the bottom of the channel. My chest was pounding so hard I thought I was going to have a heart attack. I popped off the bottom, and every single person on the cliffs --Mexican, American, spectator and official - was on their feet, whistling and cheering. I was too stunned to react. I looked back at where my bubbles were coming up and I'd missed the spike by less than 24 inches. I didn't even smile. It may have come off like I had a game face on and I'd laid down the gauntlet to all challengers, but in reality, I was just fucking stunned. Three seconds earlier I'd been dead.

Juan was the first one to greet me. "Incredible dive," he said. "I've never seen anything like that and I've been diving here for 20 years!"

Bruce pulled me out of the water with a big smile. "That's showin' 'em!" he said. "That's fucking nuts, but that's showing 'em."

I'd tossed the biggest trick in my life, even bigger than the Mifflin St. 3 ½, but I wasn't the slightest bit relieved. I had to keep practicing the son of a bitch all week long.

Putting a couple dozen sea urchin spikes in my foot, dropping blood up and down a cliff in Mexico and being dead for a split second was enough of a day for me. I grabbed a towel and walked back up the cliff towards the hotel. I was still shaking from the dive and I wanted to sit down with a Tecate to calm my nerves.

As I stepped into the hotel I looked into the lobby and sitting down watching the practice session was my old mentor and the greatest coach in the history of the sport, Hobie Billingsley. If I had sat down and prayed for one person on earth to be there - it would have been Hobie Billingsley. I hadn't seen him in seven years, and he hadn't coached me in twelve. It didn't take more than one sentence out of my mouth for us to fall right back into the relationship. I walked up behind him and

tapped him on the shoulder and said, "How's it goin' Hobe?"

"Murdock, I thought that was you, but you can't ever tell unless you see a hurdle." For some reason that I never really understood, Hobie had always called me Murdock. "What the hell are you doing here? Haven't you gotten a job yet?"

On top of being the greatest coach of all time, Hobie also had been one of the greatest water show performers of all time. He'd done Vegas shows with Esther Williams and barnstormed the country diving into small eight-foot tanks. He, of all people, wasn't the person to tell me to get a job.

"I'll start working as soon as you do," I said. "You put on a tie lately?"

Cliff diving was a big stretch from competitive technical diving, and it was a huge relief to have the best in the business there at the contest. Hobie had been selected to judge the contest alongside Dr. Sammy Lee, a two-time Olympic champ and the man who got Greg Louganis interested in diving. Louganis, too, would be coming in to do the commentary on ESPN. Bruce was pulling out all the stops.

"So did you see that gainer double?" I asked.

"Sure did," Hobie said. "That sure doesn't look like an easy trick to put in the water. You sure you want to toss that in a contest?"

"I'm here to win the damn thing," I said. "If I put it in the water the D.D. (degree of difficulty) should put me over the top."

"We'll see about that," he said, "and don't forget to swing those arms all the way through, either. This isn't a springboard, but it's definitely not the time to slouch off on mechanics."

"That's all I'm thinking about Hobe," I said. "Swing the arms through then get my ankles above my head as soon as I can."

He joined me for a beer, and we caught up on where we'd been the last couple of years. He told me that he'd retired from Indiana and was doing a little coaching on the side. That little "coaching on the side" would eventually lead to a gold medal three-meter springboard performance out of Mark Lindsay in the Barcelona Olympics. Not bad for a retired coach. I told him that I'd found a spot in France for the time being, and I was going to hold out there until it got boring.

"You studying the language?" he asked. "I hope you're not just wasting your time around a show tank. You don't want to be old and have nothing to show except a good photo album you know."

It was the first time a high diver ever advised me on anything besides diving. As jittery as I felt about getting the double gainer off the cliff, having Hobie there was the most reassuring thing I could ask for.

The next day we were all back up on the cliff, but all the divers except Jeremy, Roland and me had gone ultra conservative. Jeremy took his back triple down to the 50-foot level and put a couple really nice ones in the water. Roland went for a triple half-pike from both levels. Jeremy saw Roland's triple half and tossed one of his mid-turn triples that he ripped day in and day out in Harderwijk. I tossed another pair of gainer doubles, which were still harrowing but much easier when my legs stopped shaking. The only other person who showed any balls at all was Daren Duffy. Daren had the least amount of technical diving experience of anyone there, but he went ahead and fired off a double half from the low level - a trick he'd just learned. The rest of the pack just tossed flying fronts. They were going to be boring as were most of the Mexicans who did the classic over-arched, often broken, Acapulco swan dive.

As the week went on, I tried to think of anything but the gainer double, but it was impossible to get it out of my head. It dominated my conscious and subconscious. Not one night went by when I wasn't startled out of bed by a nightmare of my head crashing against the rocks. Jeremy said he, too, thought of the cliff all day and dreamt about it all night. There was no escaping it. We just wanted the contest over with so we could get some sleep.

Seeing as we were only working on two dives, there was lots of time to kill in Acapulco. I pulled the Cannondale out of its travel box and reassembled it. I was hoping to go for a nice ride out in the countryside, but I didn't make it three miles before I flatted on an unavoidable pile of glass. I was out of tires, so I sat on a curb and fixed the flat in the middle of the city. Before I was done I had 30 Mexicans surrounding me with advice. Everyone gave me ideas about how to change my tire while I made sure nobody walked off with my tools. Once it was repaired, I took off again, this time for the tallest peak in the Bay. The roads towards the tops of the cliffs were nearly vertical, and I found myself in the granny gear for the first time since leaving Mississippi. Before I got to the summit I flatted again and decided this just wasn't a good place for a road bike. I walked the bike back to the hotel and packed it back in its crate.

Two days before the contest, Jeremy, Rolland and I went out with Alberto, one of the Mexican divers, who was going to show us the "real" Acapulco. All the Mexican show divers come from the neighborhood just behind the cliffs. Their grandfathers started diving off the cliff to retrieve fishing lures for tourists. Before long they were making more money in tips than anyone in town. La Cabrada noticed this and hired the best divers to do a show a few times a day. Between tips and salary, the divers were making up to \$50 a day. The average day laborer in Mexico was making less than \$10 a day. Cliff diving became an elite profession and the signature of the city.

It was great that they were making lots of legitimate money instead of dealing drugs and living in shacks, but there was a big drawback. Cliff diving isn't an old man's sport. Many divers tried to hang on to their jobs on the cliffs well past their prime. Alberto's neighbor Manuel was one of them. Alberto walked us through a small alley to a big window with a few chairs in front of it.

"This is Manuel's bar," he said. Manuel came out from a back room, felt his way up to the bar, then reached back into his fridge and cracked open a couple of Coronas. Manuel was a 45-year-old Mexican who looked like he was 70. He had multicolored circular bruises around his eyes, which were hollow white globes. "Manuel's nephew is in the contest tomor-

row," Alberto said. "Manuel will be there, but he won't be able to see him. Too many night dives."

Manuel had dove long past his prime and taken too many night shots. The night shots occurred when the divers did evening dives with a torch in each hand. They jumped off the cliff with the only light on the landing area coming from the torches in their hands. Sometimes the torches would go out, leaving the diver blind to the entry. Occasionally they took the full force of the dive with their eyes wide open looking for the water. Salt water would fill up their eye sockets and take days to drain out. Apparently Manuel had missed that trick more than once.

The day before the preliminary contest, we had a meeting so Mickey, Chip and Bruce could go over the difficulty table with us. We sat in a room in the lobby, and Chip handed us all copies of the proposed DD formula. I took one look at it, tossed it on the table in front of me and said, "This is pure bull shit."

Jeremy and Roland were beside themselves. We were the only ones tossing big tricks, and we would get virtually no payoff for our effort. My gainer double was rated the same as a double half, using the logic that they both were feet-first, entry-two somersault dives.

"What the hell is this?" I said. "I've got Mexicans telling me they've never seen anything like my dive before, and I'm getting the same difficulty as a required dive? You guys can't be serious?"

"We have to take the Mexicans into consideration here," Chip said, "They're just tossing front dives, and they have to have a chance to win too."

As it stood on the sheet, my gainer double was rated a 10.0, and a front dive was rated 9.8. I was getting a whole 2 percent for risking my life over the Mexicans who could do their dives in a drunken stupor.

"What's going on here?" Jeremy asked. "We're supposed to be doing a high diving contest, and we're completely catering to pussies."

"No shit," Roland said, "I came here to get crazy off the cliffs. This is bullshit. You turned the thing into a fucking beauty contest."

"Take it easy," Chip said, "There's a lot of people in this room..."

"Who can't fucking dive," Jeremy interrupted.

"Easy Jeremy," Craig Lesser, one of the old vets chimed in. "This is the Acapulco Cliff Diving Contest, not the U.S. Nationals. Long floating dives are part of the heritage here."

"That's cause you can't do anything else," I ripped. Lesser had shown up fat and out of shape, and it really chaffed me that I'd trained my ass off and wasn't going to get any credit for it. The only reason he was there was he was Chip's old friend and worked for a big water ski show. WWP wanted to land a contract with them. On top of it, Chip was arranging the D.D. table, and he was in the contest tossing easy dives. It was a crock of bullshit, and I wanted to pull out right there.

"Let's cool down," Chip said. "We'll take all your opinions into consideration, and we'll finalize the list in the morning. Remember, we're all on the same team here. It's us against the Mexicans."

Jeremy looked at Roland and me and said as loud as he could, "It looks like it's us against the fucking pussies." Before the TV finals, the American team had to trim down to eight from our existing 12. ESPN wanted to use our U.S. Trials as a practice round to get the production bugs out before they brought in the Mexicans for the contest. I was absolutely furious about the D.D. table, but it was too late to change my dive even if I wanted. The contest rules state that you have to have practiced the dive you were doing to the satisfaction of the judges before entering it the contest. Even if I wanted to back down and toss a new dive, it was too late.

The worst-case scenario was coming true. I was trying to win the contest with a big trick, but they had completely taken difficulty out of the equation. The first round went by with everyone tossing easy tricks, except for Jeremy who tossed his back triple and Roland who stuck his triple half. Jeremy ripped his back triple, but he was short. The judges gave him a set of 5's when all the boys tossing flying fronts were getting 7's and 8's. Not only was he getting no credit for difficulty, the judges were judging his trick, which had never been done before, against a bunch of floaty soft dives. I collected a bunch of 7's on my flying gainer and felt guilty that I hadn't tossed a harder dive like Jeremy and Roland. I was stuck in the middle of the pack with my inconsequential "big trick" left in the bag.

When it came time for the top level, much of the same happened. Jeremy again ripped his mid-turn triple short for a collection of 5's. Arguably the best high diver in the company was out of the TV finals. When it was time for my gainer double, I was so pissed I could barely see straight. I had to hit one of the toughest dives in the history of the contest as cleanly as everybody else's front somersault.

Louganis was doing a TV interview before each diver did his trick off the top. He saw on my list of accomplishments that I was a high school state champion. He asked me if there were any similarities between high school diving and the Acapulco Cliff Diving Championships. "Sure," I said, "just like any diving contest you have to block out all the surrounding distractions and concentrate on mechanics. It's just that here there are a lot more distractions." He thought I was talking about the cliff and the water depth, but I was talking about getting completely ripped off on the difficulty scale.

Two days earlier I'd gotten a great take-off, saw my spot on the water, and puffed the dive away without throwing a drop. That's the dive I needed to stay in the contest. I swung my arms through and got a decent take-off. I spun the first flip and saw that I was a little lower than I wanted to be but still OK. I tucked over the last flip and stood the dive up but threw some water. I came out of the water to see 5 ½'s and 6's. I, too, was out of the contest.

I got out of the channel and climbed up to the cliff on the opposite side. I was completely disgusted with the whole thing. Craig Lesser came up and said, "Good effort, Tom. Maybe next year you'll have a better contest." I felt like gutting him with a

fist. Good effort? What the hell was his effort? He showed up with a winter fat roll and pushed a couple of front flips off the cliff. In his mind, somehow he had made a better effort than my three weeks of intensive training and a sport-stretching dive.

I spent the next morning hanging out with a bunch of the Mexican divers who weren't selected for the team. We walked high above the city and blew a joint while watching kids fly kites from a hill in the distance. Acapulco Bay was stretched out below us with The Love Boat docked in the harbor. It was the first time I'd gotten high since leaving France. A rival company had warned U.S. Diving that we were all a bunch of stoners and shouldn't be representing America in an international competition. U.S. Diving said the only way to prove that was to drug test. I'm sure it did us all some good to clean out our lungs for a couple of months, but I wasn't in the mood to keep my fast.

I was still smarting from the contest, but I couldn't let the experience go down as a failure. The bike trip itself was a major win. Tossing the ballsiest trick in the contest was a win. Sitting up above the city of Acapulco with a fresh buzz was a win. Not being on the New Year's Eve ESPN telecast, however, was a major loss. At least I could hold my head up and know that I didn't choke. It had been taken away from me.

The contest was about to start, so we went down to cheer on the team. Along with Jeremy and me, Randy and Darren missed the final. Randy caught Montezuma's revenge and was barely seeing straight when he dove. Darren just had a couple of horrible take-offs and missed his dives. I was really bitter when Roland and the seven required dive experts lined up for the U.S. Team picture without us. I wasn't looking forward to returning to Wisconsin and explaining to people why I wasn't on TV.

The Mexicans hit dive after dive, and the Americans missed almost all of their flying front flips. Roland hit his triple half

## Mile 22: Hades

from the low perch but had a cruddy takeoff and busted his entry off the top. The only person I was truly happy for was Dene Whittaker, who went after his double half with a vengeance and put it in the water for 8's. He ended up in third place far behind the Mexican David Reyes who lined up two front dives for 8's and 9's. The Mexicans kicked our asses with Jeremy and me sitting on the sideline.

I helped Hobie off the judging platform and asked him what he thought. "You showed 'em too much, Murdock," he said. "People are already scared shitless over this thing, and you guys took it to a level they really didn't want to exploit. Hey, it was a great vacation though wasn't it?"

It took the genius of Hobie Billingsley to put it all into perspective. That night at the awards dinner attended by the divers, the TV crew and local dignitaries, Juan called Jeremy and me up to stand along side him as he presented the awards. He doled out all the paychecks (\$5,000 to the winner) and gave the diminutive David Reyes a trophy that weighed more than he did. Jeremy and I didn't know why we were standing up there, but just before the finish Juan gave us a special award.

"I have been diving off this cliff for 22 years," he said. "I have seen thousands of dives done by hundreds of divers from all over the world. These two divers are the bravest two I have ever seen. They truly pushed the limits of La Cabrada and the sport of cliff diving. I would like to present them with the 'Mas Bravos' award."

All we got was a polite round of applause and a handshake from Juan, but the look in his eyes when he shook my hand was one of true admiration. I would have loved a paycheck, but that money would have been gone in just a couple of months. The look from Juan's eyes is mine forever.

On a sunny Sunday morning in September 1996, I stuffed a foam cheesehead in my backpack and rode out to meet some friends at a sports bar in downtown Portland. The Packers were playing the Vikings, and the game wasn't carried on any of the west coast affiliates. I may have left Wisconsin, but no matter where you move, your teams come with you.

I was managing a cycle shop in Portland and rode so much that I'd pretty much forgotten I even owned a car. Sunday was my only day off, so I usually used it to go on a long road ride or a tough mountain bike trail - but always after the Packer game. I rode out of my hood on N.E. 33rd St. and turned right on Sandy Boulevard, one of Portland's major arteries. In the past, I'd ridden Sandy Boulevard during rush hour through driving rain, but on this sunny, 75-degree Sunday morning, it was clear sailing. It was only a five-mile sprint to the sports bar so after a short warm-up, I dropped down on my handlebars and picked up my cadence like a time-trialer.

Sandy Boulevard makes a big left curve as it approaches the Willamette River and drops from the neighborhoods of Northeast Portland into the commercial/industrial district along the banks of the river. I'd out-pedaled my gears and got in a streamline crouch to drop the hill. I gauged the green lights, hoping to beat them all before hopping the Hawthorne Bridge across the river to breakfast and some Brett Favre magic.

Suddenly a sedan driven by an elderly couple blew a stop sign and shot into the middle of Sandy Boulevard. I swerved left into the oncoming lane, and then jerked back just avoiding the grill of a Mazda. I turned and screamed at the old woman then looked to the road ahead. The light ahead of me was no longer green. It was red, and I was flying. A 24-foot delivery truck was entering the intersection at Stark street. I made eye contact with the driver, and we both hit our brakes as hard as

we could. As he came to a screeching halt, I prepared to lay my bike under his front end. Just as I started my skid my rear brake cable snapped. My rear wheel slid out, and I slammed my head into his front bumper. My helmet and the cheese head saved my head and neck.

