TIM MOORE

GIRONIMO!

RIDING THE VERY TERRIBLE 1914 TOUR OF ITALY

AUTHOR OF FRENCH REVOLUTIONS

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Twelve years after Tim Moore toiled round the route of the Tour de France, he senses his achievement being undermined by the truth about ‘Horrid Lance’. His rash response is to take on a fearsome challenge from an age of untarnished heroes: the notorious 1914 Giro d‘Italia. History’s most appalling bike race was an ordeal of 400-kilometre stages, cataclysmic night storms and relentless sabotage – all on a diet of raw eggs and wine. Of the 81 who rolled out of Milan, only eight made it back.

Committed to total authenticity, Tim acquires the ruined husk of a gearless, wooden-wheeled 1914 road bike, some maps and an alarming period outfit topped with a pair of blue-lensed welding goggles.

What unfolds is the tale of one decrepit crock trying to ride another up a thousand lonely hills, then down them with only wine corks for brakes. From the Alps to the Adriatic the pair steadily fall to bits, on an adventure that is by turns bold, beautiful and recklessly incompetent.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Having ridden the route of the Tour de France in *French Revolutions*, led a donkey on a 500-mile pilgrimage in *Spanish Steps* and driven round the worst places in Britain in an Austin Maestro for *You Are Awful (But I Like You)*, Tim Moore can look back on a towering career in daft misadventure. *Gironimo!*, his latest and most imposing pedal-powered endeavour, is a story he will be dining out on for years – alone at a table for one. Moore lives in London and still wears those googles at Christmas.

ALSO BY TIM MOORE

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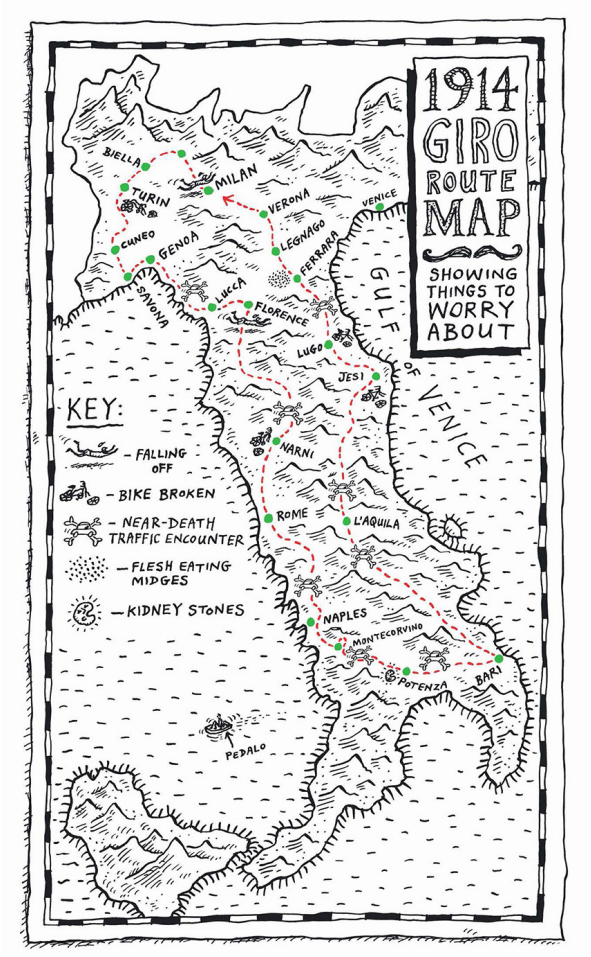
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Gironimo!

Riding the Very Terrible 1914 Tour of Italy

Tim Moore

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PROLOGUE

The sun has just slipped behind the lonely Campanian Alps, taking summer with it and surrendering a dishevelled mountain-top lay-by to shadowy, misted silence. Briefly, at least, for an ugly noise now builds from beneath Monte Licinici's final hairpin, the desperate gasps and creaks of aged toil. At length, inching waywardly out of the gloom, comes the ghost of a bike, and hunched over it the ghost of a man. Even in this light the pair are visibly past their ride-by date. The man could, theoretically at least, be a great-grandfather; the bike could have belonged to his. Their geriatric struggle demands sombre respect, but doesn't get it, because the man is wearing a giant Rubettes cap and blue-glassed leather goggles, and when he comes to a squeaky halt in the lay-by his woollen-pouched nuts slam stoutly down onto the crossbar.

