

July 2023



"It's *your* New York!"

The Rondout Reader



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AMERICA & AWAY

by Kevin Ahearn PG-13)



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[Whitney Houston - Star Spangled-Banner - Bing video](#)

1975



'My Home, Sweet Home'

*"We may have all come on different ships,
but we're in the same boat now."*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

When Mom was just a teenager, she got a tempting job offer: personal assistant for a young, up-and-coming nightclub singer.

Grandma, a show business vet, set her straight.

"Completely impractical," she told her daughter. "Your boss catches a cold or gets pregnant, you're out in the street."

Mom listened to Grandma, got a regular job, married Dad and after the war, their first baby boomed.

Dinah Shore went on to become a TV star, singing 'See the USA in your Chevrolet, America's the greatest land of all!'

I took Dinah's advice. In 1964, my two Air Force buddies and I chipped in and bought a shamrock green 1939 Chevy and rode from San Angelo, Texas to New York City.

We then sold the car and, add in our Air Force 'travel pay', made a small profit. A lot of people owned cars, but I would know too many cars that owned people. Not gonna happen to me. I had traveled by bus and train and flew to Europe and back, but confined inside a machine, dependent on a gas-driven engine, no trip ever made me feel joined to the road and the country.

Blame it on *Wheaties*. I grew up eating 'The Breakfast of Champions' and reading the box containing the 'whole kernel' flakes. Bob Richards, the Olympic gold medal winner, was the first athlete to appear on the *front* of a *Wheaties* box in 1958.

Richards projected the image of the All-American hero, but I could never see myself polevaulting. Where was the *quest* in a split-second act? In 1969, as I was failing as an art student, Richards and *Wheaties* pushed the cereal bowl: a cross-country trip by bicycle. On the back of the box, I can still see Bob hunched over the handlebars as he took on the Nevada desert.

Not me, I thought. A Catskill boy, I'd take the mountain route.

Less than a year later, I got my first ten-speed. Pedaling out of Huntsville, Alabama on *The Spirit of Mighty America*, I'd first ride to my aunt's place in Atlanta, then on to New York City.

No job, no car, no house, no girlfriend, every morning I'd wake up with somewhere new to go, new places to see, new people to meet, feeling like Clark without Lewis and a little more like Huck without Tom.

Alone and independent, I'd be a knight errant riding out to discover 'the greatest land of all'. Or maybe that long-haired biker in *Easy Rider*... 'Looking for America and can't find it anywhere.'

What would I find out about my country and myself? After thousands of miles, cities and towns, mountains and valleys, bridges and tunnels, what would it all *mean*?

Full of confidence, I was ready and eager for my 'first time'. As so many Americans were killed every year on the highways, I'd be cautious and careful, but never afraid.

What a sight I was, long hair blowing in the wind, topped by an 'Aussie Commando' hat, with one side propped against my head. A lanky boy atop a red, white and blue bike, overloaded and unbalanced, off on a great adventure. I'd behave and not do anything stupid and though there might be some pain at the start, losing my 'virginity' to the road would be a wonderful, blissful experience.

It was a disaster. Because I'd been stupid *before* I got to the road. *Spirit of Mighty America*, cluttered with heavy, needless accessories, including a 'kiddie' Alabama license plate with my name on it, plus a front basket and a backpack mounted high on the deluxe sissy bar must have weighed over 85 pounds. Taking a downhill turn became a death-defying maneuver.

That first day I passed through Scottsboro, Alabama, where in 1931, 9 black teens were tried and found guilty of rape by an all-white jury and became a landmark in racist judgment. On the way out, I wished all America could leave Scottsboro behind.

I didn't bring a tent and my first night out, slept only a little under a picnic table. When I hit the mountains, I found out the difference of being physically fit and being in 'road shape.' Pushing my heavy bike I was dying.

When I stopped to rest at a gas station, I was surrounded by a bunch of crewcut rednecks, who looked at me as if I had come from another planet. One fingered my vanity license plate.