But my legs were toast.

It wasn't immediately apparent that I'd fried my legs. In fact, I reached down and touched my thigh to see if I could feel it. I could feel it but the sensation was odd. Only when I tried to unclip my cleats did I notice something was wrong. There was absolutely no response. I reached down again for my thigh, and that's when I realized that my fingers were feeling skin, but my leg wasn't feeling anything back. I slowly dragged my fingers up my body until I got a response - just above my waist. That's when I realized I was in for something bigger than I'd ever imagined. I looked down at my fingers and started playing guitar scales. They worked fine. I was still a musician, but not much else. I'd become a cripple.

Life had been a downward spiral ever since coming to Portland, and now it would sink further than I ever could have conceived. I loved the city, but there were only two real bright spots of my Portland experiences. One was my wedding to Rachel. It was a blissful event at Ecola State Park, a rain forested bluff overlooking the pristine Oregon Coast. Rachel's friend Sarah who had survived the car crash four years earlier was the maid of honor, wheeling her chair over the rocky grass. My sister Barb read Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," encompassing the Bridge to Venice rules and symbolizing the odd set of circumstances that brought the two of us together.

The other bright spot had been getting a real job in the events department with Adidas America. Rachel had found decent work there relatively early, but it took me almost two years to land a good job - and that was after she begged her boss at Adidas to hire me. Adidas was a great fit for both of us with its focus on athletics and corporate culture of working and playing hard. Our business trips usually consisted of going to soccer matches more often than sitting in boardrooms. The transition from diving to a desk job in some ways was easier than I thought. I'd never become the man in the gray flannel suit, but I got a kick out of working with a bunch of ex-jocks. And the consistent paycheck was something I never thought I'd ever get.

But Rachel left me after three years of a struggling marriage. While we were champions of the road trip, settling down and dealing with life wasn't our forte. Our sojourn through Asia may have been incredible, but by spending every moment together it was like cramming five years of a relationship into six months. Basically there wasn't one damn thing we didn't know about each other. Things just got stale, and she began to resent me for crowding in on her great sports company job. I was thrilled to have landed a real job and didn't mind at all that she was there. But she hated it, and the flame in our relationship fizzled.

Eighteen months into my stint at Adidas she moved out of the house. Six months after that I was fired as a scapegoat for a project that went awry. I'd lost my job and my love. I was hurting. Over the past six months, I'd regrouped, rediscovered my old attitude and ridden myself back into phenomenal shape. I didn't have much money, but I'd started the long journey of putting my life back together. I got a kick out of managing the bike shop, and I began to feel a real passion for what I did. I'd become healthier than just about anyone I knew, and nobody could take that away from me. Except me.

The scene around me on the corner of Stark St. and Sandy Blvd. was chaotic as some people tried to move me and others pulled them off me. People kept asking me questions, but I couldn't respond to them. I hadn't passed out, and I wasn't feeling much pain either. I was simply watching the first 35 years of my life vanish with every passing second.

Somebody had the sense to call 911, and the Portland paramedics came screaming to the scene. My feet were still clipped into the pedals, and I was leaning on my backpack stuffed with the cheese head. A paramedic asked me if I could unclip my cleats, and I told him I broke my back. He looked at the situation, nodded his head and said, "Maybe, I think you might be right, but let's not take any chances - this might just be a stinger." He had hope, but I had none. Stingers come from the neck - this thing was right around my waist. I was trying to be positive, but my confidence and self esteem lay in a motionless heap below my pelvis.

They loosened my cleats, which were attached not only by laces but by a Velcro seal. They slipped my feet out and pulled my mountain bike out from underneath me. Aside from the brake cable, there was nothing wrong with the bike. I watched a policeman roll it along the street and toss it in the trunk of his car. The wheels were still in true, and the fork was as solid as ever. The handlebars pointed straight ahead, and the paint didn't have a scrape on it.

Now it was time to move me. They laid me flat on my back and prepared to backboard me. I'd been a lifeguard for years and had done this drill dozens of times. On the count of three, you lift the body and slide the board under the victim. Unfortunately, nobody practices this well enough.

Over the next two weeks paramedics, nurses, X-ray techs and doctors boarded me over a dozen times. Not one of those times did a team simultaneously lift me. The leader would always say, "On three." Then he would count, "One, two, three." On "three" a few members of the team would start lifting. Then the leader would say, "lift." Then the other half of the team would lift. Sometimes it was one person lifting on "three" and three people lifting on "lift." Sometimes it was two and two; sometimes there were only two people doing the transfer and each one would lift on his own cue. And these were all professionals. You couldn't ask for better people to do it, but they got it wrong every damn time. Getting my life into sync would be even more frustrating.

Once on the board, they slid me into the ambulance, and I held on for the drive over the Willamette and up the switchbacks to the Oregon Health Science University in the Tualatin mountains overlooking the city. OHSU takes up some of the most expensive real estate in town, and its views of Mt. Hood and the Columbia Gorge are spectacular. The drive up the

side of the mountain hanging on to what was left of my spinal cord, however, was harrowing. Everyone else on the road was on a simple Sunday drive but I was going on an adventure wilder than even the Napalese bus driver had taken me on. When I got to the emergency room, a doctor approached me and started some sensation tests.

"I've got some horrible new for you, sir," he said.

"I know," I said, "they're toast."

"Looks like it," he said.

I've always considered myself a competitor, but surviving and recovering from a spinal cord injury is an ugly and complicated game that nobody wants or deserves to play. The object is to get back everything you've just lost. It's you versus your new body. Your new body makes and changes the rules without notice. There are no timeouts. You always play in pain. You can no longer urinate or defecate by yourself, yet the new body has the option of discharging anything at anytime. You no longer have a car, and you can't get into your house (or anyone else's for that matter). You can't fuck. You are instantly out of work and out of money. There is very little reason to carry on.

"Do you hurt anywhere else?" he asked. "Nope," I replied. In fact I didn't hurt at all. I couldn't feel my legs, and as far as I could tell, I hadn't taken a hit anywhere else. My helmet saved my dome, and I didn't even have as much as a cut on my entire body. I realized a couple days later that I'd bruised a rib, but that was it.

"What about the Pack?" I asked.

"We got a Packers-Viking score?" the doctor shouted. "Packers are getting worked," a nurse replied.

The Packer game was over, but the crap game was on. And the crap game isn't the kind of game you can win by yourself. It was time to bring in the heavy hitters. "Is there someone we should contact?" the doctor asked.

Although breaking your back is just about as unlucky as it gets, having a brother who is the Director of the University of Michigan's Spine Center helps even the score. I told them to look in my bag for my address book. "Call my brother Andy," I said. I'd made this call a couple of times before, but this was a different deal. This wasn't calling from Taipei telling him I'd gotten in a car accident or calling from Les Avenières telling him I'd trashed my knee ligaments. This was the call that he'd done for hundreds of people before, always dreading that it wouldn't happen to one of us. Andy had just returned to his home in Ann Arbor from a conference when he picked up the phone.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Hey, man," I started, "This is the big one."

"What kind of big?"

"I cracked my back - I'm toast"

"Fuck... ...Where's the crack?"

"They're not sure - T-11 to L-2 (11th thoracic to 2nd lumbar vertebrae) - somewhere in there."

"You moving your fingers?"

"Just like Townshend"

"Toes?"

"Can't dance."

"What else? Are you bleeding - anything internal?"

"Nope - not a scratch. Bike's fucking fine too."

"They got you hooked up to some meds?"

"They gave me something - but it's just starting to suck."

"Jesus... ... Shit... try to relax - let me talk to the doc - I'm on my way."

"Fuck."

"Fuck - hang in there man - let me talk to the doc."

I passed the phone to the doctor, and they wheeled me up to the intensive care unit. Within an hour the pain that accompanies me to this day crept into my body and took a stronghold. When it finally became unbearable, they hooked me up to a morphine rig. It was a small plunger next to the nurses call button. I could zap myself once every 20 minutes with a big ol' hit of morphine. Of all the crap I've introduced into my body morphine is the worst. It does absolutely nothing to relieve pain. It simply makes it impossible for you to think or respond. Your body turns into a jalapeno: fiery red with pain, but a vegetable nonetheless.

A nurse came by and asked if I needed to call anyone else. Putting people on your Christmas card list is one thing. Being asked to prioritize everyone in your life to tell them that you'll never be the same is another. The list started out with my family, but it was a nice Sunday afternoon and the Packers had just lost their first game. Seems like everyone had turned off the TV and gone for a walk. I left a string of messages, but nobody was home. Rachel and I were in the final stages of our divorce, but I really needed her. She was out playing, too. I couldn't get a hold of anyone, but then again if I hadn't been lying on my back, I would have been riding trails myself.

For the rest of the day I zapped myself with doses of morphine and tried to watch football. Every 20 minutes or so, the nurse would bring the phone over to me, and I'd have to tell someone else that I was going to fuck up their year. The whole episode turned into a morphine soaked couche mar, and I couldn't really distinguish minutes for hours, hours for days.

Eventually, most of the voices on the phone turned into faces at my bedside. My sister Sue was visiting friends in Seattle, and they sped down with her bundled up in a wailing mess in the back of their Subaru. Rachel got the news from her roommate, and rushed over only to pass out - pulling out my IVs on her way to the floor. I had joined her friend Sarah

who had broken her back while we were in Les Avenières. Now the two closest people in her life would be in the ranks of those who view the world from the height of three feet.

My brothers Dan and Bagus flew in from San Francisco and stared in disbelief. The same man who had joined them at the summit of Mount St. Helens could no longer climb out of bed. Just two weeks earlier, I'd been roughhousing in a pool with Pat in Florida. Now he stood in front of me, afraid of what a touch might do. My mother, a former X-ray technician, came in with perfect bedside manner while my father, someone who passes out at the site of blood but who had seen me through so many other scrapes, didn't even know where to start. My other two sisters Barb and Nari were told to stay in Milwaukee with their kids - their job would come later. This wasn't going to be a quick fix.

Finally Andy popped in after a hell flight from Ann Arbor, complete with multiple transfers and delays. He had been at a convention in Chicago and was only home long enough to kiss his wife, Brigit and daughter Molly goodbye. He really didn't have words to describe to 7-year-old Molly what was going on except that Uncle Tom was really sick and things weren't going to be the same anymore.

When he walked in the room, he might as well have been wearing a Superman cape. In high school, the swim team had dubbed him "Bananaman," and he even had a T-shirt made with a "B" instead of an "S" on the chest. And that's exactly what he felt like - a fake superhero. On a professional level, he was the best person in the whole damn country, if not the world to be there. His 27-page resume lists dozens of awards, articles and associations. But even he felt helpless.

Helpless to my legs, but invaluable in every other way. My family members wouldn't have to trust a newcomer to make the gravest decisions of our lives. As Andy surmised the situation I watched as, one by one, the OHSU doctors assumed defensive postures. They were way out of his league, and they knew it. As a point of procedure, a doctor wanted to put a Greenfield filter in my leg to thin out the blood and prevent clotting. Andy stopped the guy saying Doctor Greenfield, one of his former professors, would never tap a leg in this kind of situation. A doctor had been assigned to me, but whoever the guy was, he wasn't making any decisions. I was Andy's patient.

Meanwhile, my family and friends stood by my side, mustering up enough courage to stay and talk. After a while, I noticed that they started coming in small groups. They'd stay in the room as long as they could support themselves, then sneak out and cry like babies while the next shift took over.

While Andy was the first person to play hero, he was far from the last. Even though I no longer worked for Adidas, Rachel still worked there, and since our divorce hadn't been finalized, I should still have been covered by her insurance. In the confusion over my firing, the human resources secretary at Adidas forgot to put my name on Rachel's policy. When the hospital called the insurance company, they said I wasn't on their list, and they refused to pay. I walked Jay Edwards, possibly the greatest human being ever to work in the sporting goods industry. Jay was a DC lobbyist who went to work for Nike and helped pave the way for Phil Knight and Bill Bowerman's billions.

Now as the head of HR at Adidas, Jay called the people at the insurance company and told them that they would cover this or lose the entire Adidas account. The rep said he would consider it. Jay told him that he was looking at a Blue Cross business card in his rolodex and if they didn't agree to pay the claim right there, he was going to use that number immediately upon hanging up. The agent caved. Jay saved my family hundreds of thousands of dollars - even though the insurance company continued to dispute virtually every claim I would make.

Over the next two days, after several horrible transfers onto x-ray tables, I was diagnosed as a T-12 paraplegic with 80 percent compromise of my spinal cord. That meant that I hadn't cut or broken the cord. In fact it was only a small bruise. On any other part of the body it would barely show up as a blemish. On the spinal cord it had permanently disabled me.

Andy spoke with the neuro surgeon, and they decided to fuse my spine between the second lumbar and eleventh thoracic vertebrae. A week earlier I didn't even know I had them. Now I only knew how many of them I had left. They were going to cut my back open and screw in a five-inch titanium clamp that would stabilize the region, help the bones heal and insure the bruise wouldn't spread. They also jacked me full of more steroids than the Cowboys offensive line uses. Before I went in for surgery I couldn't tell if I'd been in the hospital for a day a week or a year. All I knew is that I was losing consciousness and when I woke I would never be the same.

All I could see was a cloudy blue light vaguely illuminating a pale green room. The same committee that controlled Bruce Willis in the Twelve Monkeys controlled my pale green room. It was the same dull putrid green of the high-rise apartment buildings in East Berlin. The committee refused to let me speak, move or breathe. I screamed as loud as I could but no sounds came from my mouth. The committee laughed. I resigned myself to live in this hell forever. Then I figured how to cross them - If I scream in French, they will have to let me vocalize in order understand me. These people can't read lips in French. I was sure of it.

"PUTAIN DE MERDE ME FAIT CHIER! BANDE D' ENCULES! ESPECE DE CROUTE DE CUL! GROS BRRANLEUR DE MOUCHES!

It worked. I blasted out of the nightmare coughing up immense piles of dry nonexistence. I tried to swallow, but the dry lack of substance was keeping me from producing the saliva to extinguish it. The new room still had a smoky glow. The commie green color of the nightmare was reestablishing itself as hospital green. The committee was replaced by a single masked nurse who refused my requests much like the committee had.

In the dream, I was strapped down. Now I was cemented in by nothing. For the next three months I had nightmares every night. And a worse reality when I woke every day. The pain overwhelmed the army of endorphins recruited to soothe

my brain. The tubes stuck in my wrist cooled my abdomen with glucose and morphine. I'd been through some pressure cookers before, but this one was worth taking a step out. This wasn't a crack from a diving board or a hardball crushed into the back of my head. This wasn't the smash of a windshield against my back or the scrape of pavement ripping open my knee.

Since birth, my skull had been commissioned to hold my conscience in place but for the first time I asked my skull to take a rest and let my conscience float out of my body.

I could see my time here was over. There was no coming back from this one. No cast or ace bandage was going to heal this. I was begging the powers that be to let me check out, but the docs were doing too good a job on me. I could have fought for death, but I didn't have the guts. I complacently let my soul back into my body. As much as I wanted to end it I didn't even have the power to off myself.

Finally, the surgeon appeared and explained to me what he'd done. I looked around and discovered that I was on stage again. My parents, my brothers, my sister Sue, Rachel, her mom, Pat, who knows who else was there. It had been a couple years since I'd been on stage, but the sensation was familiar. I was out in front and everyone was watching. Once it was Tom Haig the state champion. Once it was Tom Haig the Acapulco cliff diver. For four glorious years it was Tom Haig le Plongeur de la Mort. Now I'd be on stage the rest of my life. Nobody would ever miss my act. Not the grocery store clerks, not the policemen, not the bosses, not even the geriatrics leaning against their walkers. From now on my act was "Tom, the guy in the chair" - the guy who needs help.

Time to ask the skull for an escape again. I leaned back, shut my eyes and took another spin around the room - and this time I tried as hard as I could to shut the door on the way out. Whatever was awaiting my crippled gimpy corpse on the inside of that room, I didn't want any part of it. Better to let the nieces and nephews remember me from pictures - not the piece of bullshit that was lying on that fucking cart.

The day after surgery, a physical therapist strapped me into a two-piece, form-fitted fiberglass brace that would serve as a physical cast and a spiritual prison for the next three months. It was a brace fastened by three clips and a series of Velcro straps understood only by the person who constructed it. For the next 12 weeks, dozens of nurses, doctors, therapists and friends took a crack at strapping me in it. Not one person got it right the first time. It stayed on all day and was removed only for sleep.