As formerly round objects, the man's reproductive organs are not alone in this scene. You now note that his bicycle's wheels are rather less circular than is considered traditional, and 100 per cent more wooden. The rear is unencumbered by gears, and keen eyes may spot the words 'VINI DI CHIANTI' printed on the crudely hand-crafted brake blocks. A wise observer – he's just behind you – might take account of all

this, and the rust-mottled frame’s heft and geometry, to date the machine to the very dawn of competitive endurance racing. That bicycle, he will tell you, is one hundred years old. And that man, you will tell him, has just burst into tears.

Set into the lay-by’s rocky retaining wall are two weather-beaten plaques, each honouring a long-gone local cyclist. His unbecoming tears are a tribute to their lives and times, the glorious, brutal age of Fausto Coppi and a generation either side, when those who gave their all in the saddle stood alone as towering national heroes. He’s weeping for them, and for anyone who’s ever ridden a bike up a hill too far. Which, predictably enough, means he’s really weeping for himself, because it is getting dark and he’s a spent force in the unpeopled middle of a mountainous nowhere; because he has never felt so far from home; because he and his ancient steed have both aged twenty years since the distant foot of this mountain; because a largely decorative braking system means he should put his name down for a plaque on that wall of death before the forthcoming descent.

This is a man on the cusp of surrender: he has just emptied himself once too often, and is barely halfway through a ride that a century before decimated a field of braver, better and much, much younger men. All things considered, it’s just as well that his nuts have by this stage long since been pummelled and battered into a pain-resistant coma, or he’d probably still be crying up there now.

CHAPTER 1

‘YOU HAVE SOME, uh, *expérience mécanique* with the bicycles?’

My questioner smiled at me across a stained garage floor bestrewn with dead and dismembered machines.

‘A little,’ I said. ‘You know: *un peu*.’

This was a hard, straight fact, delivered in a deceitful tone of manly understatement. I had driven to a village in Brittany’s damp, green fundament to meet this man, whose name was Max, and purchase the mountain of ancient bike bits he had advertised for sale. The trip had involved a dawn ferry and several hours of wet autoroute. I gazed across the jumble of corroded spokes, sprockets, rims and tubing and felt my mind clog with misgivings.

‘*Voilà*,’ said Max, picking up a dented tin full of hollow, square-ended brass bolts and handing it to me. ‘*Très importants!*’

I weighed it with a knowing smile, thinking: What in the name of crap are these? More generally, why have I gone to

all this trouble for the privilege of filling my car – and then my family home – with rusty artefacts of largely unknown purpose? Above all, how had I come so far without considering, even once, the ludicrous enormity of the task I had set myself?

The hands that held this tin had not attempted such an overwhelming technical challenge since the Airfix age. The legs beginning to tremble on Max's oil-blotted concrete had last been put to sustained athletic use twelve years previously. Yet somehow I expected to employ these appendages first to assemble a functioning bicycle from the century-old components piled up before me, then ride it around the 3,162km route of the toughest race in history.

I passed the tin back to Max and asked him where his toilet was.

The journey that led me to this Breton garage had started sixty mornings earlier, when I opened the inside back page of my paper and read that US federal prosecutors were dropping a two-year investigation into allegations of systematic doping by Lance Armstrong and his former team, US Postal. The article ended with a quote from the world's best known and my least favourite cyclist, muted by his usual pugnacious standards but still enough to pepper the insides of my cheeks with angrily shattered fragments of Bran Flake. 'It is the right decision, and I commend them for reaching it.'

In June 2000, I rode the route of the Tour de France, a race that Armstrong was about to win for the second time. His first victory had seemed like the ultimate feel-good comeback: from the ravages of cancer to triumph in sport's most fearsome physical challenge. But when I watched his second – on telly and, for a couple of stages, from the roadside – something was beginning to trouble me. Not simply Armstrong himself, who although uniquely disagreeable, certainly wasn't alone in unearthing a

previously well-hidden command of the core Tour-winning skill, that of riding extremely fast up mountains. It was a more general unease, a sense that even average riders seemed to be breezing through an undertaking that had reduced their predecessors to vacant, mumbling wrecks of men. As a physical challenge, it seemed much less fearsome.

