The year was 1977. My best friend Jeff and I had just finished our junior year of high school. All year, we’d been hopelessly smitten with two girls who also happened to be friends. In our single-minded pursuit, we had overheard that the girls would be vacationing on Cape Cod in August. I had vacationed on the Cape before and knew it well. Jeff had never been and was keen on going. Most of all, we wanted to spend time with these girls.

The plan was to borrow my family’s rusty Plymouth, but the alternator was shot and my father was against the idea. Disappointed and somewhat peeved, we were determined to get there. And after days of brooding, we conceived another plan.

We would run away from home, cycling to the Cape on 10-speeds. I would rise at dawn, slipping out of the house before anyone noticed. I would leave a letter in the mailbox explaining where we had gone, telling my parents not to worry and when to expect me back. The only outsider privy to the scheme was my little brother, whose job it was to nonchalantly wander down to the mailbox and “accidentally” discover the note, presenting it to my parents.

We would ride 100 miles daily, using folding maps for directions, and arrive on the Cape in three days. This would leave plenty of time to locate the girls and hang on the beach. I say locate because we only knew the town where they were staying and — more importantly — they were unaware of our intentions. In our blissful, hormone-fueled naiveté, we planned to just sort of show up and surprise them. We imagined their reactions as we proudly rolled onto the beach:

“Wow! You rode all this way just to see us,” they would sigh. And, POOF, we would be heroes.

Then we would enjoy long afternoons, admiring them in their bikinis. And soon they would realize what irresistible, charming guys we were and we would leave for home rested, tanned, and going steady.

Of course, the girls didn’t know how much we liked them, and we had no idea whether they even liked us. Also, we had only a sketchy route based on outdated maps. There were no support services, no mirrors, no helmets. Our repair kit
consisted of a wrench, pliers, screwdriver, tire irons, and a spare tube. Shorts, T-shirt, and sneakers were the basic attire. And in 1977, there were no cell phones.

Out in the garage, my Raleigh Grand Prix was ready to go. Strapped to the rear rack were a tent, sleeping bag, and other basics. A few miles down the road, Jeff was eagerly waiting with his Schwinn Varsity Sport. Weighing in at a sluggish 40 pounds, there was nothing even remotely sporting about his bike. It was 100 percent U.S. steel, built like a tank. My British Raleigh was a bit more refined and about 10 pounds lighter. But neither bike had seen fresh grease since leaving the factory, and that was years ago.

We set off, spirits high for the adventure of the open road ahead.

For the first 20 miles, we rode briskly south along the scenic Hudson River to the Bear Mountain Bridge, part of the Appalachian Trail and the only local crossing allowing pedestrians. From there, we traversed the winding backroads of New York before crossing into Connecticut.

We passed most of that sweltering afternoon pedaling through the rolling countryside, passing quaint, peaceful villages with picket-fenced yards and along lonely, meadow-filled byways brimming with buzzing locusts and softly chirping crickets. But among this bucolic tranquility, things began to go wrong.

We had packed only a water bottle each, a woefully inadequate supply even for two indestructible teenagers. Jeff was a pole vaulter on the track team, with thighs like utility poles. I was a distance runner, light and lean, built for the long haul. As the miles ticked by, I remember noting Jeff's thighs, the muscle strands bulging beneath the skin like thick cables of steel. Although these were powerful legs, they were not prepared for the relentless, grueling strain coupled with a lack of fluid. Soon the powerful legs began to cramp, causing us to stop several times. Once we encountered a praying mantis, which was immediately followed by a horn and howling tires as a car swerved within inches of me before accelerating up the ramp. Shaken and bruised, we continued on.

Bikes of this era were commonly equipped with crude derailers that were notorious for imprecise shifting. Moving the lever even slightly resulted in a loud clanking sound, reminiscent of some menacing industrial machine. Since the chain was moved by friction, one was never sure what was going to happen when engaging the lever. Often the chain jumped wildly; traversing several cogs, landing on a gear unlikely to be useful. Shifting while climbing was a particularly daring maneuver as the chain occasionally slipped before settling into a cog. If the rider happened to be standing while this occurred, or nudged the lever accidentally, there was the threat of some unpleasant and possibly permanent consequences.

It was almost dark when we wearily rolled into the outskirts of Waterbury, Connecticut, over 100 miles from home. We saw no campgrounds nearby, and there was no one around to ask. But we needed somewhere to sleep. Then we spotted a lonely cemetery. It wasn't ideal, but it was a clear space and unlikely anyone would bother us there. We erected the tent, ate some provisions, and quickly joined the deep sleep of the dead.

We were awakened in the dark of early morning by torrential rain, which quickly penetrated the tent and created ponds on the floor, mostly beneath our bedding.

There are moments in life in which words cannot express the despair of a particular situation. Indeed, this was one of those times. And there, lying in saturated bedding, the mission again changed tack, and we conceived a plan of even greater brilliance.

We would cycle home and propose a deal to my father: in trade for the car, we would install a new alternator, as Jeff was a competent mechanic.

"Can you do it?" I asked him.

"Piece of cake," he said with a smile.

To save time, we would cycle Interstate-84. I-84 was, and still is, strictly off-limits to bicycles for obvious reasons, but we were beyond caring at this point. With renewed optimism, we broke camp and headed home. It was 6:00 AM.

Donned in ponchos and buffeted by incessant wind and spray, we made excellent time on the interstate's generous shoulder and mild gradient. We traveled mile after mile at spectacular speeds. No sign of police, no need to stop. Things were going well, which is almost always a sign something is about to go wrong.

Highways are constructed with expansion cracks cut into the pavement. These cracks run perpendicular to the direction of travel, but at ramp entrances, the crack becomes parallel. In the speed and excitement of our progress, among the pelting rain, I did not see the crack until it was too late.

The last thing I remembered was catapulting sideways through the air, holding tight to the bars like a patron of some wild amusement park ride, before slamming onto the pavement, accompanied by the sound of grinding metal. This was immediately followed by a horn and howling tires as a car swerved within inches of me before accelerating up the ramp. Shaken and bruised, we continued on.

By noon, the sun was shining and we were at a phone booth at the Newburgh Bridge, about 10 miles from home, calling my father to pick us up. My parents were calm people. Although they loved me dearly, my father never reported my disappearance to the police, probably because he had done similar things at my age and in those days, people didn't seem to freak out about such matters. However, our disappearance did succeed in sowing enough guilt that he agreed to loan us the car. Two days later, we arrived on the Cape.

Ironically, the only surviving relic of this trip is my water bottle. It sits on a shelf in my bike room — a grave reminder of the importance of hydration.

Just in case you were wondering, neither of us got the girl.

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