To sleep (or whatever you could call my nighttime activity), I was wedged into a fetal position with a pillow between my knees so I wouldn't get bedsores. Every four hours someone would come in, put a catheter up my dick so I could pee, then turn me into the same pillow wedge on the other side. In the morning I was strapped back into the brace, which stayed on the entire day. At no time during the three months I was in the brace was I ever without piercing pain.

After the therapist strapped me in, she told me I was ready to sit up. I told her she was insane. She told me it would feel good to lift my head after lying down on drugs for four days. I put my arms around her neck and she lifted me up. It was the worst pain I'd ever experienced in my life.

After the accident and the surgery, my body had coughed up all the endorphins allotted in one single lifetime. Even though I was heavily sedated on morphine, I could feel millions of neural endings slamming against the brick wall in the middle of my spinal cord. I've never passed out from pain before, but I could feel myself slipping away. My head swayed, my breathing accelerated and I convulsed. The dry heaves were a trick my body was playing to distract me from the real situation. The therapist slid my legs off the bed and told me it was time to get into a wheelchair. If my pupils had lasers, she would have gone down like a Gameboy kill. I couldn't get my breathing down well enough to speak, so I was unable to tell the soft-spoken therapist that she was Satan and I refused to do her evil will. She lined up a sliding board (a smooth skateboard without wheels) under my ass and told me to lean forward and grab around her neck.

"No fuck..." I gagged, "no fucking way!"

She laughed, smiled and in an angelic tone said, "Oh, I think we're gonna do this - all we have to do is sit in the chair for a half an hour."

My head stilled, and the convulsions ceased. I looked around the room for Andy. I was sure he was going to back me up on this one. He wasn't there. "I'm not moving anywhere," I said. "Didn't they tell you I just got cut yesterday? Aren't I supposed to be in traction for six months or something?"

"No," she said. "As long as your back is fused, it's best to get the rest of you moving as soon as possible. We could drop you flat on your stomach, and it wouldn't change your level of injury."

"First day after surgery?" I asked. "I haven't even eaten yet."

"You can eat if you want, but it's not going to change the fact that you're gonna have to get in that chair before I leave."

The tone of her voice began to match her demonic requests. I couldn't take it from an angel-faced do-gooder. I put my arms around her neck, and she slid me along the board into the chair. Emergency rooms have a pain chart ranging from cool blue to hot red. You're supposed to point to a color that describes your level of pain. If the therapist had shown me that chart I would have lit it on fire and shoved it up her ass.

At this point, I realized I'd forgotten how to cry. I was breathless and in shock, but crying from pain had been conditioned out of me years ago. I think it happened when I was a catcher in Little League. I'd get bowled over by guys twice my size, but crying on the field just wasn't going to cut it. Since then I'd been in car accidents, fallen from water towers and landed flat on my back from 70-foot multiple somersaulting dives. No crying. I used to swear, jump up and down, and tell jokes, anything but cry. Now I really wanted to cry. I had no physical outlets sufficient to relieve my pain. I was going to have to



learn how to cry again, or I wasn't going to survive. Then again I wasn't sure if I wanted to survive.

After a week of watching family and friends come in and out of my room only to leave in a fit of tears, it was decided I should move from Portland to Northwestern University's Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago (RIC). When I was at the University of Illinois, I used to visit Andy in Chicago when he was an RIC resident. Not only did he know the management and staff, but even I was familiar with the famed Dr. Richard Betts. Betts has a reputation as a tireless fundraiser with political connections so high it embarrasses him to mention them. At RIC I'd be getting celebrity treatment. I was in constant fear of my own body, and I wanted to be treated like a family member not just the poor kid from Wisconsin who wiped out on Sandy Blvd.

I assumed a medical air transfer was a fairly regular procedure, but I discovered later that we were taking a tremendous risk. If any of the nightmares that were to take place the following week occurred on the plane, I could have died. I was off morphine, but only because it made me sick to my stomach and didn't touch the pain. Instead I was jacked up on a codeine-drenched, Tylenol hybrid called Tylox. At 8:00 a.m. eight days after my accident I was dressed by a nurse, slid onto a gurney and loaded into an ambulance.

My parents and Andy were either with me or in the car behind me. I think my sister Sue was there, too. I was so fogged out I couldn't have told you if Mick Jagger was driving.

The ambulance rounded the switchbacks down the West Hills of Portland, through downtown and onto the Banfield freeway towards the airport. I couldn't see where I was, so I guessed, based on curves. When I lived in Taiwan, I played the same guessing game. Every morning when we drove from Taipei to Yeilui I would lie down and zone out in the back of our microbus. I tried to figure out from the turns how much longer I had to nap.

I nodded off on the way to the airport and woke up thinking it was time for a 9:00 a.m. show for 3,000 Chinese school kids. Instead of jumping out of the van and stretching, I lifted my head and stared at my dead lower corpse. Only three weeks earlier, I was diving off cliffs with Bagus in Hawaii. The final dive of my life was a 50-foot flying gainer off the beachhead at Poipu on the Island of Kauai. I ripped the snot out of it, not displacing more than a teaspoon of water. I was going to try another one that day, but I figured there were plenty more cliffs like that. Now six-inch curbs scared the shit out of me.

They lowered me out of the ambulance and rolled me into the airport. Andy and my parents dealt with all the technicalities of moving a fresh spinal cord patient while I was rolled past security into the United terminal. On the way I saw a lawyer that I used to work with at Adidas. I waved but he passed by without noticing who was on the gurney. He was in a rush to get back to his office. I wasn't rushing anywhere for months. Once at the gate, it was time to get into a wheel chair and load me into the plane. They raised my gurney and transferred me into a small aisle chair that fit between the seats of the plane. It was an easy slide into the chair, and I made it without a scream. I rolled past the queue staring at the ground avoiding the horrific looks from the other passengers.

Andy plopped my legs into a first class seat, then he and my dad lifted me onto the transfer board over the handrail and into the seat. Even though the transfer was smooth, each small twinge was enough to roll my eyes back and take my breath away. Fourteen days earlier I was strong enough to push my Cannondale to Timberline Lodge on Mt. Hood, the highest road in Oregon. Now I was so weak I couldn't even hold my arms around Andy's neck. Once in the chair, Andy took my vitals and fed me some more Tylox while I tried to get comfortable. Comfort is a relative term that had changed drastically since the wreck. I haven't been truly comfortable since.

It was a beautiful Indian summer day in Oregon, and the sky was magnificent as I crossed the country and went back in time to the midwest. We swung around Mount St. Helens on takeoff, and I peered into the active volcano we had climbed the week after my wedding. I started to describe the climb to Andy then stopped realizing we would never do monster hikes again.

We flew along the Columbia River, past Multnomah Falls, Larch Mountain, Dog Mountain and Mount Adams. These were the main reasons I moved to the Northwest. What used to be monuments to conquer had turned to nothing more than pretty pictures. Mt. Hood was brilliant. I'd planned to summit it with my friend Aaron in spring. Now I wondered if I would ever be healthy enough to climb the streets of Portland. As we passed over the Rockies, I spotted Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons. A few years earlier Rachel and I had hiked along Yellowstone's Grand Canyon descending ladders and steps to a spectacular overview of the falls made famous by Ansel Adam's photograph. We had walked deep into the forest, climbing over fallen trees, to a remote lake where we got stoned and made love. We popped out of the forest, only to find a herd of buffalo blocking our trail. I timidly walked towards the buffalo, who turned on me and bluffed a charge. I scampered back to the forest with Rachel laughing. "I could have gotten killed!" I said. She just kept laughing. Being rolled by a herd of buffalo would have made a better story than being taken out by an old lady and a brake cable on an empty city street.

The pain pills were doing the job, and I felt OK during the flight. Six months later - long after I was weaned from meds - I took a Tylox pill after a bad day of stomach pain. It sent me flying like one of Hendrix's beta trips. On the airplane I felt normal on three hits.

The terrain turned dry and boring after the Rockies so I knew I wasn't far from Chicago. I tried to read the in-flight magazine, but concentration was impossible. It would be three more weeks before I could focus enough to read a newspaper. The pilot announced the descent, and we dropped into O'Hare for three months in the Midwest. I was so doped up that I actually felt positive. The Pack were looking solid. It might be their year. I was going to get healthy, watch some football and make it back to Oregon by January - maybe even for a Super Bowl party. I had no idea how long and convoluted that journey would be. The next three months took two years to pass. Favre ended up throwing more than 4,000 yards. I don't think I even

wheeled that far the entire time I was in Wisconsin.

The plane landed and the worst epoch of my life began. The passengers deplaned while I took another hit of Tylox. We waited in the plane for 20 minutes before an attendant arrived with an aisle chair. Getting out of the plane seat was such a brutal experience that I nearly passed out. Three people lifted me over the rail and slid me down the transfer board where I landed with a thump on the thin aisle chair. The pain of the transfer hit with an acute crack then revisited me every few seconds in throbbing after-shock waves. Andy looked at my eyes and took my pulse before we moved. He's seen me get as beat up as anyone, but I know he's never seen a look of helpless desperation in me before. It had to scare the shit out of him. They rolled me out of the plane into the breezeway.

The O'Hare worker looked at me with a straight face and said, "This chair's just for getting outta planes. We gotta put you in another chair."

"Good one," I laughed, holding back tears. "Where do we go to find the ambulance?"

"No," he repeated, "First we gotta get you into another chair."

I laughed again, but when I looked in his shallow bloodshot eyes I saw he was serious.

"Hey man, you just tell the people that this is different, and I ain't moving until I get into an ambulance gurney."

"No can do," he said. "This is a United chair. I work for O'Hare. You need to get into an O'Hare chair."

"Hey asshole, why don't you just punch me in the face and get your jollies that way. I am not moving into any more fucking chairs."

By this time Andy had taken off to try to find the RIC ambulance. The airport worker persisted. "I's sorry sir, but this ain't my call. I can't move you in that chair. Airport rules."

"Look jackass," I said (I'd left any tact or patience I may have had on Sandy Blvd.), "tell the airport that this is a fucking emergency and it calls for different fucking handling." I crossed my arms and neither one of us moved for a minute.

"Sir," he squeamed, "I gotta have you move into this chair. People's waitin' ta get on the plane."

"Fuck off and push me out of here."

Finally my mother, always the voice of reason, calmed me down. "Come on Tommy," she said, "We'll never get out of here. Just one more transfer and we can get something to eat."

All the fighting seemed to bolster my strength. "Let's get it done then. FUCKING ASSHOLE!"

For the first time in my life my mother didn't object to my profanity. I grabbed around my father's neck, and the three of us made the transfer to an old grocery cart of a wheelchair. Again, pain shot through my body like a hammer hitting the bell at an amusement park. I envied my lifeless lower half. We rolled out of the breezeway over to the United customer service desk where we waited for Andy to find the ambulance. Following us the entire way was the O'Hare worker rolling the aisle chair. He parked it 20 feet from where we finally sat.

Now I was a patient in a precariously stable condition waiting in the United Terminal at O'Hare for an ambulance that OHSU forgot to arrange. Andy searched the Yellow Pages for ambulances while my parents found something for us to eat. I put my forehead into my hands and tried to get some rest. I felt my chair jiggle and assumed it was my Dad with a piece of pizza. No such luck.

"Excuse me sir," another attendant said, "but that chair belongs to O'Hare, and this is a United lounge. We need to put you in a United chair so we can use this chair to pick up other passengers."

I was stunned. John Cleese couldn't have written a better skit. It was the most absurd thing I'd ever heard. In a Matthew Perry tone I said, "Excuse me but could you please find another cripple to harass? I'm kinda tired."

"I'm sorry sir," he said, "but we've got to have that chair. If we don't come back with all our chairs we get fined. If you'll just move over to this bench I'm sure we can get you a United Chair as soon as one is available."

"Why don't you just lay me out on the floor?" I continued, "There's lots of room there. Maybe I could get some rest that way?"

"Sir," he continued, "I don't appreciate your tone or your attitude. Now could you please move over to the bench so I can help out some other passengers?"

"Look brain trust," I said, "I just got out of the hospital. I'm in the middle of a 2,000-mile ambulance transfer. My god-damn legs don't work and I can't move a fucking muscle without blowing through the roof. Get the fuck out of my face."

"I'm sorry sir, but I'm going to have to get my manager here on this."

"I don't care if you get Richard Fucking Dailey and Mike Fucking Ditka - you're not getting me out of this chair."

At this point my mother saw me and flew over like an eagle protecting her nest. "Get the hell out of here and leave us alone!" she screamed. She was red in the face. I've never seen my mother commit an act of violence upon anyone (except for a few well-deserved spankings - it was the '70s). There was no doubt in my mind that if he didn't back off he would have taken a knitting needle in an eyeball.

He backed off.

It was a full two hours before the ambulance finally showed up. I made one last transfer onto the gurney and lay back for the first time since leaving Portland. According to the doctors at OHSU my seating tolerance was between 45 and 90 minutes. By the time I laid back in the gurney it had been seven hours. I was fully expecting to fall asleep as soon as I lay down, but the pain from the brace and the strain on my back kept me awake. I needed sleep more than ever, but it wasn't coming.

An hour later the ambulance pulled into the RIC. It felt like I'd landed in Shangri-La. One of Andy's best friends and oldest colleagues, Dr. David Chen, met us and showed us to my new room. They did a short intake and introduced me to the

staff, many of whom were also Andy's old friends. I was transferred from the gurney to my bed where they loosened my brace and jacked me full of pain pills and knockout drops. I dozed to sleep, feeling like I'd landed at a luxury resort in Bali. I woke up in a prison cell.

At 4:00 a.m., a fat, nasty night nurse bounced into the room, splashed on the florescent light and announced it was time to cath and turn over. She slapped me on the leg, pulled off my blanket, dipped a catheter in a packet of KY jelly and reached for my crotch. "Yo, hold up there! - What the hell are you doing?"

"Just taking your vitals and removing some liquid," she said.

"Can you turn off that damn light first? I don't need to be awake for any of this."

I was sharing a room with Jimmy Sturtevant, a week-old fresh quadriplegic, a gunshot victim from Rockford, Illinois. I'd briefly met Jimmy when I checked in. "God damn that thing is bright," Jimmy said. "Ain't there enough light comin' in from the hallway?"

"Listen boys," she said, "the more I can see the quicker I can get out of here. Now who's gonna be first?"

"I can cath myself," I said.

"I need help," Jimmy said.

"Well, Mr. Haig, you get busy, and I'll help Jimmy over there."

"Can you please turn off that frickin' light?" I said. "Fallin' asleep's a bitch... If you just turn it off you can take our vitals, take our piss, and we'll fall back to sleep before the doctors come to wake us up. OK?"

"Come on now, Mr. Haig, it's not all that bad," she said through a belly laugh. "Let's just get to work here. I've got 30 more patients on this floor waiting for me."

Realizing that completing her rounds before Katie Couric came on was more important than patient care, I shut up, cathed myself and swallowed a cupful of pills. Pigwoman cathed Jimmy and took our vitals. She entered the numbers into a pager, emptied our pee jars then dashed into the hall leaving the door open and the light on. "I'll be right back," she snorted.

The bitch was gone into the night only to come back an hour later laughing loudly as she announced that her boyfriend called and got her "all detached" from work. I was hoping her boyfriend was a male phone-sex number. No one could possibly be attracted to that bovine apparition. She turned off the light but left the door wide open with corridor light pouring in.

"Shut the door!" I yelled.

"Can't do that," she said, "I gotta be able to see you fellas. Hospital policy."

"We got beepers," I said.

"Now how's that gonna help me if you're asleep?" She slopped out of the room ignoring our plea. If I was lucky I may have gotten an hour of sleep before the 7:30 a.m. wake up call. Not only was I on west coast time, but I'd been waking at 9:00 for most of the past six months (work at the bike shop started at 10:00). On a day where your average rehab patient logs 12 to 15 hours of sleep, I'd had less than four.

I cathed again and looked up to see Dr. Chen with some interns and a med student, "Get any sleep?" Dr. Chan asked.

"Not too much," I said. "Some dairy nurse woke us up in the middle of the night and forgot to turn off the light. An hour later she came back, turned off the light and said it was hospital policy to leave the door open. What's up with that?"

Jimmy overheard me from the other bed. "Yeah, what the hell is up with that?"

"I'm really sorry you guys," Dr Chen said. "We've been a little short-staffed, and we've had to hire some temp nurses at night. The day staffers are real pros. You'll notice the difference. They've been here for years."

"I'm really tired," I said. "What's the program today?"

"Unfortunately, it's a pretty big day," he said, "We've got to get you down for x-rays, figure out your diet, sign you up for therapy and start your classes. The sooner we get you going the better."