Disquiet crystallised as I stood amongst the flag-faced young drunkards on Mont Ventoux's most brutal section, a pine-lined stretch so steep we should have all been roped together. Armstrong had already sped past us, in an elite group whose combined career accomplishments are now absent from the records or served generously salted. When two of his US Postal deputies presently trundled by – irrelevant *domestiques* whose work for the day was done – no one else paid much attention. I alone tracked their progress with wide, unblinking eyes. These two men had just cycled 140km at an average speed in excess of 35kmh, pacing their leader up three substantial climbs and the relentless lower slopes of Ventoux. I knew what they'd just done – a month before, I'd done it myself, albeit rather more slowly and without Lance Armstrong up my arse. The memory of that terrible, hollowing day was still fresh and raw, and here were these two blokes rolling up an especially tender 11 per cent slice of it, nattering to each other. Sharing a joke with one hand on the bars and the other scratching an earlobe.

This probably isn't the place to hold forth at righteous length about the curse of EPO and all the other forms of blood doping that have blighted professional cycling over recent decades (for a full overview, I would direct you to Jeremy Whittle's *Bad Blood*, and *The Secret Race*, by Armstrong's former teammate Tyler Hamilton). Suffice to say that all the bad thoughts came rushing back when I read that Armstrong, the cheatingest cheat in Cheatsville, had

once again somehow cajoled and bullied and lawyered his way out of trouble.

The basely gladiatorial incident that hooked me on cycling was Stephen Roche collapsing just past the line at La Plagne in the 1987 Tour, oxygen mask clamped to his waxen face, eyes a million miles away, too far gone to grasp that his extraordinary, soul-flaying effort had all but won him the race. That, with apologies to Roche's mother, was what Grand Tours were supposed to be about. As if to emphasise the extent to which they no longer were, during the 2001 Tour I had to put up with Armstrong feigning exhaustion, gasping theatrically for the cameras before slipping away to victory up Alpe d'Huez without breaking sweat.

In the years that followed, improved drug-testing and public opprobrium at least reined in the blood-doping free-for-all. But something had changed, and for good. Riders, in the preferred argot of endurance sport, just didn't seem to bury themselves any more. Legs seemed fresher and so did minds. Races became ever more predictable, more calculated, more professional in the worst sense of the word. When the camera closed in on a rider's face, you rarely saw suffering. You saw concentration.

Sport, of course, was the real loser in all this. Sport, and me. I had pushed myself to the vomity edge of my capabilities riding the Tour route, and now people would look at these focused cyclo-bots pedalling calmly around it and think: Meh. Every race that finished without some shattered Rochian collapse seemed to erode my accomplishment. The age of blood, sweat and tears – my age – was fading into sepia-toned history.

Three months after my Tour ride, I went up to Manchester to watch Chris Boardman take on Eddy Merckx's twenty-eight-year-old hour record. Boardman had, in fact, already beaten the mark on several occasions, and by gigantic margins: four years previously, he had cycled almost seven kilometres further than the 49.5 that Eddy had managed in

sixty minutes. The intensity of Merckx's 1972 effort – he called it the hardest ride of his life – took something out of the great man that he would never recover. Boardman, though an indubitably talented athlete, was no Merckx: his Eddy-battering achievements were a tribute to the technology and wind-tunnel ergonomics of a new era. Chris Boardman piloted a disc-wheeled carbon-fibre space-racer with his arms out like Superman and a big plastic teardrop on his head. Eddy had just stuck on his old leather-sausage track helmet and ridden a bike.

Shortly after Boardman rode 56km in an hour, the cycling authorities drew up new rules to defend the integrity of the sport's blue-riband record. Merckx's distance was reinstated as the official mark; any future attempt to better it would have to be undertaken in comparable fashion. Old-school bike, equipment, riding position. When Boardman accepted the challenge, it seemed almost foolhardy. I remember looking at him as he sat on the start line astride his stock, steel-framed track bike, thinking: Fair play for giving this a go, Chris, but you're not going to make it. He very nearly didn't. As the velodrome roof loudly rose, a superlative, bankrupting effort in the final seconds hauled him past Eddy's mark, by a mere 10 metres.

Spooning up the last Bran Flakes, I thought of Boardman, and how he had struck a blow for old-fashioned grit and old-fashioned kit. He had shown it was possible, after all, to reclaim cycling from the high-tech, low-sweat Generation Armstrong, clicking impassively through its electronic gears, taking orders from the cardiac monitor on its handlebars and the *directeur sportif* in its earpiece.

