

SAMPLE CHAPTER

The handsomest man in Cuba

Excerpt from Chapter 19: A Loiter Too Far

I am at a crossroads. I can tackle the near vertical ascent to Topes de Collantes, a cool, foggy town of health resorts for vacationing Cuban bigwigs, then take a reportedly fantastic 20 kilometre descent down the mountain into Santa Clara, the town that has eluded me on two significant occasions. Or, I can continue around the coast to Cienfuegos, which will probably be another tourist trap like Trinidad, given its proximity to Havana. Those holidaymakers on get-back-to-work-Monday beach packages in Varadero would normally venture no further than Cienfuegos or Trinidad by airconditioned bus, if at all.



I am drawn towards the mountain option, despite being warned that the road is extremely steep, particularly when encumbered with a three-month life support system strapped to two skinny wheels. But after four years of traveling on a bicycle, I have learnt that things take as long as they take. When I had a day job and a car and a jacket with padded shoulders I thought a 20 minute drive down the highway at an illegal speed was a raw inconvenience. Now, I allow all day to get wherever I have to get, no matter how near or far it is. Thus, I am prepared to spend an entire day pushing my bike uphill to Topes de Collantes.

I reach the turn off to Topes de Collantes and boldly set off towards the hills. The sun has risen to near melting point despite the early hour of the day, and I am thankful for the shade cast by the steep sides of the mountains as the road starts to ascend. Just two kilometres up the mountain the gradient rises sharply and my little wheels stop dead. At this point I am out in direct sunlight. I get off the bike and start pushing as planned, but I feel my feet sliding back down the hill, like the folk clinging to the deck in the movie *Titanic* as the ship went vertical.

Ironically, it's often easier to ride up a steep hill than push the bike; when pushing, the body is off to one side, so the force is not optimally centred.

Pant, pant.

My head is a giant stuffed pot roast in the heat. I flash back to the infuriating 11 or so rivers I crossed in northwest Scotland in 1997, straining hour after hour on the long, tedious ascents, barely recovering on the short, unsatisfying descent down to creek bed level.

Pant, pant.

I flash back to the UK where I pulled a fully loaded suitcase trailer to the top of a hill so steep that motorists followed me at a respectful distance like a funeral procession, then tooted and applauded when I reached the top.

Pant, pant.

I flash back to the impossible road up Volcán Masaya in Nicaragua, engulfed by sulphurous wisps.

Pant, pant.

I look down and see a small centipede overtake my front wheel. I decide to bail out. I turn the bike around and hit reverse. Santa Clara will elude me for the third and final time.

Back at ground zero I spot a pair of Dutch backpackers hanging out for a lift to the top. Both young, blond, and carrying

an air of worldly arrogance many pack especially for trips to third-world countries, then throw off when they go back home. Their problem, as is mine, is the lack of passing traffic on this day, and the curious unwillingness of those passing to stop. I notice this seemingly un-Cuban attitude is more pronounced near heavily touristed regions. The Dutch double have been waiting for over two hours, and when I suggest they try holding out a dollar note for attention, they look at me as if I'd suggested they surrender their virginity to the next truckload of banana pickers.

'Veef nefer had to pay, and ve are not gunna start,' sniffs the long haired, bespectacled one.

They inform me that they are converting everything to pesos to make sure they get the cheapest deal. Typical stingy Dutch, I find myself thinking in a flash of pure and unblessed bigotry, and hope I never run into them again.

Gradually I let go of my aborted attempt to get to Topes de Collantes, and give in to what that might say about my aging body, tenuous tenacity, dissolving resolve, and set off on the long, flat road to Cienfuegos...

I haven't been pedalling long when a distinct hum catches my ear. Then it's gone. Then it's back. I strain my ears to catch it but the breeze eats it. I hear it again, louder. A vision of a giant cloud of Cuban stalker bees leaps to mind.

I look behind me and see nothing, just fields and ocean and sky. Then something enters the corner of my eye, a fuzzy glinting blob moving along the ribbon of highway in my wake. It disappears behind a rise in the road, then reappears on the crest. It is the unmistakable purr of a peloton of cyclists.

Das machine, as I coin this group of five German cyclists, catches up with my small wheels, hovering briefly like a space probe, its five pilots nodding imperceptibly. Then it rockets past like a spray of Lycra bullets shot from a red and yellow spotted gun. Immediately ahead they slow again, they nod to each other, turn around and pedal back towards me. In a moment I am enveloped by the mother ship, safely docked among precision-engineered fat aluminium tubes, tinted eye-glasses, German-made waterproof panniers and the whirr of five pairs of wheels as we accelerate to somewhere near 50 kilometres per hour.

Whew. It is hopeless. After five minutes in hyperspace I realise I cannot not keep up and fall away like a loose cog, motioning for them to continue without me. I see them close ranks, wave auf wiedersehen, and my guard of honour hums down the highway.

I am suddenly pedalling alone as before.

A truck groaning with a giant spinachy load screeches to a halt beside me, and two men jump out to ask if I want a ride. Before I can formally accept they bodily throw me and my bike on top of the huge green load. My bags are hustled into the cabin.

A free ride does not come without a price, and perched atop this verdant mattress is a lecherous hombre who crawls across to my neck of the cabbage patch to fire a volley of questions about my marital status and sexual orientation. He then grabs my chin to extract an answer while I try to stop my bike from bouncing off the giant green bed. During all of this I curse myself for allowing my bags, which are riding in the front seat with my rescuers, to leave my clutches. Instead of enjoying the scenery or Spinachman's advances, I watch a mental movie of the men gleefully molesting my belongings.

I need not worry. They are basically cheerful, honest farm workers, and drop me and my unfondled belongings about ten kilometres from Cienfuegos. I give them ten pesos for the trip, thankful to be out of Spinachman's grasp, and they are gone..



Lynette with the Cubans who found her a replacement pedal which spun off on a nightmare truck ride ...

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