I could have slept for 20 hours at that point, but instead the nurse strapped my brace on (backwards - neither one of us noticed the difference until Andy showed up), and I waited for a chair to take me down to x-ray. I raised the back of my bed to a sitting position just in time to see Andy and my parents show up. I told them about the she-wolf nurse and Andy said he'd mention something to Dr. Betts.

Andy and Tom, one of the day nurses, slid me into a wheel chair then waited for me to catch my breath and let my eyes focus. Every transfer I made was still an ache-fest. Somehow I thought the change of venue was going to alter things, but I was still a fresh crip with plenty of agony. They rolled me down to X-ray where I met a technician who remembered Andy from his residency. She told me stories of what a caring and conscientious doctor he'd always been, saying she was sad to see him leave. It relaxed me and left me with a reassuring feeling I was in good hands. Then she told me I had to get on the X-Ray table. I glared at the chasm between the chair and the table. She sensed I wasn't too happy with transferring.

"We've got to get you on that table," she said. "I'll call for help." She called in a huge attendant who took one look at me and assured it would be no problem. He swung my legs onto the table. The two of them hoisted me by the armpits and dropped me on the table. My mother, an x-ray technician of 25 years, told me that the walls of an x-ray room were made of lead to keep radiation from escaping. They also deafen the screams of mortally wounded patients. I'm sure my scream was heard far outside those walls.

The table was hard and cold. The clamps from my brace dug into my side. They had to take a dozen films from several different angles and body positions. Each time they moved me I found another level of pain I'd never experienced before. Once, while the technician was behind her curtain, my leg spasmed and fell off the table. I almost followed it. Instead, I was left in a contorted, stretched out position.

I passed out only to be woken when the technician noticed I wasn't responding to her. When the session was over, she saw I was in tremendous pain. Instead of trying to get me back in the chair, she thought it would be better to slide me into a gurney. She called for a cart and a couple of attendants. This was a much more humane way to deal with the transfer. When I slid into the gurney, it struck me that I was more comfortable having other people move my body than moving it myself. I had absolutely no control over anything. I was swimming in pain, thinking I'd reached the lowest low but the day was still young.

They wheeled me up to my room, and three people lifted my flat body back into my bed. Breakfast was waiting for me, but this wasn't the time to be trying any hospital food. I just wanted to sleep. I chugged a Tylox, loosened my brace and tried to drift to sleep. I almost made it when I felt the first twinge of nausea hit my stomach. I took a Zantac with a tall glass of water and tried to doze off again. For a while it worked. I fell into a deep sleep but experienced a paranoid nightmare like the kind I used to get from chloroquin. I was in a World War I trench with shells flying all around. I was being chased by an enemy force that kept getting closer and closer. I was running in and out of a labyrinth of bunkers and tunnels. Finally they caught me, and I was hauled off to prison camp. I took a bullet along the way, and I was bleeding from my leg. Just as they shut the prison door on me I woke up with a start.

There's no better relief than popping awake from a nightmare knowing it was all fantasy. Instead I looked down at my legs and pined for the prison camp.

Then the nausea came back. I swallowed more water. I raised and lowered my bed. Finally it got so bad I buzzed the nurse. Tom, the day nurse, came into the room followed by Andy and my parents. "Something's wrong," I said. "I'm sick to my stomach and I'm burning up. Tom pulled out his thermometer, Andy grabbed my pulse and my mom put her hand on my forehead.

"Jesus, Tommy," my mom said, "You're on fire."

"I'm ready to puke, too," I said. "But I can't get anything to come out."

Andy went over my chart and tried to figure out what was wrong. "Hey," he said, "When's the last time you've taken a crap?"

"I don't know," I said, "Last Sunday as far as I can remember."

"Weren't they giving you a bowel program at OHSU?" he asked.

"What's that?" I said.

Andy rolled his eyes and walked out of the room. He called OHSU and sure enough they had given me a "bowel program" but there weren't any results. Finally I had to act the idiot and ask, "Hey, what the hell is a bowel program?"

For some reason hospital people find it very difficult to say the words "crap," "shit," and "dump." Instead they use the term "bowel program." These people are sticking their fingers in us and ramming tubes into our bodies, but they're afraid to use the word "shit" in front of us. More than likely nobody wanted to be the one to tell me that for the rest of my life I was going to have to ram a pellet up my ass and stay on a toilet for an hour while my innards drop out. It gets even more fun than that. Every 15 minutes I have to put on a rubber glove and digitally do my ass until all the shit drops out.

Apparently at OHSU they were putting the pellet up my ass but not doing the digital thing. None of the crap came out. I remember them doing something, but I thought they were sticking tubes up there or taking samples. At the same time I was eating Tylox like candy. Tylox will stop up your system and turn everything in your digestive track to rock. Andy looked at me and said, "Dude, You're F.O.S."

"What's that?" I asked.

My mother, Andy, and Tom said in unison, "Full of Shit."

"So let's get that shit out of there," I said. "I'm sick as hell."

"We're gonna cram you full of laxatives," Andy said.

"How long's that gonna take?" I asked.

"About 24 hours," he said.

"24 hours? Whaddya mean?" I said. "Can't we just flush that crap out of there?"

"Not without ripping up your intestines... and... um... we've got to take you down for more x-rays."

At OHSU I was in pain, but towards the end of the first week I started to feel better and I thought I might be getting over the worst of it. After my first day at RIC I realized that I hadn't even started. They mistransferred me again onto a gurney and rolled me back down to the X-ray tech.

"What are you doing here again?" she asked.

"F.O.S." I said. She rolled her eyes in disbelief.

"We need a full set of abdominals," the attending nurse said.

I'd just won the triple crown. I was in the most pain I'd ever been in, I was wretched with nausea and I was in a state of complete exhaustion - and now they were going to toss my body around a hard table for a half an hour. A week earlier I couldn't cry when they made me sit up. I'd gotten over that. I wept hard as they moved me around. When they were done and they moved me back up to my room, I cried and cried. Crying was supposed to be a cathartic activity that makes you feel much better when it's over. Not this time. I was strapped in for a long, painful nauseating day, followed by a long, painful couple of weeks, followed by a long, painful couple of months followed by a long, painful couple of years capped off with a steady diet of constant frustration. All I wanted to do was check out.

Andy's prediction of 24 hours was off by exactly 48 hours. I lay in bed in feverish agony for two days until my bowels

gave way to the jet fuel I was swallowing in place of regular meals. Then, for the next 24 hours, I had the pleasure of erupting every four or five hours until I was finally cleaned out. Sometimes the nurse would come and clean it up. Sometimes I had to lie in the filth for an hour with both Jimmy and me gagging, waiting for the nurse to come. There was not one second of those four days that I didn't want to end it. I remembered reading a book by Armand de Las Cuevas who had to wade through cesspools while in a prison camp in Cuba. I never thought I would ever experience a low like that, but this one was potentially worse. De Las Cuevas would eventually leave his prison. I would never be able to leave mine.

Over the next two weeks things got better as I slowly regained the ability to leave bed by myself. There was a team of physical and occupational therapists that put me on a lifting regimen and tried to teach me the basics of living in a chair. None of them really knew what they were talking about. I didn't realize this until months later when my bones healed and I weaned myself from my brace. Some of the things they were asking me to do were impossible with the brace on, yet painfully simple with the brace off. Dressing was the most obvious example. I wasn't able to reach down and tie my shoes, yet the therapists insisted that this was very easy and every one of their patients had learned it. I went through excruciating pain trying in vain to do it, whereas just three days after my brace was off it became as simple a task as, well, tying your shoes.

They treated me like a baby and made me participate in games that wouldn't even be fun for a mongoloid. The worst of these games was balloon baseball. The therapist would make a ball out of an inflated surgical glove and we were supposed to play baseball with it. The diamond had eight-foot base paths, and we were supposed to slap a pitched ball and try to make it around the circuit. Each time someone made contact (which was every time) The therapist would cheer like a mother watching t-ball. "Run to first!" she would scream. I've never felt so humiliated in my life.

Finally they started letting us go for extended pushes. I was thrilled at the chance to get out into the city but terrified at what I learned. Most sidewalks are tilted for drainage, and that makes rolling along them especially difficult. If there is as much as a one percent incline, the chair will shoot towards the street. That means that one arm does all the work while the other actually has to break in order to keep the chair straight. When you see someone in a wheelchair moving quickly along a sidewalk, they're working their ass off.

They started teaching us how to do wheelies, but they never really knew how important it was to hold a good solid wheelie. They made wheelie class optional when it was by far the most important thing they could teach us. All the other skills (dressing, transferring, balance) would become second nature as soon as the brace was removed. Holding a wheelie allows a chair-ridden person to jump off a curb and eventually roll down a small set of stairs. It also allows crips to bounce up on sidewalks, which is especially handy when there aren't any curb cuts or driveways. It allows a crip to control speed when descending a hill, and once you get really comfortable, you can dance like a mutherfucker.

At night the occupational therapists would give lectures on things they had no business talking about. The most insane lecture of all was the sex-ed lecture. They separated us into boys and girls classes, then some rotund nurse who probably hadn't gotten a piece of ass in years talked to us as if we were 13-year-olds popping out our first pubes. She had no idea what it was like to be a crip and have sex. There's only one way to tell crips about sex, and that's to have another crip tell 'em the way it really is. If you ain't a crip - you don't want to know. If you are one - you need to hear it straight up.

In case you do want to know, here's the deal on sex: Regular, get-horny, rip off the clothes and get busy sex is over. Period. The link between the brain stem and the penis is shot. There is no longer a connection between what you think and what you feel. You get erections when you're watching a baseball game, but you wouldn't be able to get a hard on with Pamela Anderson going down on you. You can take a hit of Viagra and that gives you a good long woody but you have to wait an hour for it to take effect. Once it's up; you can't cum. And you never will. Your partner even has to tell you if you're in or not. Granted, when you are getting laid, most crips get a really nice electrical stimulation and you drive yourself nuts to the point where you swear you're going to cum, but you don't.

Obviously this wreaks havoc with your brain and your self-esteem. The brain has been wired for billions of years to find a mate and reproduce, but something drastically wrong is going on here. Once again cripdom has come up with a way to frustrate you beyond your wildest imagination. People assume that it must be god-awful to live without standing up. To tell you the truth, legs are over-rated. You can do pretty damn well without them. It's living without a functioning dick and ass that drives male crips insane.

Most crips really can't handle the fact and repress the shit out of it. Most crips repress the shit out of everything. That's the one area where the RIC did well. I had a psychologist who really knew what she was talking about. She dealt head on with frustration and suicide. She taught me one lesson I use daily. Once a high threshold of frustration has been met, you never go back to the old level. Once you've been suicidal, all it takes is a bad day at the office to cough up a few suicidal thoughts. If you don't actively tone down your depression level, you're gonna off yourself. Guaranteed. Lots of crips who haven't had that lecture go straight for the Derringer instead of trying to figure out just how drastic their most recent frustration event is.

And it's really easy to have a sequence of unbelievably frustrating events pile up on you in a hurry. You wake up late and rush to take a shower. Your shower chair breaks and you crack your elbow on the side of the tub. You can't reach the showerhead so you have to endure either the frozen or scalding water until the temperature mellows out. You try to pull yourself off the floor of the tub, but your elbow is so sore that you can barely make it to balance on the ledge. You go for the chair but you slip and crack your head on the sink - and knock over everything in the bathroom. You finally get back on the chair, towel off and get dressed, but as you transfer into your car seat you discover that all that extra lifting and heaving has loosened up your bowels and you've just shat yourself. You go back inside and call your boss to tell them you're going to be

late for the third time that week.

You go back into the bathroom and look at your broken shower chair. You make it back down onto the floor of the tub (this time remembering to take the shower head off first) then take off your shit-soaked clothes and try to clean yourself off without puking. Then you look at your chair and try to clean it off without puking. You get dressed again, wheel out to your car and remember that you shat the driver's seat as well as your chair. You get it cleaned up and finally show up for work. Then the CFO says your budget's been cut and your boss has the gall to tell you that HE is having a bad day. You look at the clock on your computer and it says 8:50 am. Why even try to get out of that one? Why not just get back into the car and drive 70 mph into a semi?

The answer that the psychologist told me is that by noon of that same day everything will probably be just fine. The trick is to go out to the car, drive around the corner and take a time out. Shut your eyes, calm down, reassess the situation, develop a plan, change your attitude and start over. When she first told me that I thought she was fucking nuts, but I've actually used that exact same process several times. When the frustrations of crippdom start to get overwhelming - and that's very often - I take a timeout.

In between the PT, OT and psychiatrist meetings at RIC, I spent all my time in bed. After a couple weeks, my seating tolerance was supposed to get up to three hours at a time, but that still left lots of time lying in bed. One day I tried to extend my seating tolerance. Instead of going back to bed between the morning and afternoon sessions, I sat in a room by myself and tried to run through a couple of Dead tunes on my guitar. I couldn't make it through a single tune without getting tired or forgetting the words.

I went to the cafeteria and tried to read the newspaper. It had been three weeks since my accident, and I still couldn't read even a few column inches before having to restart. That's when I realized that I had to chill on the Tylox. I'd smoked enough pot and eaten enough LSD in my day to know what a drug does to my body. There was only one reason I couldn't concentrate and it had to be the damn pills. I'd been on them 24-7 since the accident, and it was getting to the point that I couldn't even think. I asked the doctors if it was time to start cutting back, and they told me I could give it a shot.

Instead of taking my usual hit of Tylox that afternoon, I let the narcotic wear off. I didn't notice much until I tried to transfer into my chair. There was always a lot of pain associated with the transfer, but this time it was much sharper. Once in the chair, however, it reverted back to its old dull ache. I went to a wheelie class and noticed that if I let myself get into a deep wheelie it actually relieved some of the pain. Once back in bed for dinner, the ache grew worse, and I was forced to take another Tylox. The next day, however, I started drug free and kept it going all day.

That evening, for the first time in three weeks, I was able to read a newspaper. The next day I started to read Phil Jackson's Sacred Hoops. It was the first time I felt in control of myself since I'd bounced off the truck. I was successfully doing something of my choosing, Not something a doctor or nurse made me do.

For four weeks I bounced up and down between suicide and acceptance. The more time I spent alone, the more I wanted to off myself. Fortunately, I never spent much time by myself. I received five or six pieces of mail every day, and I rarely went a night without having a visitor. I actually left the hospital with a handful of fond memories, most of them revolving around Packer parties. We were in the heart of Bear country, but this was our year and even the die-hard Bear fans sided with the Pack. One night the Pack was on Monday Night Football, and I asked the nurses if some friends could come over to watch the game.

The staff set up a TV in a corner room and told everyone they could stay until the end of the game. A couple of old roommates and high school friends dropped by and snuck in a case of beer. The hospital was keeping track of my pee volume, so slugging a couple of microbrews felt like sneaking beers in high school (especially since I was with the same bunch of people that I used to sneak beers with in high school). I downed a six-pack during the game, and Favre pulled out a fantastic fourth quarter drive to win it. I had to sneak a quick pee into the sink before my midnight cathing so the nurses wouldn't find out. My bedtime Tylox felt really good that night. Even the nurses leaving the light on after the 4 a.m. cathing couldn't keep me awake.

After four weeks of pain, confusion, frustration and anger, the RIC decided to give me my walking, errr, release papers. The RIC proved to be one major disappointment after another, and I needed to get the hell out of there. The doctors may have been the best in the country, but the therapists and night nurses were the cheapest money could buy. Even Andy and his colleagues were embarrassed when I told them of some of the lousy care the patients were given. I'd passed all the RIC's physical tests, and they decided I would be much better rehabbing at home. I was still in the brace and needed to be turned at night, but both the doctors and I agreed that the RIC wasn't doing me any good. It was time to try to live a real life again.

My parents drove down from Milwaukee and picked up my things, but I wasn't going straight home that evening. The Who was in town, and it was high time I paid a visit to Mr. Townshend. If I was going to make it through this shit alive - I needed a little refresher from the master. Most patients would have gone home and gone straight to bed. I was going to see the greatest rock and roll band on the planet.

My old friend Shawn picked me up at the RIC and drove me to her apartment in Wrigleyville. Shawn was a Deadhead, and we'd gone to dozens of shows together over the years. We were concert pros, but we were both a little scared. The chair barely fit into her apartment, but once inside I had plenty of room to maneuver. I knew if I was going to make it through the show I was going to have to get some rest, so I transferred onto her couch. I sunk deep into the pillows and fell against the back. I hadn't sat on a couch in over a month, and this was a completely new experience.

Shawn helped me put my legs up and held my arms as I leaned back to lie down. I loosened up my brace and tried to nod off. I never felt comfortable in the RIC bed, but the couch swallowed me up like an octopus securing its prey. I couldn't move, but I didn't care either.