I noisily turned the newspaper page, feeling a quiver of righteous, flinty determination run up my spine. On another day, this neurological tremor would have fizzed swiftly through my synapses and been forgotten. Instead, and in impressively unanticipated fashion, the words of survival

expert Ray Mears now caused it to splatter my brain with raw, claggy hunks of earnest resolve.

The interview laid out two compelling facts: Ray was precisely my age, and he was hanging up his bush hat. Announcing that he would henceforth focus on reviewing past adventures rather than planning new ones, Ray said: ‘You get to a point where you can look back and enjoy the view, because you’re not having to climb the ladder so hard.’ Jesus. An ex-adventurer at forty-seven. Was I at that point? Was I shit. Speak for yourself, Mears. I’ve got a few rungs left in me.

I set my jaw, and scratched the grizzled stubble that lined it. OK, so maybe at my age I wouldn’t be Raying it up in the woods, living off bark and making a tent out of cuckoos. But surely I still had some big bike miles in my legs, enough for a proper ride. Something epic, a challenge from the old school. Keeping it real, Boardman style, two fingers up at Lance and a salute in tribute to cycling’s whey-faced, lion-hearted heroes of old.

The hour record was, I reflected, something riders generally attempted as a finale to their sporting careers. This would be the crowning achievement for what passed as mine. I was going to bury myself one last time, before someone else did it for me.

Obviously, had I known that Lance Armstrong would end the year thrashing himself ever deeper into the quicksands of disgrace, I could have spared myself – and more importantly spared you – everything that now follows. Blame him. These days everyone does.

*

How very rewarding it would have been to have homed in on my quest in appropriate fashion, perhaps through a series of encounters in derelict velodromes that led to a rasped first-hand account of suffering and glory from some

leathery veteran, ideally on his deathbed. However, for an impatient man in the age of Google, that was never going to happen.

‘Hardest ever grand tour’

Click.

About 3,900,000 results (0.38 seconds)

www.bikeraceinfo.com/giro/giro1914.html

> ‘The 1914 Giro was without a doubt the hardest-ever Grand Tour. Only eight riders were able to finish this staggeringly difficult race.’

Confirmation of this stark verdict was delivered a week later, in the pages of a slim account of the event, embellished with some evocative photographs. It was written by a veteran Italian sports journalist in his native language, which presented certain difficulties: in 1985 I signed up to a course in Business Italian in order to gaze at an extremely beautiful young woman, then noticed she had really hairy forearms and quit halfway through. Astonishingly, this dried-up puddle of knowledge proved sufficient to translate Paolo Facchinetti’s title, though online assistance was required with the subtitle and the rear-cover blurb.

THE 1914 TOUR OF ITALY: TOUGHEST OF ALL TIME

Those Magnificent Men on their Pedalling Machines

[translator’s note: may sound better in Italian]

Eighty-one riders set off, and just eight finished. Terrible weather conditions, appalling roads and 400km stages proved too much for even the greatest champions of *‘il ciclismo eroica’* . . .

Il ciclismo eroica, as I was to discover, succinctly embodied the spirit I hoped to recapture. In recent years, Italians have developed a powerful affection for their ‘heroic age of

cycling', when the sport ruled supreme in Italy, and Italian riders led the world. Between the 1920s and early Fifties, Italians won almost as many Tours de France as did the French, while maintaining a monopoly of their own national tour, the Giro, which had cemented itself as cycling's second-most prestigious race, and first-most gruelling.

That the toughest race in history should have been a Giro seemed inevitable now that I considered the event's fearsome reputation. A few recent verdicts:

'The Giro d'Italia: Why Grown Men Will Cry', *Peloton* magazine, on the 2011 edition.

'A massive, brutal physical overload,' Dan Hunt, Team GB's cycling endurance coach, 2012.

'There's so much more carnage than at the Tour. You keep thinking: "Why on earth did I choose to do this bloody race?"' Sir Bradley Wiggins.

Of *course* my challenge would wind up being a Giro. The race that Lance Armstrong – hah! – dared enter only once, and then finished eleventh. The race that raised the curtain on Eddy Merckx's Grand Tour reign in 1968, and brought it down in 1974. And the race that introduced the world to Fausto Coppi, a template for tragic heroism and one of the most exquisitely flawed sporting geniuses of all time: a five-time winner in the Forties and Fifties who received a two-month prison sentence for adultery, gaily blew the lid off the sport's endemic amphetamine habit and died of malaria at forty.

