With my boyhood dream of riding across the country diminishing with each passing year, I finally started training for a ride in my early 50s. I got permission for the trip from my patient, noncyclist wife and I invited my 21-year-old, insanely fit son Beniah along (fully intending to draft him for the entire ride). We mapped out a route that started in Bay Center, Washington, and ended in Camden, Maine, a day’s ride from my home in western Maine.

I was intent on doing the ride in a month, simply because that was all the vacation time I had saved up. We’d be keeping up an average pace of over 100 miles a day — every day — so the ride would be a real personal challenge. More than that, though, the ride also offered a professional opportunity: I could write my next book about the ride, or a whole series of articles, or use some part of it in screenplays. For a born storyteller, I knew the opportunities would be significant.

But the stories didn’t come. Sure, things happened. Our first day, from Bay Center to Randle — 132 miles — was done on May 1, 2016, on the same day an all-time high-temperature record for the area was set. 132 miles in temperatures hovering around 90°F and a fair elevation gain on our way to the Cascades makes for a good story. But when I called my wife that night for my safe-arrival report and she asked me how it went, I struggled to respond. The story of the day didn’t come out, and I instead found myself telling her that we’d dipped our rear tires in the Pacific by dawn light and then started riding. I faltered, hesitated, then told her about what didn’t happen — we didn’t have any accidents or incidents, we weren’t too sore or chafed, we didn’t get dehydrated.

Hanging up, I was surprised I didn’t tell her my story, and I was equally surprised the next day and all of the next week when I also didn’t tell her my stories. I didn’t tell her about crossing the Cascades at White Pass or the joyous downhill run into Yakima, arriving a bit after sunset. Or about our route through the eastern Washington desert (in a continuing heatwave) and our relief at finding water at a small rest area next to the Columbia River. I didn’t tell her we reluctantly...
decided to ride the edge of Highway 90, then, after about 10 miles, I realized I loved riding the edge of an engineered highway with a breakdown lane and rumble strip separating me from traffic that might as well have been a world away. I did, in fits and starts, try to tell my wife some of those stories or just describe the many working pieces of our day. But to my consternation, nothing came out.

It wasn’t just my wife. To make our miles every day, we couldn’t take the weight and time required to camp so we checked into hotels each night. Usually, the hotel staff would express some measure of curiosity about our ride. Often, they’d ask where we’d come from that day, and when we told them, their eyes invariably bugged out. They’d ask where our ride would end, and their eyes would bug out again. Then they’d ask the questions I’d learned to dread, the question whose answer escaped me. “Riding across the nation — what’s that like?”

I could paint word pictures of small snippets of the trip — like hypothermia while crossing the Continental Divide in a very wet snowstorm outside Lincoln, Montana, and flagging down a savior in a pickup truck. Or dispiriting headwinds across Montana and North Dakota. Or how we dreaded our arrival in Fargo, knowing that it would mean the end of legal riding on the edge of the highway. I could tell them we slept through the whole ferry ride as we crossed Lake Michigan, or about the miracle of not getting rained on once the whole trip. Or the blissful peacefulness of a bike trail in New York once we finally got off the road, or the joy of riding into Vermont and being on roads I began to recognize by sight. I mentioned how we grit our teeth and forced ourselves to make our miles. Every day. No matter what. The way my heart soared when I saw my beautiful wife by the side of the road just inside the Maine border, smiling and filming us. Or the relief at leaving our packs at home on our final day into Camden and the joy of dipping our front tires into the Atlantic on the dock, surrounded by friends. And I could describe, or try to, the utter strangeness of driving home after a month on a bike. But after an anecdote or two, I always stammered off.

On that strange drive home, I finally realized why I couldn’t tell my stories. In moving from the bike to the car, I had left a world in which everything had to be planned and carefully balanced and had re-entered a world which all I had to do was press an accelerator. I had left behind a world in which the quality of the entire day was determined by the direction and speed of the wind, the temperature and presence of cloud cover, the elevation to be attempted, and the width and quality of the apron at the edge of the road. I had re-entered a world that was defined by things that had nothing to do with the natural elements, where grit and sweat and determination did not define the quality or achievement of the day. When I started our trip across the country, I had entered a different world that operated on strikingly different terms than I was used to, and to describe it required using a different language — a language that people who didn’t share common experiences simply couldn’t understand.

For a few days after my trip, I continued to try to tell people what my trip was really like — how amazing it was, how transformational it was, how we struggled against things that were unseen and unconsidered by most people. Then I stopped. Watching them lose interest in, then politely endure, a description of factors and forces outside their frame of reference was simply too painful. I wanted to tell them about a crowning achievement of my life, but I quickly came to the point in which, in response to a query, I would simply smile, tell them it was tiring, make a pedaling motion with my hands, and say that I remembered “quite a lot of pedaling.” Most people didn’t have a follow-up question, and no wonder — there was no common experience on which to build communication.

I recently challenged my two grandsons, now five and seven, to a tri-century ride over a long weekend in 10 or 11 years. I’ll be 70, and if I can make it, it will very likely be my last big ride. But I desperately want to stay in shape and make that ride. I want to have that experience with my grandsons, to be able to smile and wink at them in my old age and know that we share experiences and accomplishments that few others understand. I want them to speak my language.

Scott Christiansen is a writer, author, and biorefining consultant. He lives in the foothills of western Maine with his wife, his dog, and his humble but steadfastly reliable Specialized Sequoia.