A few hours later my old Illinois roommates Tom and Matt came over for a little pre-show party. As we knocked back some beers, I felt free for the first time in weeks. When I leaned over to put my beer on the coffee table I forgot that I no longer had control of my hips, and I fell headlong into the table. Tom jumped up and saved me just as I was about to smash my head. We all had a good laugh, but we realized that as much as I wanted to be independent, I still needed a leash.

Tom and Matt helped me into Shawn's car and threw my chair into the trunk. It was midweek and they both had young kids and jobs, so they weren't able to make it to the show. One of the reasons we stayed friends all these years was our common devotion to The Who. It really meant a lot that they were there.

Shawn drove to the United Center where just the night before Jordan had lit up Cleveland for 34. We didn't have a hand-icapped placard, but the attendants saw the chair and parked us up front anyway. The show was sold out and the lines getting in were endless, but being in a wheelchair was like Moses parting the Red Sea. Attendants came from every direction and cut me through every line. In just a few short minutes, we were at our seats listening to a horrible warm-up band.

That's when I started to freak out. A year earlier I'd pushed Rachel's paraplegic friend, Sarah, onto a platform at Portland Meadows to see Chuck Berry play with the Dead. I looked at all the people in chairs and imagined what a horrible world that must be. Now I was on that same platform. To the left of me was an obese quad with a finger control automatic chair, and to the right of me was a thirty-something woman emaciated with MS. Further down the aisle were two paraplegics that appeared to be a couple although it wasn't as easy to tell as the two people making out in the row in front of us.

I turned to tell something to Shawn and for the first time in our concert going history I was looking up at her. She stands barely five feet tall, and we've gone to tons of shows where she never even gets to see the band. I used to offer to lift her onto my shoulders, but she always insisted she was fine just hearing the tunes. Now I was the short one.

We went out in the corridor while the horrible band finished their set. When they stopped playing, there wasn't even a feint of applause. All you could hear was the sound of idle chatter and random crowd noise. Before The Who started, I had to deal with that storied rock 'n roll nightmare, the concert bathroom. It was between sets and intolerably packed, but just like when we walked in, the seas parted. There was one handicapped stall, so I wheeled through the river of slop on the floor and locked myself in. I'd used a handicapped bathroom once before on Navy Pier just across from the RIC, but it wasn't busy and I didn't think much of it. This was different. This time I truly felt like I was on stage, and everyone was both watching and waiting for me. I scrubbed my filthy hands clean with a baby wipe and opened up a new sterile catheter. I ripped open a packet of KY jelly and lubed up the end. I used a bungee cord to hold my pants down then grabbed my penis between my pinky and ring finger while holding a pee jug between my thumb and forefinger (at RIC they called the jug a "urinal," but nobody knew what the hell they were talking about). I slipped the catheter down through my urethra, feeling nothing but a small glitch as it passed through the sphincter. The beers slowly drained out, I pulled the tube out and dumped the whole mess into the toilet. I zipped myself up, packed up my backpack then unlocked the door. That's the peeing ritual I

## Mile 25: Dharamsala

had to get used to. Not only was it complicated and intrusive, but by the time I was done thirty guys had already whipped it out and peed.

When I got back to my seat (actually it was a painted square - I never left my chair) the lights had gone down, and the crowd was in a frenzy. Shawn was jumping up and down, and nerve twitches were shooting through my body. The last time I'd seen The Who was in 1982 at the Milwaukee Arena. It was during the height of The Casa's Who frenzy in which we spent hours a day doing wild windmills to Quadrophenia. At that point I couldn't play a lick of the stuff, but I had every Townshend mannerism down. Now I could probably play most of it, but I'd never again be able to pull off a windmill.

The giant diamond-vision screen was illuminated with North Sea waves crashing onto the shore in Brighton. A 15-piece orchestra started playing the Quadrophenia medley, and tension rose with each passing song reference. I was screaming with my arms in the air, but my legs were motionless. That morning I thought that maybe when Pete hit the first chords of "Can You See the Real Me," my legs would bust through all the nonsense in my spine and jump into a mule kick. It would be all over - just a bad month. If anyone could pop me out of this shit it was Townshend. I'd punted Catholicism over what the guy was saying and his message had rung true to me ever since. C'mon Pete - just one more time. Let me have just one more leap...

The band burst out on stage, and Pete smashed into the intro. Up to that point I, honest to God, thought I had a chance. My legs knew that cue better than they knew how to ride a bike or do a front dive. In fact, it would have been impossible to hear that cue and not spring into action. My ears took in the sound; my arms went for the power chord, my hips tensed up for the jump... But no response from the legs. Instead I burst out in tears.

The thrust of confidence I got from my first trip abroad in a wheelchair seemed to last for the better part of three years. I was rehired by the internal communications department at Adidas, and Rachel and I even got back together to try to make another

er go at things. But as much mutual respect as we had for each other, the flame had burned out and we both knew it. I heard a commentator on NPR describe relationships as a garden. Two gardeners might stay in love and a gardner might stay in love with a flower, but two flowers will never stay in love. After ten years together it was clear that Rachel and I were both flowers.

Then one day in April 2000, I was scanning email and I got a post from my brother, Dan, in San Francisco. The subject heading read, "We're out of here!" Dan was a freelance web-producer making a pile of cash. He also had done post-graduate work in Tibetan studies, and his passion lay with the Dalai Lama and his struggle to free the Tibetan people from the religious persecution of the Chinese. He'd been to India twice and had spoken with the Dalai Lama about his plan to mount Tibet.org, a website that would link the Tibetan government to the expanding Tibetan exile communities throughout India and the world.

The Dalai Lama had given him his blessing, although he had no money to fund the project. Through Dan's work as the president of the Tibetan Group of 100, (a collection of Nobel laureates, celebrities and politicians sympathetic to the Tibetan cause) he found a group that would fund his project. He'd just finished his last contracting gig and was going to move with his wife, Zoe, and their two-year-old daughter, Tashi, to Dharamsala in the Himalayan mountains of northern India.

I looked at my computer screen and my insignificant position at Adidas America and decided that I needed to make my life significant again. Those cursed Bridge to Venice rules were rearing their ugly head - and this time by Dan whom I'd walked the bridge with 15 years earlier. Rachel and I were in the process of selling our house, and that night I told her I wanted to split up and go to India. She was angry when I told her, but after it sunk in, it made a ton of sense. She needed a release too. Our life together had been based on our mutual love of having a physical interaction with the world around us. She felt enormous guilt over her abilities, and I felt like I was holding her back. When she left me three years earlier I was crushed. This time, however, we both felt it was the right decision.

I went to work the next day, mapped out the final edition of the employee newsletter, then told my boss that I was leaving the company.

"Dot-com?" she asked.

"Nope," I replied, "dot-org."

I left Portland in mid June and drove the northern route back to Wisconsin. I camped the first night in Glacier National Park and spent almost the entire next day driving through northern Montana. The sun fell as I entered Teddy Roosevelt National Park in Western North Dakota, and I was prepared to drive until I got white line fever. Instead I was witness to the most amazing sky show I'd ever seen. To the south, a frenetic electric storm was building sending a bouquet of long, thin, lightening bolts across the lower horizon. Rising out of the clouds was a dominating orange crescent moon sending blue lunar rays onto the plains. Then, as I looked to the north, the sky erupted in a brilliant psychedelic green, yellow and red northern lights dance. I hadn't heard too many exciting things about North Dakota, but this just blew me away. I pulled over in a farmer's field and camped out with the sky exploding all around me. I took it as a sign from the cosmos that whoever they are, they approve of whatever it was I was doing.

The next day I made my way through Fargo and the Twin Cities before crossing the Mississippi into Wisconsin. The plains gave way to rolling hills, and I felt like I was completing a circle that I'd made when driving out west eight years earlier. I flipped on the radio and Bob Uecker was calling a Brewer v. Braves game. Living in Oregon, there were very few things I missed about Wisconsin, but one of them was Bob Uecker. He may have made a fool of himself doing Mr. Belvedere, and he had some pretty boring days broadcasting the World Series on NBC; but give the guy a 162 game radio schedule, and it's like turning on David Letterman every night. Pure genius.

It was 4:00 when I got the game on the radio, and I wanted to see how long it would take him to crack me up. Uecker's generic straight man started up a dialog about the great Brave Hall of Famers whose jerseys were retired and hanging on Turner Field's wall of fame.

"That's what's great about coming to Atlanta if you're an old Braves fan." Uecker said, "Henry Aaron's always out at the ball park, and you can look out and see Eddie Matthews and Warren Spahn's jerseys out on the wall."

"And pretty soon some of this group will have their jerseys hanging out there too," the straight man added, "Maddox, Glavine, Smoltz, Chipper Jones..."

"Maybe even John Rocker too," Uecker, said. "Except that Rocker may still be in his jersey."

I spit up my drink and laughed out loud in the car. I looked over to my right and a 50-year-old couple driving a Cadillac was in stitches. I checked out my rear view mirror, and a college student on his way home from Madison was shaking his head with laughter. The guy cracks up everyone in the state all summer long.

I made it to Milwaukee in time to see my family and attend my 20th high school reunion. My mother and father were just getting used to the fact that my Deadhead brothers and I had settled down, gotten jobs and stopped globe flopping when we were off on another adventure. Only this time Dan was taking Zoe and Tashi, and I was going to a disease ridden third world country in a wheelchair. Bagus, now an award-winning webmaster in San Francisco, would be joining us in January.

The Bridge to Venice was apparently more powerful than anything my parents could have ever prepared for. My oldest two siblings Andy and Sue both have PhD's and my next oldest sisters Barb and Nari both have successful families and careers. Whatever it was that struck Dan and I that chilly January day in Northern Italy delivered a compulsion that we can't seem to break. It's like an ongoing X-files episode that defies logic or reason. Like in my diving days, what appeared crazy to other people was just a small stretch beyond what I already knew. We were both old enough to know we should stick with



our well-paying jobs, but we got on the plane anyway.

The Nicolet reunion was probably more difficult for my classmates than it was for me. I'd been in my chair for four years and had gotten used to all the stares and questions, but most of my classmates were seeing me as a handicapped person for the first time. Most hadn't even heard about my accident. Some people had completely metamorphosized in 20 years, but none more than me. I still had all my hair and I weighed about the same, but I was two feet shorter, and taking in the size of my chair, three feet fatter. The state diving champ was long gone, but I had a story or two to tell. It wasn't long before the chair became invisible and I was just one of the crowd catching up with old friends and looking at pictures of people's kids. In the end I realized that I make a bigger deal out of the way I look than anyone else. Nobody else really cares.

My nieces and nephews especially love the fact that I'm in a wheelchair. I spent the bulk of my time in Wisconsin with my remaining two Milwaukee siblings, Barb and Nari and their families. The two are as close as sisters can be and tend to raise their clans as one big family. The kids, Patrick, Timmy, Kelly and Megan, are each unique in their own endeavors, but they always come together and push like a team when it's time to get something done. Each kid has two moms and two dads. Each parent (including my brothers-in-law Dan and Mark) brings special talents and influences into the mix. The kids' roll models include activists, business people, artists, environmentalists and most importantly loving and accepting parents.

In Oregon I really missed watching all my nieces and nephews - including Andy's two kids, Molly and Will - grow up. When I had just come out of the hospital after my accident I spent two months in Milwaukee and got to know them as individuals as well as how they behave as a group. Seven grandchildren, very close to the seven of us.

This time, after just a few days I wanted to pack them up in a suitcase and take them to India with me, but their time would have to come later. At least I knew that with two of their uncles taking off for far away lands they would grow up with a keener sense of curiosity and global responsibility than most of their classmates. The draw of the dramatic landscape and temperate climate of Oregon will keep me in the Northwest - snow and ice are horrible in a wheelchair - but I'll always feel that I'm missing something very special in Wisconsin.

After ten days in the midwest it was time to hit the road. When my parents dropped me off at O'Hare, they were fighting back tears - just like they were when they dropped me off to go to Hong Kong 15 years earlier. While I was always comfortable trying to push my limits, my parents had always feared for the worst. Seeing as the worst had already happened, they could only think of what else would come to pass. For six years they had been able to keep their children in America, but now we were about to explode back into the world again.

Before getting to India, I wanted to spend some more time in France. Pat had moved back to Paris, and I'd regained contact with several friends in Les Avenières through the Internet.

After a week in Normandy and Paris with Pat and some friends from Portland, I spent the next few days in Albertville with my old friend Vincent Fabbris who lived up the hill from me in Buvin. On Bastille Day, when we packed up and headed to his sister Cecile's house, a beautiful old farm complex 20 minutes from Les Avenières. It poured all day, and all the small village festivals and fireworks had been cancelled. Instead of staying cooped up in the house, Vincent and I decided to drive to Les Avenières and see if anyone we knew would be hanging out at the Cafe des Platanes. When we got to the Platanes, we ran into two old friends, Loic and Joao. Instead of people partying hard on a closed street, the few that ventured out were packed inside the smoky bar, dressed in long pants and leather jackets. The four of us were pining over the glorious epoch of the fabled Walibi Plongeurs de la Mort (Death Divers of Walibi). Although many of the shopkeepers and park directors were still in Les Avenières, most of my close friends had moved to Lyon or Grenoble to look for work. As beautiful and free-spirited as Les Avenières was, it was still a tourist town and not the kind of place likely to hold on to its promising youth.

We were just about to take off when a table of Slavic-looking 20-somethings pulled into the bar and started drinking enormous beers (a very un-French thing to do). One of the bar regulars who had recognized me asked if the people at the table were friends of mine.

"Nope," I replied, "I've never seen any of them before in my life - they're not even speaking English?"

"I thought you knew all the divers," he said.

Then it occurred to me that after a long absence, Walibi theme park had hired a new team of divers. I went over to the table, introduced myself, and the conversation turned from Russian to broken English. They ordered me a big beer, and we played the Who-do-you-know game that show divers engage in when they meet up with divers from another company.

Before long, the rain let up, we wiped off the patio furniture, and it was just like old times. We were divers hanging out with Frenchies getting liquored at the glorious Cafe des Platanes. We hung out until closing time (midnight in our little village), and then retreated to the divers' house for after hours. During my stint in Les Avenières, the divers' house was well known for its after hours parties, but this was the team's first year in town. The new divers were all from the former Soviet block except for one Brazilian. The trend in high diving shows was to hire Olympians from poor countries. They were fantastic divers who would work for half the pay. They all spoke some English, but none of them spoke any French. I played translator, breaking the ice between the foreigners and locals. I remember needing that same translator when I first came to Les Avenières twelve years earlier. Before long it was 3 a.m., Vincent was gone and I had to crash on the floor.

The next day, I woke up amongst the clatter of divers collecting their bags and towels, cramming down aspirin and pulling their bikes out for the short ride to the park. For the better part of twenty years, I woke up and got ready to go to the pool, but this felt like a bad dream. It was the kind of dream where everyone is doing something you're supposed to be doing, but for some reason you can't get any of it done. It was the kind of dream where people are going on a trip and you get left behind. For the most part, I'd felt pretty good about getting on with my life after the accident, but watching my old

routine take place in my old hometown was pretty difficult. When I lived with Jackie and Jeanine, I just rode my hand cycle, and things seemed normal. This was the first time I'd been in a diving environment since my accident. It conjured up some long repressed memories.

When I got to the park I ran into more old friends and felt better, but when I arrived at the show site, I felt awful. I hadn't seen a diving show since quitting eight years earlier and had never dealt with this aspect of my prison sentence. When I left show diving, I knew it was time and had no regrets, except that I was leaving France. I didn't have anything left to prove as a diver, and the only reason I kept doing it the last few years was to ride a bike in the French Alps. But in the back of my mind, I'd always envisioned coming back to Les Avenières a few years after I'd quit and still be in good enough shape to do the show. Now I wasn't even healthy enough to get back stage.

Although the new team members were excellent divers, they were pretty poor showmen, and the crowd never seemed engaged. It stung seeing a C- show going on in a place where we took immense pride in being entertaining. As I sat watching, I made mental notes to tell them how to pick up the pace and get the crowd involved. They did their dives, the comedy, and even the fire dive without much fanfare or panache. I sat in the audience with my show captain's hat on, but when it came time for the high dive, an eerie sensation snuck up and hit me like a bomb. You can talk all the shit you want when you're outside the pool or in the bar, but the only respect you get from the divers is to climb the ladder and rip the snot out of a nasty trick. I wanted to pop out of my chair, climb the ladder and snuff a Mifflin Street dive. My head still had it, my arms still knew what to do, but the ol' legs just didn't have the same snap. Instead I sat on the sidelines and took a picture. I felt like a crip all over again.