As an unassuming specimen with ideas above his sporting station, I'd always held a candle for Fausto, a beaky, pigeon-chested rake of a man whose physique made no sense until you put him on a bike. That silky, tireless pedalling action bagged him his first Giro at twenty, and an hour record that stood for twelve years. At thirty-two, riding towards his

second Tour de France win, he set a time up Alpe d'Huez that no one bettered for three full decades.

As a mark of Coppi's extraordinary, transcendental achievements, my father – a man with absolutely no interest in sport of any kind – recently identified him alone in a photographic quiz of athletic legends that included Pele, Björn Borg and Muhammad Ali. (In the interests of full disclosure, my father spent part of his childhood in Rome, and was living there when Fausto passed through the city en route to his debut Giro win: '*Viva Coppi* was painted on half the walls in town,' he told me. 'Though to be honest, I only recognise his face from the adultery trial.')

So the Giro d'Italia was exactly the sort of epic challenge I was after: a hard race for proper heroes, which you could win on guts alone without looking the part, which was everything Lance Armstrong wasn't. I'd just begun to warm to my task when I made the mistake of opening Paolo Facchinetti's account of its uniquely onerous eighth edition.

The 1914 'Giro of records' in numbers:

- *Longest ever average stage length: 396.25km*
- *Smallest number of finishers: 8*
- *Highest percentage of retirements: 90%*
- *Longest individual stage by distance: 430km, Lucca–Rome*
- *Longest individual stage by time: 19h 34' 47", Bari–L'Aquila*

The Bullet Points of Doom in Paolo's foreword abruptly put my planned endeavour into perspective – on the *Spinal Tap* scale, too much fucking perspective. An *average* stage length of nearly 400km? On my Tour ride, 100 a day had almost done for me. And back then I was nearer thirty than forty. Younger than the oldest Tour winner. Younger, much younger, than David Beckham when he signed up for a swansong at Paris St Germain. Now I was the wrong side of

forty, the extremely wrong side, the one hard up against fifty. At thirty-five you can still cut it. At forty-seven you've forgotten where you put the scissors.

The best I could manage for inspiration was Bernard 'The Executioner' Hopkins, who at the age of forty-six had just won the IBO and WBC light-heavyweight titles. But though Bernard made a great case for the physical feats one could still achieve in late middle age, he made a very poor one for their cost. Here he is addressing journalists before a subsequent title defence: 'I just found out a month ago, the doctor will be here before the press conference hopefully to explain this, but I must confess that I am not human. I am an alien. No, seriously. I'm from Mars.'

Try as I might to suppress it, the memory of my one significant two-wheeled undertaking of the previous decade now reared its putrid head. In 2007, the year the Tour de France started in London, I rode to Canterbury along the route of the first stage. My preparatory training programme reprised the schedule that had done me proud seven years earlier: do absolutely nothing, and get through on will-power alone, the 'suitcase of courage' that veteran cycling commentator Paul Sherwen so memorably references a rider digging into as he toils through adversity. In sedentary middle age, as I discovered to my cost, this metaphorical receptacle was more a 'handbag of sick'. With that emptied out onto an Ashford lay-by, I had nothing left in the tank. Many unspeakable hours later I crawled onto a train home, fumbling chips into my slack and pallid gob and vacantly submitting to a new reality: I had now passed the age where determination could stand in for preparation.

Possibly I was even too old to prepare. A couple of years after that game-changing debacle I went mountain-boarding with my teenage son, rolling down a Surrey hillside on knobbly-wheeled skateboards. As we never got up above a trundle it didn't seem like I was asking for trouble, but I got it anyway. An innocuous rollover on our final run somehow

severed an important shoulder muscle – the one that lets you go about your daily business without imitating a 498-year-old Chelsea pensioner. It took four months to heal, ample time to contemplate a looming future of age-related infirmity. ‘There’s Mr Moore over by the telly: poor chap had a bit of a tumble last week. No, Mr Moore, that’s *Countdown* – the Tour de France doesn’t start for six months. No, *months*. MONTHS. Just give him a nod, he likes that.’

Every physical undertaking emphasised that these days I should be taking it easy, rather than contemplating the polar opposite. A year of weekly badminton sessions brought on tennis elbow and a dicky knee, while doing nothing to deflate my horrid first-stage man-boobs, those pert little cherry-topped David Cameroons. I turned our mattress over, as I do every spring, then couldn’t get off it for two days.