"Kee-vin, Alabama," he said. "Never heard of it."

That night, I slept in an abandoned school bus. Off the next morning, the going was slow.

"Why?" I kept asking myself.

For the first and last time on the road, I paid to stay to at a motel. After a good breakfast, I trudged on, every mile an effort. After 3 Big Macs (55 cents apiece), I thought I'd be all fueled up, but I continued to break down.

At 'Big Mama's Truck Stop', outside of Rome, Georgia, I called my aunt and the family came and picked me up. My 'first time' had been an embarrassing humiliating failure.

But...there were these moments, alone on the road with the wind at my back, the complete *freedom*. I had to try again.

Back in New York City, I went from one bike and one book to another, researching 'bicycle touring', correcting my early mistakes. I took a 'century', a 100-mile trip to NYC, then a 250-miler to Washington DC, a 350-miler around New England and a 450-mile trek to Ohio. With each trip, the road would teach me new things. In between rides, at school or later, working a job, I'd get bursts of 'road fever,' and quickly sought relief.

Finally I had found 'the bike of my life,' a Fuji *Finest* with a 25-inch 'tall' frame, a Brooks 'pro' saddle and Shimano sidepull brakes. Over the miles I'd replace every part of the *Finest* except for the chain and frame.

I referred to the bike as 'her'; that's what men called ships, cars and airplanes. There'd be times, especially at night, when I'd gently stroke her tubes. Not like a man would a lover, more like a knight patting his trusty steed. And just before going to sleep, I'd gently fondle the tips of her tire valves and never once wake up to a flat.

The *Finest* wasn't a flashy bike, but she had a presence all her own. Years later, in the Peace Corps in Brazil, I'd ride my bike to the supermarket and load up the panniers with groceries. One afternoon, I found another bike blocking mine. I took the 24-inch 'kiddie bike' by the handlebars and...

That's when the owner came out, a big guy with a machete on his belt.

"This is your bike," I said, "And here's mine."

One look at the *Finest* and no way was I going to steal his bike and leave *her* behind.

Imagine being at a party or at a club, in the middle of an animated conversation with a woman, when suddenly her husband or boyfriend shows up. With just a tip of your head, let him know who you're with and all misunderstandings end.

Not just about beauty or youth or fashion, but the presence, the confidence of a woman who wants to go somewhere new *with me*.

On the road, my ears would wake up first, listening for drops of rain hitting my tent. Out of my sleeping bag, I'd check the wind. Behind me and I'd fly through the day, blowing in my face and I'd struggle. Worst was a crosswind pushing into traffic. That could get me killed.

Nothing upset me more than my own carelessness, and after leaving a couple of things behind at a campsite, after I packed up, I'd do a 'walk around' to make sure I had everything.

Breakfast would come with the first small store I came to: a box of cookies and a quart of milk while I studied my map.

Back in the day, gas stations offered free State road maps. With the scissor attachment on my Swiss Army knife, I'd trim what I didn't need. Every fraction of an ounce was critical.

Putting in anywhere from 60 to 100 miles a day, eating was like shoveling coal into a steam engine. Lunch was fast food, but never with a soda, *free* water. But once, having taken a mountain shortcut to save a couple a miles, suddenly I was starving without a restaurant or burger joint in sight. Good thing I had a big can of kidney beans I'd been saving for dinner. But I couldn't get my camping stove started. Where the hell was my fork? I ate every last cold bean with my comb.

And haven't complained about a meal since.

Early on, I'd set goals, how far I'd have to go. Got over that quickly. Enjoy the road and camp when tired out.

I looked at every day as a 'once-in-a-lifetime' experience. Country roads took me to small towns. Used book stores, local museums and art galleries were prime excuses to stop and take a break.

A chess museum, the Policeman's Hall of Fame, the 'Golden Spike' museum; on a weekday, often I'd be the only visitor, and spend time with the curator.