After the show, the divers came out and asked me how it was. I didn't have the heart to tell them that they were stinking up the joint, but I did tell them a couple of quick tricks to make things snappier. Bruce Cant would have made us practice and practice after a show like they did, but they were just happy they didn't miss their dives.

I rolled back to town and spent the rest of the afternoon with some old Walibi friends who had started up a video store. Vincent drove back to pick me up, and we ran into yet some more old friends at the Platanes. Just as we left the bar, the divers came roaring back to town after their last show. Before Vincent had my chair piled into his Peugeot, the divers all had big beers, but this time they were interacting with the Frenchies that I'd introduced them to the day before. I couldn't dive anymore, but I may have been some use to that show anyway.

That night, I took a bath at a friend's house that had a big enough bathroom for my chair. As I sat in the tub soaping up and washing my hair, I didn't notice that the flow of cold water had been cut by a flushed toilet and scalding hot water was blistering my ankle.

After lathering up to shave I put the razor under the faucet and felt the searing stream coming out. I turned off the hot water and sunk my ankle into a forceful blast of freezing water. When I got out of the tub, I looked down at my ankle and realized it was too late. I had a bubbly third-degree burn on my leg - just in time to go to nice, clean India.

Two days later, Vincent drove me to Annemasse so I could hook up with Jackie who was going up to the final climb of the Tour de France on the Col de Jeux Plane. Jeanine took one look at my ankle, and it was just like old times - I was her 12-year old son, and she was my mother. She scolded me, and then ran out to the local pharmacy. Jackie asked me if I wanted some whisky. I told him it didn't hurt. "Okay, a beer then?" he said. Jeanine came back to find us arguing about the race coverage with drops of Heineken splattered over the newspaper. She called us intolerable sports junkies as she bandaged me up and sent the two of us along with Jackie's friend, Jean, into their car and on the road to the Col de Jeux Plane.

Americans have a hard time figuring out why Frenchmen spend hours in traffic jams then hang out for the better part of a day just to watch a stream of cyclists whiz by in a few seconds. What they fail to realize is that while they are waiting for the Tour to arrive, they are engaged in a day long celebration of their hometown mountain, the sport of cycling, and France itself. When the riders do finally come by, they cheer with all their power, but it's just one part of a bigger celebration.

An hour after skirting out of the backside of Annemasse towards the high mountains, I found myself towering above a dramatic Alpine valley surrounded by 1,000-foot stone walls and rock spires that lead up to Mt. Blanc, the tallest mountain in Europe. The Tour de France officials had shut the road to the summit, but Jackie's friend Jean told the gendarmes we were bringing up wine to a restaurant at the top. The gendarme looked in the back of the car, and sure enough, there were more than 100 bottles of wine. He let us pass. What he didn't know was that the wine wasn't for any restaurant - it was just for the group we were with.

After snaking up a dozen tight switchbacks Jackie parked behind our dining fly at the summit and brought my chair around. Not 30 seconds after I was out of the car, I dumped trying to navigate an uneven incline. Every one of our group of 25 people ran to my rescue. Before I could tell them I was fine, there were six pairs of hands lifting me up, putting me back in my chair and pushing me to flat ground. For the rest of the weekend, someone was always around me wherever I went.

Our dining fly was actually a small fortress on the mountain. There were two small trucks placed about 25 feet apart with plastic groundcloths forming the walls and ceiling of a completely covered dining hall. A satellite dish was propped above one of the trucks, and a 48-inch TV sat inside one of the sliding doors of a van. Next to the dining area, another dining fly covered a makeshift kitchen. The winding road to the summit was packed with similarly equipped caravans.

There may have been 25 of us, and we may have been high atop a barren mountain pass, but we were still in France, and that required a full five-course meal with a different wine for every course. Behind the dining area were five crates containing more than 150 bottles of wine and a few bottles of 'l'eau de vie' or "the water of life," a digestive liquor made from apples, pears, raisins or peaches. It's basically pure booze -around 180 proof. "Great for drinking when you camp," a crusty

70-year-old Savoyard told me.

The meal started with a tomato-rice dish followed by salad, followed by steak, followed by a different salad, followed by the stankiest, nastiest, most delicious Roquefort on the mountain. Dessert was your choice of ten different tarts with a dollop of ice cream and a shot of the appropriate L'eau de vie. As we made our way through dessert the old Savoyard pulled out his accordion and played a litany of Savoyard folk songs that lasted well into the night. Aside from me, everybody in the tent knew every song word for word. These were the songs that are saved for weddings and the summer village festivals. Knowing all the mid-song toasts and gestures is as complicated as knowing all the gags in the Rocky Horror Picture Show. The only song I'd ever heard before was "Que sera sera" which I translated on the fly from a fuzzy memory of seeing the Doris Day show when I was seven years old.

After dinner we moved over to a small bar, the only building in sight, at the height of the pass. Inside, cycling fans from dozens of countries sang their local folk songs and got along much better than their peers in the government. I did some trash talking with Germans and Italians who were sure that Jan Ullrich and Marco Pantani were going to have their day against my new American hero, the returning champion and cancer survivor, Lance Armstrong. The Spaniards were comparing Lance to Indurain, and the Belgians were wallowing in the memory of their last great champion, Eddy Mercks. The Frenchies were hoping that Richard Virenque could hold Lance's wheel, and the Brits were... well, they were all just wasted.

Having spent way too much time with the Brits I woke up a little lightheaded and made it over to our tent-fortress for breakfast. I was the last one there, so I missed out on most of the early morning toasts. For better or worse over the years, the frequency of my beveraging has left me with the ability to hang with most, but here I was out of my league. The Savoyards slammed glass after glass of dry white breakfast wine, and I just couldn't keep up. I left the tent with one Savoyard saying sincerely, "If you don't like white, we can always open up some red?"

I moved over to a group of Swiss on the summit just above the pass. Their TV was situated so they wouldn't have to change their view to see the riders when they came up over the pass. They simply would tilt their heads, cheer on their heroes, then go back to drinking and catch the finish on TV.

When the race started at noon, all the antennas came to life and turned down the valley for the best coverage. Everyone on the mountain hovered around the TVs with a glass of wine in one hand and a copy of L'equipe in the other. Before anyone settled, in Marco Pantani uncharacteristically attacked on the first climb (of five) of the day. The party stopped and everyone glared at the TVs. The only way for Pantani, the '98 champ, to get back into the race was to go on a solo break and eat away at Lance's lead. He was the only rider Lance really feared because he had already beaten Lance on one of the mountain finishes (The Ventoux).

Lance let him get a minute ahead, but then the Pantani train stalled. For most of the day, the lead stayed at a minute, but not long before the final climb, Lance and all the other favorites caught Pantani. At the bottom of the Jeux Plane Virenque, Ullrich, Lance and a few climbers broke away from the pack. Pantani cracked for the first time and looked like he was going to hurl. Up on top of the mountain, the excitement bubbled over as the publicity caravan, the team cars, and the helicopters arrived at the summit. I was busy pissing everyone off screaming "It's Lance's day!," when for the first time in the tour, Lance was dropped on a climb. Virenque attacked, Ullrich followed, and Lance got left behind. "It's a bluff!" I screamed...

...But it wasn't. Lance didn't eat enough in the feed zone, and he was blowing up halfway up the hill. He wasn't doing as badly as Pantani, who had turned white and was dropping further and further back with each pedal, but he wasn't doing nearly as well as Virenque, who had dropped Ullrich and caught up with the Spanish climber, Roberto Heras, who had escaped off the front of the original Pantani escape. Virenque and Heras were not threats, but Ullrich, a great time-trialer, was a major concern. Lance had more than a seven-minute lead, but if he gave up five minutes on the climb, Ullrich might have been able to cause him an awful lot of trouble in the final days.

Fortunately, Lance caught the wheel of a group two minutes behind Virenque and was able to hang on up to the pass. The last time I'd seen a tour mountain stage was the 1989 Alpe D'Huez stage when Greg Lemond suffered the same fate. He missed his food bag and was dropped on the climb by Frenchman Laurent Fignon and Spaniard Pedro Delgado. I screamed bloody murder for Lance, but I couldn't help but think I was bad luck. Bad luck for the stage but good luck for the Tour - Lemond won the race in '89 and Lance was a lock for this overall win.

With only a few kilometers to go, Heras misjudged a steep turn and smashed into the barricades, wrenching his front tire. Virenque sped ahead and took the stage - his first since being banned for drugs two years earlier. As much as I wanted to see Lance take the stage, it was great to have a French victory on a French mountain, and it only cost Lance 90 seconds against Ullrich. The French victory, of course, made way for more great celebration. Surprisingly no grave mishaps occurred while the spectators drove back to Geneva.

Five days later, I was sitting along the Champs Elysees with Pat and a bottle of champagne. As Lance crossed the finish line with his second victory, we popped open the bottle, and it sprayed all over the crowd. I was soaked along with a ten-year-old French kid along side of me. I apologized to the kid and his dad, but they both thought it was a thrill. Pat and I partied long into the night with friends, but in the morning I realized the party was over - it was time to get to India.

Packing has got to be one of my least favorite activities, and being in a wheelchair has multiplied that distaste a hundredfold. On top of all the extra junk I have to carry, I also have to deal with the wheelchair. My body, which used to be of great use in transporting gear, had become just another piece of luggage. I had a duffel full of clothes, my guitar, a laptop computer and a 3'x 3' x 2' box stuffed with six months worth of Depends, ten tubes of KY jelly for my catheters, five bags of

baby wipes, four extra bike tubes, and two extra caster wheels.

That's a ton of crap to be hauling around, but I also had a wheelchair, a small backpack - and me. It took Pat and our friend Jan several trips down the stairs before they came back for me. Pat and Jan crammed me into the puny French elevator, which required Pat holding the back of my chair while I took off my wheels and Jan stuffed us into Pat's 18 inch wide elevator. Once we got everything out to the street, the two of them packed the whole mess into an oversized cab with the cabbie bitching the entire way.

I had to take a train to London to catch a flight with Locke Berkebeil, a security expert also working on the Tibet.org project. The cabbie dumped me off at Gare de Nord for my trip under the English Channel. He piled my stuff on the curb, and then went inside to find an SNCF (French Rail Company) guide to help me with my baggage. A minute later, he came out telling me that someone was coming. I paid him the fare plus a tip, and then he asked for 50 francs for the baggage (a normal fee that I'd forgotten about). I dug into my backpack, but then he reneged and told me to forget it. At first I thought he was giving me a break, but after 20 minutes on the curb, I realized he'd ditched me. Paris cabbies really suck when it comes to wheelchairs. Every single time I got a cab, the cabbie bitched about the wheelchair staining their seat (like they were clean to begin with) or the fact that they weren't required to take handicapped passengers.

I asked two German girls to watch my box and guitar while I strapped the duffel onto my feet and put the computer bag on my lap. I rolled into the station with ten minutes to catch my train. After begging for a porter for help, I zipped outside and waited for someone to come. The German girls were there, but they weren't watching my stuff. Anyone could have walked off with my guitar, and Paris is just the place where stuff like that happens. Finally, the porter showed up and took me to the platform. I'd missed my train, but they put me on the next one. They also put me in first class which is as nice as any first class airline service. I hadn't eaten a thing all day, and one last French meal before taking off didn't hurt. As I left the country, I realized that France is worse than heroin. It's an addiction that will end up costing me every cent I ever make.

Two hours later, I saw the Battersee Power Station from Pink Floyd's Animals album just before the train pulled into London's Waterloo Station. A Britrail steward helped me store my gear, so I was free to roam the city with just my small backpack. I hadn't been to London in ten years and was pretty excited to get there, but it left me flat. Aside from the monuments, the architecture was bland, the weather was horrible and the prices were out of control. I wandered around the Queen's walk on the Thames River, and then found a bed and breakfast across from Waterloo Station.

The rooms in the B&B were up a long narrow flight of stairs, across a small courtyard then down three more steps. I got out of my chair and pulled myself up the steps, with the cook from the B & B following me with my chair. I slid along the courtyard hoping the cook didn't care that my pants, without any butt muscles to hold them up, had slipped down to my knees. He positioned the chair at the bottom of the landing on the far side, and I plopped myself back in. He handed me the key to my room and refused my offer to tip. I thanked him, then told myself that if the kitchen were to go up in flames that night I was going to have to sit there and burn like a Buddhist monk.

The next morning, I pulled myself up the small stairwell, hoisted my chair and myself across the courtyard to the long stairwell, and called for help. The cook carried my chair to the bottom of the stairway, and I bounced my ass down the steps and flopped in. I only paid 15 quid for a room in London so I wasn't about to bitch about inaccessibility.

Although there was a nice Dali exhibit in town and Parliament and Big Ben were still really cool, London continued to under-impress me. In the ten years since I'd been there, I'd turned into a devout Francophile, and England just isn't in the same league on any level, except rock stars. The biggest letdown was Buckingham Palace. What an embarrassment to a country that once ruled the world. The train stations in any number of European capitals have more character. Hell, even St. Monica's, my elementary school in Milwaukee, has more character.

To top off my growing distaste for London, the temperature dropped to about 60 degrees and it started to pour. I hid out in Trafalgar Square for an hour, then made my way back to Waterloo Station for my bags. Fortunately, the cabs in London are enormous and could easily handle my luggage. Unfortunately, they are the most expensive cabs in the world, and they hit me up for 50 quid just to get to Heathrow Airport. I had paid 50 bucks to get from Paris to London and 70 bucks to get from Waterloo to Heathrow.

Once at Heathrow, there was one last pain in the ass before I was free. I had to find another porter, pick up my ticket and convince the good folks at Virgin Airlines that my truckload of shit wasn't overweight. I told the ticket agent that I'd called ahead and Virgin had approved my excess baggage as medical supplies. She was confused, but there was a long line, so she let the box go. She weighed the guitar and duffel, and those two were within limit. She asked me what I had for carry-on, and I showed her the laptop bag while hiding the backpack behind my chair. She tagged everything, checked my passport and visa, and then handed me my ticket. I calmly left the counter, strolled into the nearest handicapped bathroom, locked the door, then screamed louder than I did when Lance crossed the finish line a week earlier. After two months of planning and seven weeks of travel, that freaking box was on its way to the Subcontinent. I slipped off to the pub for a couple pints.

I had to wait an intolerable five hours at Heathrow before the flight was ready. I met Locke at the gate, and then fell asleep before the flight took off. I woke up just in time to see sunrise over the Himalayas. We flew over K-2, and I knew that somewhere just off the other side of the plane was Dharamsala. As the 747 dropped over the Himalayas and through the flat plains of the Punjab, the squalor of Delhi emerged in the distance. It had been nine years since I'd been to Asia, but I wasn't even out of the plane before the ambiance of the third world slapped me in the face. As the jet lowered, I saw a bare-foot family of six squatting in the high grass along the runway. A few hundred yards behind them, a hamlet made of scrap

wood and cardboard bordered a stagnant creek that served as both washbasin and toilet.

It took me more than an hour to deplane and go through customs, but Dan, who had already been in Dharamsala for six weeks, was sitting at the baggage claim with his friend, Greg, who was going to ride back with us. It had been a long, stressful journey, and when I saw Dan, I almost lost it. I was teary-eyed, but the pragmatics of the situation precluded the emotion, and it was time to get to work. Unfortunately, Dan's Indian driver decided to take a long lunch and left us sitting outside of baggage claim for more than an hour. Just as we were about to call another company, the driver pulled up. The five of us packed our gear in the back, except for my chair, which they loaded on the roof. We pulled out of the airport and into the quagmire of Delhi traffic.

On my first trip to India, I traveled by train, so I never really paid attention to how we were getting anywhere. This time, I sat in the passenger seat riding drop-jawed at the circus taking place in front of me. Before I arrived in India, I thought we could have rented a car and done the driving ourselves. If we'd done that we'd either be dead or still trying to find our way out of Delhi. I've lived in cities where the driving is crazy (Taipei tops that list), but for the most part the rules of the road are the same - red means stop; green means go; pass on the outside. India has a completely different system that is as complicated and mysterious as the country itself.

As we wove in between buses, motorcycles, cars, horse-drawn carriages, bicycles, rickshaws, bicycle rickshaws, and half-functional utility vehicles, our driver also had to make sure not to smack into an army of pedestrians, herds of goats, random cows, swinging monkeys, water buffalo and hawkers selling everything from newspaper to coconut. As harsh as it sounds, if you hit someone or something (cows = people here) you just keep going. Word on the street was that if you whack somebody with a car and hang around to see what happens, his buddies will swarm upon you, steal everything you have and possibly drop a knife in your back.

