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The morning drive to the airport is one we've done hundreds of times. I sit uncomfortably in the passenger's seat as José, the taxi driver, chats. He is my age, thirty-six. When I first moved to Europe to race professionally in the spring of 2002, he picked me up at the Barcelona airport and drove me 120 kilometres northwest, to my new home in Girona.

Gazing out of the window at the passing countryside, listening to him chat, I realise that all that was once foreign has become familiar. I can't place the moment when Catalonia became home. When I was a boy Europe seemed exotic, a place where I always imagined I would one day live. France, Belgium and Italy were the homes of my idols. Now as I contemplate retirement, Toronto, my birthplace, seems oddly foreign. I feel as though I'm floating in the ocean between continents, a nomad no longer attached to a culture, a country or a home.

On the way to the airport I notice the subtle changes in landscape only a local commuting to work would recognise. Whether it is early in the morning or near midnight, the conversation with José is good. Already aware if we have won or lost from the news reports, he alludes to the races but shifts topics with the next breath. He understands this is a brief escape for me, and we chat about everything else. I joke with my teammates that José has taught me to speak Spanish. It's not far from the truth.

The low January sun shines through his window. He adjusts the visor. I dig in my bag for my sunglasses. My teammate Jeremy Hunt – Jez – sits in the back, quietly. On either side of the

motorway, green fields of spring crops give way to slopes which transition into tree-covered hills, and then barren peaks. Two days ago, Jez and I were in those hills, riding, pushing each other to exhaustion, recovering and then doing it again. Out there, we felt fast and strong. We pedalled the last kilometres home on an endorphin high. Now I question whether our fitness will be enough to fight the desert winds that gust and blow off the Gulf and across the Qatari peninsula. In two days, we will find out. My mind shifts away from my concerns and back to José's voice. I listen. The economy is the topic, as it is everywhere outside our insular community of expatriate cyclists. Jez hasn't said a word. His mind is on the race. I can feel it.

We're both veterans and this is likely our last season of racing. We want to retire on our own terms. Too many riders squeeze every last ounce out of their bodies to continue for one or two more seasons. Their names fade with their results. Their bodies become worn with the crashes and kilometres, effects I'm already starting to feel. The drive to extend their careers comes at the sacrifice of their families. Unable to find a life outside of cycling, a rider gives up everything else for the professional's existence. His routine brings comfort. He'll move with, and within, his nomadic family until he is no longer fit enough to follow the frantic rhythm of its world. After that, he is left alone, unable to perform but without roots or a home. My fear is that I will be trapped, without the ability to make the transition after a lifetime on a bike. Since I was a boy, I always knew that my dream job had its limits.

In conversations with the younger riders at the dinner table, the generation gap is now noticeable. Not long ago I was one of them. Now, with a family and a lifetime of racing experience, my perspective has changed. With each passing year, the veter-

ans on the team find they have more in common with the staff than with their younger teammates.

Pedalling through the countryside or lying awake in a shared hotel room, Jez and I consider our options, reflect on our past, and prepare for the future. But in the taxi, on our way to the first race of our last season, our thoughts are stuck on the imminent start line.

After packing my bag for thousands of races, I still fear I've forgotten something. I then ask Jez to check my carry-on bag in the back seat for my passport. He finds it. It isn't the fear of forgetting something that makes me anxious; it's everything else. No matter how well trained we are, we can't control our competition, the climate, the race or the crashes. The unknowns are haunting. They often keep us up at night. Until I clip into my pedals, and the race has begun, the thoughts swirl through my head. Once on the road, everything falls into place. On the bike emotions are levelled. Clarity is found with the fluidity of the pedal stroke. The emotional undulations vanish.

Jez speaks my thoughts. 'Still, after seventeen years, I get nervous when I leave home for a race. You never know how good you'll be or what will happen.' Jez has struggled during the pre-season training camps with tendonitis in his knee. The pain subsided for ten days and then returned after he did a long hard sprint while training. Just after Christmas he changed his pedals and within a day his knee was sore again. Countless hours of riding over decades have tuned our bodies. Adapting to new equipment or changes in position is now a slow, potentially painful process. Lowering a saddle a few millimetres, changing chamois in our shorts or a misaligned shoe plate can lead to months of pain if the changes aren't progressive and closely monitored. While he was unable to ride, Jez's weight ballooned.

Knowing his weight would hinder his performance he fell into a deeper downward spiral while questions mounted in his head. Every professional has been in the same situation. We find comfort in that mutual understanding and we lean on it when we're down.