That should have been the end of the whole daft business. Retracing the 1914 Giro was, quite plainly, no contest for old men. But there was a counterbalancing aspect to my planned endeavour, one that played very much to the strengths of a male’s middle years.

CHAPTER 2

EVER SINCE PAOLO'S book arrived, I'd been captivated by its illustration of the Stucchi road bike that won the epic race. Humble didn't begin to describe this rhombus of slender tubing, not so much low-tech as no tech: a gearless machine with chunky drop handlebars and a stout saddle, clearly plucked at random from the company's Milan production line. I smiled every time I looked at it: pure, simple, honest, the graceful antithesis of today's six-grand pro bikes, with their stubby, artless geometry dictated by drag coefficients, material science and biomechanics. After a while that smile hardened into a frown of covetous determination. With a bike like that I could pay proper tribute to Eddy and Chris's finest hours, to *il ciclismo eroica*. I could stick it to Generation Armstrong: out with energy gels and titanium, in with heavy steel and sarnies. Spending months trying to get in shape for this monstrous enterprise would be witheringly dull, and probably pointless. No, I would for now focus on doing what people of my age and gender do best – stockpiling rusty old shite.

Initial enquiries mixed good news with bad. Hundred-year-old racing bicycles were more common than I had anticipated, but also more expensive. eBays on either side of the Atlantic offered restored examples at a grand and a half upwards. A complete but very distressed ‘barn find’ wouldn’t cost me less than £700. Italians, as I was simultaneously excited and disappointed to discover, nurtured an unrivalled attachment to bicycles from their golden age. Excited because I could already picture myself riding a wave of warm nostalgia through cobbled hill towns, and disappointed because this wouldn’t be happening with a period Italian machine between my knees. Stucchi was a now-defunct marque whose survivors all seemed to be on public or private display. It was the same with the Mainos, Gannas, Globos and Atalas that had lined up alongside them on the 1914 start line. The closest I found for sale was a 1913 Bianchi, Stucchi’s bitterest rival and the only firm still in business today. The pedals didn’t match and it was priced at €3,400.

At length, ignorance and creeping dismay had compelled me to broach the final frontier of male desperation: I asked for help. One website kept cropping up when I Googled period manufacturers, a Gallic forum of old-bike enthusiasts that styled itself TontonVelo (‘Uncle Pushbike’ – in French it probably sounds less like the nickname of a wanted paedophile). These *tontons* knew their stuff but were refreshingly relaxed about its application. For every fanatically authentic, nut-and-bolt collector’s rebuild there was a tale of some knackered old crock unearthed in a neighbour’s shed, doused in WD40 and ridden to the shops until it broke in half.

As the nation that invented the bicycle, held the first ever bicycle race and still hosts the globally pre-eminent bicycling contest, I had imagined that France would venerate its related relics with the loftiest respect and price tags to match. I had imagined wrong. As the sheer number

of barn-find stories on TontonVelo suggested, and as the incorporated discussion of comparatively modest euro-sums confirmed, there was nowhere better on earth to buy an extremely old bike. I registered on the forum, fired up Google Translate and posted a request for assistance in the ‘pre-1945 racing bicycles’ section.

Almost at once a private message arrived from a poster who called himself Roger Rivière. I rather wished he hadn’t: Rivière was a rider who famously came to grief in the 1960 Tour de France, plunging through the barriers and down a mountainside while off his face on pills, and spending the rest of his days in a wheelchair. Anyway, this new Roger kindly alerted me to a forthcoming vintage bike festival in northern France, where he said I might be able to source a period machine. He also, more arrestingly, provided a link to a classified advert on leboncoin, his nation’s leading online craporium. It was Max’s, and offered the aforementioned mountain of aged parts for €400.

Having already spoken to Max, Roger reckoned this to be quite the bargain. Along with a great assortment of random spares, the collection included the full component pieces of two venerable machines. One was a 1940s racing bike, in which I had no interest beyond its appealing bonus inclusion. The other, though, was a La Française-Diamant. Having inspected an emailed photo, Roger could date this frame no more precisely than 1910–20, but that would do for me. I didn’t know much about the marque, but I knew enough: Maurice Garin, winner of the inaugural Tour de France, had ridden to victory on a La Française-Diamant.