We took a lunch break at the Dalai Lama's compound in Delhi, then switched drivers and took off on the 12-hour trek to Dharamsala. Besides not knowing the code of the road, the other reason you should never drive in India is that, no matter how detailed a map you might have, you would get hopelessly lost. Drivers know Delhi by feel and landmark, not by street signs or highway indicators. About an hour after leaving the compound, we were finally on the outskirts of Delhi heading north through Haryana Province. We were traveling India's largest and most developed highway, but it never had the look of anything short of a chaotic hodgepodge.

None of our seatbelts worked, so I spent the first hour of the trip stiff-arming the dashboard assuming that at any moment I would face-plant the windshield. The saving grace of India's traffic is that nobody is ever going very fast and everyone (aside from us) understands the language of the road. Even with a huge bus and a rickshaw coming straight at us (in the wrong lane), the driver honked a few times, made some arm signals and the bedlam magically subsided. If the same scenario were to take place on a U.S. interstate, it would result in several deaths and an abundance of fecal matter in drivers' shorts.

About five hours outside of Delhi, the road seemed to clear, and the driver got the jeep up to 50 MPH. We crossed into The Punjab at Ambala, but not before the driver bribed an officer with 100 Rupee (\$2) to let his cargo of whities through the state checkpoint. For the most part, the police in India are absent; but when they do get in the way, a small tariff will easily let you slide. As we made our way through the confusing mess of the city of Chandigarh along the eastern border of the Punjab, night dropped onto the plains, and the language of the road changed from honking and hand signals to the flashing of glaring headlights. Nightfall, however, did not signal the end of the diversity of traffic. Cyclists continued to ride in the middle of oncoming traffic without a light, bell or reflector to announce their presence (helmet? Hahahahahhah!).

As we passed into Himachal Pradesh, the road thinned to a barely passable, two-lane trail, and the driver's speed dropped back to 25 MPH. When big trucks clogged the road, another confusing Indian driving protocol went into effect. Drivers flashed their brights and flipped the lights on and off to dictate who was making the move and when it would take place. The mountain roads, however, are less confusing than their urban counterparts, simply because there aren't too many places to go except the city at the end of the trail. It was also comforting to once again be in the mountains instead of the plains. What kind of person lives in dusty plains when there are luscious mountains right next door?

As we entered the mountains, we were only 40 miles as the crow flies to Dharamsala, but it took four hours of winding, sliver-thin, cliff roads before we reached the valley floor below McLeod Ganj, the exclusive suburb of Dharamsala where the Dalai Lama lives. The driver took an abrupt right at the base of the 3,000-foot climb to McLeod Ganj and started up a semi-paved pathway that proved to be the most insane road I'd ever traversed. The Library Road (named because it is the road to the Tibetan National Archives) cuts about 30 minutes out of the drive to McLeod Ganj, but the switch backs are so tight that I swear I could see the back of the jeep on the bottom half of the switch as I was on the top.

For many of the turns, I could not see the surface of the next level before making the turn. The width of the road was rarely more than 15 feet, and the price of any error is death. At a few points along the road, landslides had wiped out the pavement, leaving a drooping pile of gravel that had to be taken at good speed or the jeep would plummet over the side. I thought the road was a small short cut, but it continued like this for three miles until we reached our hotel at the summit of McLeod Ganj. Later I would learn that this mountain path was the major thoroughfare from Dharamsala to McLeod Ganj. In the middle of the day, there were even traffic jams on it.

It was 4:00 a.m. by the time we arrived at the Pema Thang Guest House and dropped dead in our beds. Ten hours later, I woke up to find myself perched at 6,000 ft. looking down at the Tibetan government compound and the residence and temple of the Dalai Lama. Young maroon-robed bald monks sat in a circle listening to a geshe (teacher) while a teaming veg-

etable market bustled just a few hundred feet away. The cliff I was on was so severe I could have hit the bottom of the valley 3,000 feet below with a good overhand Frisbee huck. Off in the distance lay the plains of the Punjab, and behind me sat a 15,500-foot block of granite that separates Dharamsala from Kashmir. My parents were worried that we were so close to the constant fighting in Kashmir, but with the almost complete lack on infrastructure north of us, it would have taken weeks for an army to make their way into Dharamsala.

Jet lag and the enormity of the trip were weighing heavily on me when my 3-year-old niece, Tashi, knocked on my door and smiled so wide that I forgot I was perched like an eagle above the world. Tashi was followed by Dan's wife, Zoe, who brought us up some somosas (spicy, deep-fried potato patties) for lunch. Tashi thought my big box was a present for her and was a little disappointed when she was told that she wasn't allowed to play with anything in it. Instead I pulled out my digital camera, and we took pictures of everything in sight. When I popped them up on the computer screen her eyes lit up and she said, "It's Tashi! It's Tashi!" For the next four months we had a toy that just wouldn't quit.

As an Oregonian I've seen as much rain in the last eight years as anyone in America. It's part of our culture and something we all learn to deal with in order to live in one of the most beautiful places in America. Before going to India, I looked at a climate map in Northern India and discovered that I would be arriving during monsoon season. How bad could that be?

Weeks after arriving in McLeod Ganj, I had yet to go through one single day without a horrible downpour. In the Northwest we have nice clean sprinkles that rarely even require a raincoat. The monsoon of the Indian Himalaya comes in like waves on a violent Pacific coastline. One enormous cloud burst after another. At times it was accompanied by tempestuous winds, deafening thunderbolts and golf-ball sized hail. Losing electricity was a daily occurrence. Sometimes the power grid would go out for five minutes. Often times it would be out all day.

I'd moved from the Pema Thang overlooking the Dalai Lama's residence to the Hotel Tibet right in the center of McLeod Ganj. The Hotel Tibet was run by the Tibetan government so the rooms were spotless and the food delicious. Zoe had scoped out a couple of places and found it to be the closest thing to an accessible hotel in the city. I could roll into my room and the dining room, but there was still an annoying step going into my bathroom. That meant the only time I ever really washed my hands was after I'd spent one of my hour-long sessions on the toilet. I would park my chair at the bottom of the step, throw myself onto the bathroom floor, slide myself across the tile, pull myself onto the toilet and start my defecation routine.

An hour later, I would lower myself to the floor and slide to the shower drain just a few feet away. The shower consisted of a faucet and a couple buckets of water. Two out of three times, there was still some warm water left, but once a week or so, I would have to endure a freezing cold bucket of water. I knew this was par for the course in India, but when the shower drain would back up, I was forced to sit in some awful filth with no way to fully clean myself. All I could do was slide myself back over to the stair, dry off and plop back in the chair.

I went for weeks not leaving the Hotel Tibet except for an occasional meal with DZT (Dan, Zoe Tashi). I started writing, and it consumed days on end. My writing breaks came with the daily maneuvers of the army of monkeys that patrol the city. My room overlooked a busy courtyard with a few guesthouses and restaurants. Every day the monkeys would show up and perform the most incredible athletic feats I've ever seen. They would swing from balcony to balcony and jump across rooftops, looking for an open window to sneak into. If someone left a door or window open, the monkeys were sure to find it and walk away with a prize. One time a group of visiting monks left all their doors open, and a band of five monkeys had a field day. One by one, they entered the open doors, and each one exited with different bounty. The first four came out with fruit, but the smallest one came out wearing a pair of maroon underwear rolled up to the top of his shoulder.

When three-year-old Tashi popped in for visits, she ran to the window and tried to get one of them to come over and play. Occasionally one would gallop past our windowsill, and Tashi and I would scream for joy, then laugh till we hurt. I learned about monkeys from Curious George. Tashi was learning about them the same way American kids know squirrels.

I rarely left the hotel because the streets of McLeod Ganj turned into mud rivers stained by hundreds of cowpies. Rolling around in a wheelchair was the same thing as walking through it on my hands. I'd brought a couple pair of gloves, but there was no way to keep the mud off my hands. That's a very dangerous practice if you need to have sterile hands for inserting a catheter six times a day. As much as I fought to keep my hands clean, I was still exposed to way too much bacteria. I ended up fighting off constant infection, and in the end it drove me back home.

But, after eight weeks of confinement to my room, the sun broke through, and for the first time since arriving, the Bagsu road in front of the Hotel Tibet dried up. I rolled out to see a colorful market dominated by the newly snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas. The outdoor cafes opened, and the Chai stalls just down the street from the Hotel Tibet came to life. Even though McLeod Ganj is high up in the Himalayas, it's a major tourist stop in India, and it attracts people from all over the world. The town is composed of about 1/3 Indians, 1/3 Tibetans and 1/3 travelers. The locals may refer to the foreigners as tourists, but these people were not the same breed that frequents the beaches of Florida. These are travelers in the truest sense of the world. Rarely did anyone stay for less than a few weeks, and it wasn't uncommon to speak with someone who had ended up moving there permanently.

Along with the Tibetan Government and the Dalai Lama came dozens of experts willing to both learn and teach. People studied Hindu, Tibetan, Tabla (Indian drums), sitar, herbal medicine, Indian and Tibetan cooking, and any number of crafts. Although there were organized classes, most of the teaching was done in small groups or one-on-one. When people gathered at the chai stands at the end of the day, the conversation was the most interesting and informative I've ever heard. Then again, it might just be gossip, the lifeline of Tibetan society.

Aside from the monkeys, I always took a break to play some guitar. For years I'd been playing Grateful Dead and Pink Floyd covers but rarely sat down to write my own material. In the few months before I left, I began to polish up a few song ideas I'd had banging around my head. Once in India, all those ideas went down on paper and became finished songs. Zoe, an aspiring writer and poet, hooked up with Tenzin and Namgyal, a Tibetan couple who owned Tea O'Clock, a teahouse located right in the hub of McLeod Ganj. Tenzin had a guitar, a mic, a stereo and a couple of amps. Zoe decided to start Poetry Across the Planet, an open mic night for music and poetry.

Our first Saturday night showing only attracted a handful of people, but word quickly spread and soon enough the Tea O'Clock was the place to be on Saturday nights. There wasn't a lot of electric music being played in the Himalayas, and after two weeks we had people standing outside the teahouse aching to get in. Dan and I always played solo sets before sitting down with whoever wanted to jam. We ended up having a fairly steady group consisting of Oren, an Israeli guitar player; Alt Mundane, an American didgeridoo player; Pascal, a French trumpet player; and Ndrup, a Tibetan flute player. We called ourselves the Himalayan Avalanche Orchestra and we were the toast of the town. It was the first time I'd ever played out on a consistent basis and the first time I'd ever been known as a musician. It beat the hell out of being known as a cripple, and it was the first time I'd ever had any recognition outside of being an athlete. There's nothing great about being a 50-year-old high diver, but I relished the thought of being a 50-year-old musician.

As the streets dried and the sun became a constant, I was finally allowed to begin exploring my neighborhood. People at the chai stands always talked about the neighboring villages, but I had only been down to Dharamsala to visit doctors. I was getting a lot of writing done, but I didn't travel to India just to sit in a room. As I started venturing away from McLeod Ganj, I realized what an island the place was. McLeod Ganj is comprised of six roads that meet at the center bus stop outside of the Tea O'Clock. You can't go more than a half-mile in any direction without encountering a huge hill. As the weather cleared, I started waking up early and going for morning workouts. Although I'd lost a lot of weight living on a rice diet, I hadn't been in any kind of shape in over a year. My first few days felt almost as though I was coming back from an injury. I didn't have any energy, and I struggled on all the inclines. After the first week, however, the stiffness went away, and I started feeling a little stronger. It was time to start exploring further.

With each day I ventured from the Hotel Tibet, India became more and more alive. The first town I hit was Forsyth Ganj a mile away on the far side of a massive ravine that separates it from the Dalai Lama's temple. The road to Forsyth started at the McLeod Ganj bus stop and quickly dropped into a densely wooded section. As I navigated the potholes, and cow pies away from the city, I realized for the first time that I was surrounded by a plush forest. McLeod may be a small city in northern India, but India is so densely populated that the noise level of even the smallest village can rival a busy street in New York City. The honking of long, blaring horns is almost constant, and the whizzing of poorly maintained motorcycles dims the senses. Politicians love to blare over loudspeakers as do any merchants who can afford to. Occasionally I would be able to escape the noise during the afternoon siesta, but every time I tried to catch a catnap, I would be ripped awake by any of a dozen species of jarring noises. Here in the forest, though, I could listen to rustling leaves, trickling waterfalls and foraging birds. It was the first time in all my travels of India that I found a peaceful spot - very strange as most people come to India to find serenity.

Halfway along the road to Forsyth was St. John's Catholic Church erected by the Brits in 1848. I came across the pastor, a heavy-set Indian from Madras, and asked him what a Catholic priest was doing in the middle of all these Buddhists and Hindus. He told me it was the most important outpost in India as the next Catholic Church any northbound traveler would find would be in Russia.

Forsyth was quiet, except for a small motorcycle garage. Everyone who was in town, however, had their eyes glued on me. These people had lived their entire lives in a small Himalayan village and had never seen a white guy in a wheelchair before. Indians may be shy to talk, but they have no problem staring at you until they burn a hole in your clothes. As I neared the end of the village, a middle school let out for its' morning break. The boys were dressed in blue pants and white shirts, while the girls wore blue skirts, white blouses and blue v-neck sweaters. Every other person in the town was dressed in rags, but the school kids' dress was impeccable. I stopped to talk to a few students who wanted to practice their English, but when they started to yank on my chair it became obvious that they were just a bunch of punks. I rolled away with them shouting insults and even throwing a rock. One of their teachers saw the toss, grabbed the kid and slapped him across the face. Corporal punishment is not an in Indian schools.

When I turned around to head back, I looked at McLeod Ganj across the valley and for the first time saw the full breadth of the granite mountain range I lived on. I knew it was there, but for the eight weeks I was land-locked in my room, I'd forgotten that there was more there than the peak I could see from my hotel. I finally felt like I was in the country that I'd traveled so far to be in.

Day after day I increased my distance going farther down the valley or higher up the mountainside. . One day I pushed myself high above McLeod Ganj to the hamlet of Dharamkot on the TIPA road, named after the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts. The road had been nothing short of a waterfall for the first two months of my stay, but now it was a loose rocky path that led behind the houses across the street from the Hotel Tibet. The monsoons had washed away most of the pavement, leaving a series of undulating ruts that I straddled with my two large rear wheels. The incline of the road was so steep that after every push, I had to quickly catch the rear of the tire so as not to slip back. There wouldn't be an election in Dharamsala for another year, so this road would remain unpaved until just before that time. Then the local magistrate would pave it and stand alongside the work crew blaring through a bullhorn about the incredible amount of work he'd done

for the community. The work would be shoddy, and over the course of the next two monsoons it would return to its entropic form.

As the road rose above the city, I came upon a spot where the mountain runoff hit the road. Beyond that intersection the pavement held, and I was able to negotiate my course more freely. The steepness of the road didn't change, but I no longer had to keep my eyes glued to the terrain in front of me. I lifted my head, and for the first time, saw the layout of the tiny Tibetan enclave that housed one of the world's most important figures. The view was a revelation to me, but nothing new to the people who were able to walk up to the many rooftop restaurants in McLeod Ganj, I'd only been up one flight of stairs and that was to our performance area at the Tea O'Clock. To do that, I would jump out of my chair and Zoe would carry it up to the top of the stairs. Dan would grab my ankles and lift them as I walked my torso up the stairs with my hands. It's very strange when your guitar player becomes part of the gear. When I first got to Dharamsala I wondered why there were no elevators. After the first week of power outages I figured it out.

The path continued to rise, and eventually I came upon a group of Tibetan school children learning traditional drumming on a playground just outside the TIPA building. The class took a break as the teacher, a purple-robed monk, saw me struggling up the hill and rushed over to help. In the west, people ask if someone in a wheelchair needs help. In Asia they just grab the back of the chair and start pushing. When I explained to the monk that I did this for fitness, he was confused. His English, like most Tibetans, was excellent - he just didn't understand what I was doing on a steep mountain road by myself.

In Asia, people are in wheelchairs because they are sick and need help. There are no "healthy" people in wheelchairs. There is also the stigma that you are in a wheelchair because of some horrible act you have committed at some time during your past lives. People will want to help you to improve their own Karma (spiritual brownie points that elevate you to a higher level in your next life), but in the back of their mind they believe that you have horrible Karma. I'd asked Choden, a Tibetan friend from the chai stand, if Tibetans still thought like that.

"No," he insisted. "The people here have a great respect for someone trying to live in the mountains in a wheelchair."

"And your parents?"

"Yeah," he said, "they probably think you raped a child in your former life."