Sadness sank in this morning when the taxi arrived to pick me up. I didn't feel ready to leave my family, but I also knew that, once I was on the road, my mind would turn to my job, the race. Before I left, Dede embraced me and wished me good luck. To survive the time apart, we've learned to bury emotion in routine and work. We find calm and grace outdoors, on our bikes. Accustomed to the incessant coming and going that is the norm in every cyclist's life, we no longer shed tears like we did as young lovers.

I packed my bike bag and suitcase into the trunk of José's van. As soon as we pulled away, Dede gave a quick wave, turned towards the front door and fell back into her routine. As we passed the school my sons attend, I thought of them, working in their classrooms and playing with their friends. They had their routine. And mine, built around the racing season, was also about to begin again. Countless times before the first race, riders, friends and family said to me, 'It all starts again.'

Even José's life revolves around the racing season. In 1996, my friend and ex-teammate George Hincapie picked José's name out of the phone book. George was on his way to start his first Tour de France, and he needed a drive to the airport. After that, José drove George to the airport for almost all of the Tours he rode. As he tells me now about the first trip to the airport with George, there is a tinge of pride in his voice. Like George, he was just a young adult without obligations. He tells me how he rode his motorbike at dangerous speeds, without fear. But

age has made him realise the stupidity of those antics. Maturity is sobering.

Since then the number of cyclists living in Girona has ballooned from three to more than sixty. With fewer Catalan clients, José now relies on professional cyclists for income. To me, he has become a grounding point that makes Girona feel like a home. He has become a friend to chat with when I come home from races injured and a familiar face at the airport when I step out of the terminal into the sea of tourists and business people.

We speed away from Girona. For the next ten months, I will be moving relentlessly through the scenery of one country after another, always focused on a goal and a finish line. In fourteen seasons as a professional and during a lifetime spent racing a bike, I know I can't make any predictions of how it will turn out. It doesn't matter as long as I'm on my bike, moving, going.

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As the garage door opens, a rush of cold hits my body, piercing my Lycra. The frigid air against my face jolts me, as it did when I stepped out the door of our house in central Toronto to ride to school as a boy. It brings back a flash of memory: wearing flannel pants, black brogues, a sports jacket and tie while pedalling to school on the icy Toronto streets. Twenty years later in Spain, I still feel like that kid. The bite of the cold brings life to my body. It is late December 2011, just after Christmas, and the first race I'll ride, in Qatar, is still over a month away.

I descend into town from our house on top of the mountain above Girona. A heavy layer of fog covers the valley below, enveloping the river and the buildings. Like a beacon, the cathedral's spire breaks through. There is a serene silence. The fog dampens the commuters' noise as the city comes alive below me. Above it, a bird's song is louder. The freewheel of my bicycle ticks over, like a whirling wind-up toy. As I know the descent, I fly through the corners. The air bites me harder as the speed increases. As they notice me fast approaching in their rearview mirrors, drivers pull to the right and wave me through. In the third to last hairpin turn, I cut through the fog and feel the life of the town. School kids swarm the sidewalks, animated in the early hour as they meet their friends outside the playground. Drivers patiently wait at intersections. Passing the long line of cars, I see a familiar face behind a windscreen, wave, and continue deeper into the centre of town. The roads become more congested, forcing me to snake my way through the cars,

dodging side mirrors and bumpers. Scooters follow my lead until we reach a bottleneck they can't squeeze through. The road opens up, I pedal through the roundabout, jump a curb, and enter the ancient cobblestone streets of the old town.

The town square, the *plça*, is an oasis from the traffic. Bundled in winter parkas, people sit on the terraces, soaking up the winter sun, puffing cigarettes and sipping coffee. Pigeons peck the croissant crumbs under the tables. Other birds bob around the Civil War monument in the centre of the gravel square. Men unload fish, meat and fresh produce onto trolleys from the back of their refrigerated trucks. I see the same faces each morning. Recognising them, I nod hello.

As I reach the cafe, which is tucked in the corner of the square under the stone arcade, I realise I'm late. A pile of bikes leans against its wall. Even under the dim arcade light, their carbon parts and glossy frames glisten. Through the glass doors, I can see the flurry of colour; riders are clustered around tables in their brilliantly coloured Lycra, slurping coffees and munching on pastries. Seeing me arrive, they ask for the cheque and begin pulling on hats and buckling helmets. We don't linger. The cathedral bells gong ten times. Riders grab their bikes from the pile. We clip into our pedals, the snap of the bindings echoing under the arcade. We're off to work. But our work still feels like play.