My heart leapt, then distended several neighbouring organs when I Googled up the stirring image of a grandly moustachioed Garin astride his garlanded LFD at the 1903 winner’s pageant. I’d wanted an Italian bike, but surely nothing could trump the daddy-champion’s chosen steed. In my excitement I immediately booked a ferry ticket, then went straight outside and removed the passenger seat from

my car to make space for all that wonderful booty. This took me four hours, which seemed a poor omen for the rather more complex engineering that lay ahead.

Anticipation and supermarket energy drink had fuelled me all the way to the end of Brittany, and over-proof trepidation kept my synapses a-tingle as I took stock of Max's stack. Most of it, I'm pretty sure he told me – all his English seemed to have been used up in that welcoming salvo – had come from the back room of a local bike shop that closed when its elderly owner retired. Wrestling my mind away from the appalling mechanical challenge it presented, I could see in this pile beauty and fascination aplenty. There was a brown paper sack full of winsomely engraved brass bells; a magnificent pair of ancient handlebars, splayed and sinuous like a detail from some old Parisian Metro entrance; a couple of hundred spokes in their original inter-war packaging; a tin bucket groaning with oxidised sprockets. Half a dozen wooden wheel rims, a crate full of brake bits and a shoebox of pedal parts, a mummified assortment of leather saddles and toolbags . . . tip into the mix those square brass bolts and a thousand more mysteries and this much was plain: I had myself a big load of really old bike stuff. Max, a compact chap of middle years with a trim grey 'tache, raised his eyebrows at me and smiled again. '*Il y a beaucoup*,' I said.

In French as rusty as the bits piled up before us I asked Max how he'd acquired this motley collection, and why he was now selling it. To introduce his explanation he led me through the garage and into a side cellar dominated by a gleamingly immaculate vintage motorbike.

‘*Ma Velocette*,’ sighed Max, gesturing fondly at this symphony of gloss black and chrome. I gathered that the La Française-Diamant was to have been the follow-up to this frankly overbearing achievement. ‘*Mais, uh, ma femme . . .*’ With the shrug perfected by shed-centric tinkering husbands worldwide, Max indicated why Project Vélo had been reluctantly shelved.

In truth, he hadn’t got very far. A single brake caliper had been nickel plated, and he’d crudely slathered the ancient frame with white primer-undercoat. This made for a fairly dismaying spectacle, though at least Max had wisely first removed the La Française-Diamant frame badge. Like a religious relic this was now housed in its own tiny glass jar, a miniature brass escutcheon emblazoned with the marque’s name, its city of origin, Paris, and five ‘diamonds’ that stood proud of a glorious starburst. The shield that broke the finish-line tape at the inaugural Tour de France. I gazed at it with the portentous rapture of that Nazi as he opened the Lost Ark, then plunged it into my pocket before my face melted.

It was almost dark when I left, supervising a ginger three-point turn through the €400 scrapheap that entirely filled the car. As I slowly reeled Britanny back in, rusty tubes grazing my neck and my nose wrinkled against the scent of sour iron and stale oil, I began to consider again just how and why I expected to succeed in a task that had already defeated – or anyway been abandoned by – an inestimably better equipped man. Over many delicious crêpes prepared and more or less folded into my helpless mouth by Madame Max, I had been brought up to speed with the many relevant things that her husband was and I wasn't. Max was a plumber by trade and a ninja-grade DIYer by inclination, a restorer not just of vintage motorcycles but of nineteenth-century Japanese architectural models. Max had built the furniture we were sitting on and eating at, and was also a landscape gardener and a communist. There was some common ground between us, though, as it later transpired that Max was a thunderous bullshitter.

Riffling through the newspaper a few mornings after my return, I came across a large picture of a dismantled bicycle, part of a Canadian photographer's project to capture everyday objects reduced to their individual components. I'd always thought of the bike as a triumph of utilitarian engineering, an invention whose global success was dependent on its pared-down mechanical simplicity. The deconstructed bicycle in the Canadian's photograph was a low-end, low-tech 1980s Raleigh, yet this humble machine had, I learned, been assembled from no fewer than 893 bits, an overwhelming profusion arranged in neat geometrical groupings around the frame. Beside it were a similarly dismembered digital camera and a chainsaw, which together mustered forty-eight parts fewer.

I stared at this appalling image and felt my appetite ebb nauseously away. Unbidden, my career in bicycle maintenance now spooled through my mind. It didn't take