I used to get terribly upset when people tried to help me. Didn't they think I could roll on my own? Did I look that pathetic? Once in Portland, I was having a little trouble with a door when a girl came up and opened it for me. I was furious that she doubted my abilities to simply open a door. She told me that if I were an old woman, she'd help out just the same. I wanted to smack her. But I learned that it's a natural reaction, and their intentions are good. In the west, a simple "I'm fine" on my part suffices (always ask a handicapped person if they need help before automatically grabbing them), but in Asia it takes a longer explanation. The monk continued to push me even though I insisted I was doing just fine. I had to stop the chair, turn to him and convince him that I was exercising. Meanwhile his class of nine and ten-year-old Tibetans were glued to us.

"You are a music teacher?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Today I am."

In every native culture that I've experienced, drumming reflects the core of their being and results in a rhythmic life flow emanating from the deepest soul of the musician. But in the scholarly culture of Tibet, that spirit has been weaned away - much like the drab music in Catholic Churches. Tibetan drumming is slow, lacks rhythm and has patterns that complement ceremony, but not dance. It ain't got no funk.

"Can I try your drum?" I asked.

"Why, of course, yes sir," he said.

He handed me a drum, and I started pounding out a fun, danceable rhythm. The kids in the class all started cheering and dancing. The monk asked me to stop. "Please sir," he said. "I must teach them the tradition of our people." I handed him the drum back and apologized. They can learn dance music anywhere, but it would take a monk to teach them this part of their rapidly disappearing culture.

I waved goodbye to the class and pushed onward up the steepest part of the road. As I continued up the road, I saw some familiar faces from the chai stands returning to their Dharamkot guesthouses. Most rode in tuk-tuks, three-wheeled motorcycles with a seat stretched across the back and a yellow plastic drape enclosing the passengers. They function as cabs, but they don't have the power or structure of a car, resulting in thousands of horrible accidents. Fortunately, the Indian government now makes them pass emission standards as the original fleet was dumping more junk in the air than the caustic Indian factories.

Higher and higher I climbed until McLeod Ganj disappeared and I was soaring along a steep ridge above the town of Bagsu, just a few miles down the road from the Hotel Tibet. From my lofty perch I could see dozens of stupas (circular towers used for Tibetan prayer) and a set of cascading waterfalls flowing into the valley that drops to Dharamsala far off in the distance. I passed a shepherd with a band of noisy goats, and a bit further up, a farmer leading a train of majestic water buffalo.

Of all the animals that roam the streets of India none are more impressive than the water buffalo. They dwarf the average cow, and muscles rip so far out of their hides that, compared to them, a thoroughbred horse would look like a scrawny drunk who frequents an off-track betting parlor. Their horns are devastatingly potent, but when you look one in the eye, there is a sense of calm and passiveness about them that reassures you they would never hurt you - nor would you ever think of hurting them as they could split your skull with one tap of their giant hooves. They speak ever so softly yet carry a stick so



powerful that one would never question their potency. I passed a dozen cows on my way, and they tended to scurry into the woods. When I came upon a train of water buffalo, I respectfully gave ground, they nodded their approval and we both continued on our way. I have no idea if these kings were actually dangerous and I had no intent in ever finding out.

After nearly two hours of climbing what I probably would have covered in a half an hour on my Cannondale, I reached the summit and downed a two-liter bottle of water. The tuk-tuk drivers were in a circle smoking biddies (harsh tiny Indian cigarettes) and ran over to me assuming I was a sure fare to get back to McLeod Ganj. I waved them off and explained that there was no way I was going to take a ride down after pushing all the way up that hill. It would be like a snowboarder climbing Mt. Hood and not dropping the Palmer Glacier. I slapped on an extra pair of bike gloves, pulled into a wheelie and flew down the TIPA road.

One of the tuk-tuk drivers followed me, still trying to get me to hop in his rig, but I was gone in no time at all. My hair flew behind me, and I occasionally leaned back so far my backpack scraped the ground behind me. I thought back to the absolute fear I had of doing a wheelie the first time I tried one. Never in my wildest imagination did I ever envision whipping through a goatherd on the slopes of the Himalayas.

I could easily keep my balance with just a few touches on the wheel rims, but at that point my speed was out of control. On a bicycle you can lean into the curves and brake, but on two parallel wheels, any lean at the speeds I was attaining would surely lead to a dump. With a 500-foot drop to my left and a nasty tree-lined ditch to my right, I reluctantly began to apply pressure to the rims and slowed myself down. I was a bit disappointed until I started taking the road like a slalom skier. I could keep up a good chunk of speed, but the constant turns gave me the control to stop.

I wove my way down the road, passed the TIPA where the drumming class stopped and ran to the side of the road to watch me fly by. McLeod Ganj appeared from around a corner, and I watched people wander the streets as if I were one of the vultures that soared overhead. As I came to where the road turned bad, I set my front wheels down and took a breather. There are no real accurate maps of Dharamsala, but as far as I could tell I'd just knocked off about a five-kilometer (three mile) wheelie. Now came the hard part. I had to continue on my wheelie, but navigate the ripped-up terrain like a mountain biker negotiating a dry riverbed. I continued on my balanced wheels all the way down to the Hotel Tibet, where I finally put my front wheels down - and then slipped on a loose rock and fell over.

Twenty Tibetans ran to my rescue, and at this point I let them lift me up and put me back in my chair. I was drenched with sweat, my clothes were filthy, and I was laughing my ass off. Who climbs up and down a mountain and falls on the last, easiest step? I looked so wrecked and I was laughing so hard that if the scene were transported to a sidewalk in downtown Manhattan I would have been taken for a lunatic.

That Saturday at the open mic we had such a huge crowd that we didn't have enough equipment to amplify everyone. We had to sacrifice the vocal mic so that another really good Israeli guitar player could plug in and rip through the leads of "All Along the Watchtower." After that gig we found a way to plug the mic into a fairly loud stereo system, but we needed an adapter plug to do it.

The morning of the next open mic, I rolled over to the Tea O'Clock, tossed the microphone in my bag and headed for the cabstand to get a ride down to lower Dharamsala. The cabstand was packed, it was a beautiful sunny day and my workouts had been going really well. I passed by the crowd, bought a couple liters of water and rolled down the long winding road towards Dharamsala.

This was the same road I'd been working out on, each day rolling a few hundred meters further before returning up the long, steep climb to McLeod Ganj. I'd made it six kilometers (3.6 miles) down the road just two days before, but this was a 12-kilometer (seven mile) road. The only other way to get down to Dharamsala was the four-kilometer (2.4 mile) Library Road, but it was far too steep and dangerous for my chair. I'd rolled down the Library Road to Ghanki, the Tibetan Government complex, on a number of occasions, but coming back was a physical impossibility. The switchbacks on that road were so steep that I actually tipped backwards in my chair trying to negotiate them.

Each day when I began my workout, the armed Indian soldier who guarded the bus stop eyed me down wondering what I was doing. An hour or so later when I returned filthy and soaking, he would watch me approach from far away then turn and look at the bus stop as I reached the summit. I saw him daily, but he refused to acknowledge me. And this day was the same. I waved at him, he looked away, and I began my long journey.

The immediate drop out of McLeod Ganj was a filthy run through parked tourist buses next to the town dump. Cows, goats and monkeys constantly foraged the dump for food, leaving piles of excrement in their wake. It was the worst smelling section of McLeod Ganj, and it was the border to the forest just a few hundred yards beyond it.

A few years earlier Richard Gere had donated enough money to clean up McLeod Ganj's mountainside full of trash and start a recycling center. The recycling center was fully funded and in full swing, but only the tourists and elite Tibetans used it. All the shopkeepers and hotel owners continued to throw their trash off the side of the mountain.

The weather had been beautiful the entire month of October, and the mountain range had been glowing every day. As I passed by Forsyth Ganj, I looked back at the peaks that startled me my first day out. I'd grown used to them, but every day I tried to burn their image deeper into my brain. Sooner than later I would have to leave this place, and with the infections I was fighting off, I had a feeling that this would be my only stay in a remote Himalayan village.

Just passed Forsyth was the Dharamsala Cant, or the local military base. McLeod Ganj and Dharamsala always seemed like peaceful places, but we needed only to read the headlines of the Delhi Times to realize that we were just 40 miles from the biggest nuclear threat in the world. Both the governments of Pakistan and India were saber rattling as we

played loud music in our cafe. I didn't think of it often, but occasionally I would ponder what it would be like for Dan to try to pack his family and handicapped brother into a cab and hightail it off a mountaintop in the Himalayas. I'm glad we never had to figure it out. The soldiers at the Cant, however, were just one wave from the front in Kashmir. They were all too aware of it. Each one of them was more serious than the next.

The road to Dharamsala was mostly paved, but there were plenty of sections that had been washed out by mudslides. Towards the top of the mountain; the road had a gradual slant, but as I pushed farther down, the grade became steeper. A few times I leaned back into a wheelie and let the slope carry me. On the last few kilometers, I had to use the same slalom technique that I'd used to curb speed on the TIPA Road. The biggest difference was that the TIPA road was virtually empty. The Dharamsala road was full of buses, military vehicles and clunky tatas, the cumbersome, yet colorful Indian transport vehicles.

At first I got a kick out of the tatas as they were ornately painted and had incense shrines to the Hindu goddess Shiva in the cab. But when I began rolling along the Indian highways, I'd begun to loathe their dusty presence as well as the penchant of their drivers to honk their horns as loud and long as they saw fit. Few vehicles in India have seatbelts, but most have several horns - each costing more than a seatbelt. The car horn is a symbol of power and masculinity in India. Indian men are tiny, but they can pretend they are as big as linebackers behind the wheel of a tata. The louder the horn - the bigger the penis.

An hour after I left McLeod Ganj, I ended up at the electronics store on the main street of the central market in Dharamsala. Dharamsala is a mostly Indian town of 35,000 nestled 2,000 feet under the shadow of the Dalai Lama's temple. It is a horribly busy and dusty place with hundreds of stores lining one main street and a steep path that functions as a pedestrian mall. Although it wasn't anything close to an American shopping mall, it served the same purpose. There were toy stores, appliance stores, auto shops, cosmetic shops, bookshops and dozens of restaurants. In a country that is hopelessly dirty, there is a fanaticism over health. You can't go more than five stores without passing either a western or Ayurvedic pharmacy. Up in McLeod Ganj, I never had any question about eating the food in any restaurant. But down in Dharamsala, you had to be careful. It was always best to take a peek at the kitchen before having a seat.

But I wasn't about to head back up the mountain after chancing it at a new restaurant. I bought the adapter plug for the microphone, rehydrated, then turned my rig around and headed up the switchbacks towards McLeod Ganj. As I pushed my way out of town, there was heavy traffic and I was relegated to the crumbling sidewalks that had recently been built to cover the open sewers.

Once out of the thick of the market I came up on the first incline. I'd just spent about 20 minutes coming down that route doing slaloms in my wheelchair, so I knew I was up for some heavy work on the way back up. I'd timed my return for just after noon when many of the tata drivers take a nap. The tourist bus drivers don't like to drive in the heat of the day either, so many of their routes are scheduled for the morning or evening. The reduced traffic would limit noise and dust, and - more importantly -- it allowed me to roll down the middle of the road. Even the slightest sideways incline puts all the work on one arm and can easily triple the fatigue factor. If I can ride the crown of the road, each arm takes an equal load and I can get in a nice smooth rhythm.

I'd gotten used to the curious and blatant stares of the Indians, but as I made my way up the mountainside the stares turned to open-eyed glares of befuddlement. Some people would run after me and explain to me that they could get some people to help. Every cab and tuk-tuk driver that passed me offered me a free ride. "No charge!" they insisted. It's very rude in India to not stop and talk to someone in this situation, but I wasn't going to make it to the top of the climb if I took breaks. I needed to keep the momentum going.

Twice drivers stopped their cabs and insisted I climb in. The most difficult thing would be when a driver pulled up next to me and tried to talk to me while I grunted away at a tough section. Not only did they break up my rhythm, they also forced me off the crown towards the side of the road where the downside arm would quickly fatigue.

As I paced myself up the mountain, I looked ahead and saw the road climbing at a fierce grade for even a bike rider. The 2,000-foot ascent, combined with the sketchy road made this a category one climb in cycling. The only tougher climbs in the sport are the hors category (beyond category) climbs that even the toughest cyclists bonk on. I was only doing one climb, as opposed to the three to five that a bike rider might have to do, but I was also in a wheelchair with only one gear. Luckily, small cement pillars marked each kilometer on the road so I didn't have to guess how far I had to go. But the upcoming grade wasn't marked. Although I'd just ridden down the same road, I was going at a pretty good clip and couldn't remember the gradient of each section. On the way up I had more than enough time to consider each segment.

I knew the bottom of the climb was the toughest, but I'd forgotten how difficult it had been to climb similar sections of the TIPA road. There were two sections of more than a quarter mile where my hands had to grab the back of the wheel as soon as I'd released them from the push, or I would slip backwards. On those two sections I wondered if I had bit off more than I could chew. But as the grade slowed and I could manage a small glide in my push, I felt strength return to my arms and a newfound cadence. The rhythm never lasted long as the grades became unbearable along the switchbacks. I tried to remain on the high side of the steep turns, but sometimes even this angle was too precipitous for my chair. On those portions I actually had to zigzag up the switchback until the road straightened out again. Mini switchbacks conquered the big switchback.

It was Saturday, and I had to play that night, so I rehearsed songs in my head as I pressed up the mountain. It was slow going, but in time I found myself rising out of the valley and hovering above Dharamsala. The kilometers that whizzed by on the descent were laboriously counting themselves off on the climb. After two hours of nose-to-the-ground grunting, I hit the

halfway point and stopped for a food and water break. I still had half the mountain to climb, but I'd done the steepest part. McLeod Ganj was less than a kilometer away as the crow flies, and I could even make out monks spinning prayer wheels at the Dalai Lama's temple. Unfortunately I wasn't a crow who could fly across deep Himalayan valleys, so I still had a lot of work ahead of me.

I capped my water bottle and continued along the constant rise through farmers' fields and small hamlets. As afternoon grew, the road became busier, and I was no longer able to comfortably rest on the crown. The tata drivers had gone back to work, and the bus drivers continued on their suicide runs. The bus drivers in the Himalayas are insane. They whip around the tightest turns ever engineered as if they were somehow glued to the road. As it turns out they aren't glued to the road and it isn't uncommon to see a family living in a bus wreck at the bottom of a cliff.

As tired as I'd become, I was now back on my training routes. I knew all the angles on these sections and had the landmarks pegged. The only difficulty left was a washed-out section just before the Cant. It was fairly steep, there were tons of ruts, and the bottoms of the ruts were lined with sand and loose gravel. Even at full force I'd always had trouble with it, but when I came up to it with three hours of climbing in my arms, it became really tough. On top of that, the road slimmed down to barely one lane, and vehicles were in a hurry to get through.

I flagged down an oncoming jeep at the top of the section and motioned that I was coming up. The driver pulled over and looked behind him for more traffic barreling down the hill. Behind me an ox cart filled with old tires matched my pace. It didn't take me more than a minute to bust through the section, but it was one of the longest minutes I've ever spent. The traffic was building up, and instead of patiently waiting until the ox cart and I passed, the convoys on each end of us blasted out piercing, discordant claxons. Two motorcycle riders blew by throwing dust and exhaust in my face. All the while their thumbs never left their horn - as if I needed further indication that they were there.

When I got through, I busted along a crumbly section and slugged up to Forsyth Ganj. From here the road flattened through the forest until the final quarter-mile section through the dump up to McLeod Ganj. I stopped singing songs and went back to my old habit of announcing my arrival through the voice of Patrick Chene, the TV voice of the Tour de France. "Avec moins d'un kilometre de l'arriver il est toujours en tete. Il peut gagner cette belle etape!"

I had nothing left in my arms, but they just kept throwing themselves on the wheels, and I kept progressing. I made it to the dump and pulled my soaked bandana over my face so as not to vomit over the nauseous fumes. The day before I'd powered up this last rise, but at this point, I was running on empty and each meter was more precious than the last. The first time I did the high dive in Osage Beach, I'd learned that a diver relies on his body to take it places the mind doesn't understand. There was no pool here, but my body had taken over and left my brain on the road.

As I reached the last hundred yards, the faces along the road became familiar and the buildings that were dreams just a few hours earlier became reality. After nearly six hours I returned to McLeod Ganj and saw the face of the same armed guard who ignored me at the start. When I left I was a fairly together person, but now I looked like a deranged lunatic. For the first time in three months I made eye contact with the guard.

"Dharamsala?" he questioned.

"Yup," I said. "Dharam-frickin-sala."