Bradley Wiggins, my teammate on the British-sponsored Team Sky, is training in Girona for the week to escape the wet and cold of England. We instinctively fall into formation as we ride out of town. On the bike, in our small group, I feel good: two Brits, Bradley and Jez, and two Canadians, Dominique Rollin and me. The four of us pair up and then move tight against the kerb. We begin to pedal a steady rhythm. Cars pass us, the occasional driver tooting his horn, and the occasional

passenger craning her neck to catch a glimpse.

Since I signed a contract with Team Sky for the 2010 season, three years ago, I've spent a lot of time with Bradley both at races and in training camps. But I still have never quite figured him out. He isn't a team leader, in the literal sense, but simply the rider on our team who has the best chance of winning the Tour de France. I like being around him. We have a few similar interests. But often I wonder what he thinks of me. He is complex, introverted and hard to decipher. At ease, he'll humour the team with his impressions, his comedic routine. But he rarely laughs at himself or alludes to his own fears and weaknesses. When under pressure, he escapes to his own world.

In the 2010 Giro d'Italia, Brad stormed the opening prologue and won convincingly. After that the pressure was off. He had achieved a goal, and the rest of the three-week race became a training session for the Tour de France. At least, that was the plan. But when a rider feels good, it is easier to press on and go for the victory rather than back off and conserve. There's always a delicate balance: dig too deep and risk fatigue, relax too much and lose fitness. In an incredibly difficult Giro, Brad pushed through perhaps one day too many, finishing tired and empty. As the race wound down, he began to fade on the final mountain passes, pushing when he should have been riding at an easier tempo. The balance was lost. As we approached the Tour six weeks later, he was clearly tired. Or perhaps the pressure to perform was eating him from within. No one could tell. We, his teammates, were there to help. But, somewhat like a turtle escaping danger, he tucked himself away in the back of the team bus, his headphones on.

Almost two years later, riding through the Catalan countryside, Brad is relaxed. The initial moments of unease when we

met at the cafe have dissipated into friendly chatter. He asks questions. Often, it seems he already knows the answers and is just seeking confirmation. Or maybe he's simply inquisitive. He consumes cycling history; a boyhood obsession we share and which for him has yet to abate. Over the five hours of riding our conversation shifts and turns.

As with any memorable evening with friends, I can recall the time together, but not necessarily the small details. But I do remember a short bit of our long conversation from that ride. Brad and I were considering our life away from cycling and our families. I asked him how long he would go on racing. Like most cyclists he hadn't picked an end point, but he said that he couldn't be away from home as much as the sport demanded. Home with his family was where he felt comfortable, Brad said, and he wouldn't sacrifice his family for the sport. He continued to open up, telling me how money and success had only made his life more complex. The gold medals he had won each marked another goal achieved. Others admire them as they inspire dreams, but for the victor they become an object like any other. The goal is achieved; as athletes we simply set another goal and move on to pursue it.

From those comments I understood his introversion and elusiveness. The effort of riding gives us an escape by stripping away the complexities that create anxiety. We open up, allowing others in. On the bike, we can find equilibrium, focus and tranquillity.

In a career there are moments that become resonant memories. Most of them come not from the superficial kisses on the podium or the fleeting accolades of the media and fans, but from time spent on the bike or with teammates on the terrace of a hotel. In the peloton we see hundreds of faces through a

season but become well acquainted with only a few dozen. I had seen Brad at a few races during the first years of my professional career in Europe. We had nodded hello in elevators and over breakfast buffets, but our conversations never went beyond a few sentences of small talk. He was a muscular Olympic track rider with the British National Team who rode professionally with the French team Cofidis. After 2009, when he shifted his focus to the road, he stripped his body of bulky muscle and fat. He became a contender, competing against the strongest riders in the high mountains. Now, on Sky, he is our leader.

There is a moment Brad and I both recall with clarity: during the 2006 Critérium du Dauphiné Libéré, we rode together, almost silently, up Mont Ventoux. The sounds of the chains ticking over, the gears occasionally shifting and our patterned breathing all seemed in synch with our cadence. The memory is vivid.

The Dauphiné was my first race after a two-month break. I'd fallen that year in a terrifying crash in the Tour of Flanders and woke up in a hospital with two broken vertebrae and my body covered in scrapes. Fearing the risks, I swore never to race again. As a father, I owed it to my family. But time passed, I healed, and I resumed riding. I felt good again, and I was climbing better than I had all season, although in the back of my mind I questioned my choices and the culture in which I was immersed. The crash had brought clarity. I had to change the way I was living.

Knowing I was fit, the team entered me in the Dauphiné, a top-level race where teams test their riders before the Tour de France. Even though I was racing again, I wasn't certain I would continue through another season. I rode each kilometre as if it would be my last. It became a spiritual journey, which brought me back to my youth and a trip I had experienced with my father.