Out west, I passed by an artist's studio and we talked painting. Watched and learned about taxidermy at another's studio.

Biking all day changes the body and the mind. Off the road, things slow down. The senses take time to adjust. At the bottom of hill, a free art museum beckoned. Inside, a man was sitting on a sofa. Long hair and glasses, he was holding a pamphlet. I studied the picture on the cover...it was *him*. An artist's model passing for a human being and I fell for it.

Bridges were my bane...too many don't allow a cyclist to cross. I'd have to wait, sticking out my thumb, hoping for a pick-up truck.

In New York City, the 59th Street Bridge was an exception. Not the George Washington. At the end of a 100-mile trip in a torrential rain, I had to boost the *Finest*

over a gate topped with barbed wire. Riding across, cars and trucks shot by, hitting puddles and sending waves over my head like a surfer in a 'pipeline'.

I had to pay ten cents to walk across the Bear Mountain Bridge. When I finally got a lift over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel, I had to tell the driver that he had taken the wrong bridge. Another time, another state, a cop car pulled up as I was hitchhiking for a ride across a bridge. When I told him how far I had come, he gave me a police escort, siren blaring.

But it was the overpass on Route 9 on the way to DC...No cops, no toll booths, no place to hitch and no shoulder. Traffic whizzing by at the speed limit and over it. I must have spent a half hour building up the nerve to cross it.

This had to be a sprint. The overpass was uphill to a peak of 80 feet above a river. Catching a short break in the traffic, I hit the roadway pedaling for all I was worth. Maybe I should have dared to take a car's slot and the hell with everybody, they could crawl behind me until I got to the other side, but I didn't have that kind of nerve yet.

I kept pumping, pumping. Once I reached the high point, I could coast the rest of the way. Suddenly a *screeching*. I looked back. An eighteen-wheel trailer truck had caught a road cone between his back wheels. Like the bad Roman in *Ben-Hur* with the killer chariot hubs, he closed on me.

Instead of panicking, a calm came over me, as if something deep inside me had triggered a preparation for a journey far beyond Route 9. Not just yet; the road cone scraped by, missing me by a good foot.

A couple of years later, coming from California, I couldn't wait to take on that overpass again. Until I saw it. Smarter this time around, I took a longer, safer route over a backroad county bridge.

"Never pay for anything you can get for free," is an old family adage, beginning with campsites. Rutgers, Bucknell, Penn State, and other campuses I don't remember; I'd pedal in, 'Easy Rider' without an engine, easily strike up a conversation with students, and have a place to spend the night. Try as I might, and maybe because I did, I never shared a one-night stand with a college girl.

An abandoned truck and a grain elevator protected me from fierce winds, but most of the time, a patch of flat grass was all I needed. Once, in the middle of the night, my tent was suddenly struck by a burst of water; hidden sprinklers had come on automatically.

Outside a small Great Plains railcenter without a mountain or hill in sight, on a spur of track sat a string of open, empty box cars. Had they been there a day or a decade?

I boosted myself into the closest one. A couple of shanks of hay and nothing much else. I sat crosslegged and stared out at the horizon. Didn't take too much to imagine rolling across the country. Had it been late afternoon, I'd have slept in the boxcar just to say I had.

In the Green Mountains of Vermont, I walked the *Finest* deep into the woods, set up my tent, read till dark with a box of oatmeal cookies, then slid into my sleeping bag, eager for the morning.

When I was awakened in the pitch black, I couldn't believe I had somehow disturbed someone. A hunter, a park ranger? Then I heard the breathing...A *bear*? I had read 'Night of the Grizzly' in *Sports Illustrated* just a few days before leaving. Innocent campers mauled to death. I was terrified, but I couldn't see anything.

Whipping out my Swiss Army knife, I yelled into the dark. The breathing sounded deeper, closer. Putting on my sneakers, I bolted, my tiny flashlight useless. In a panic I got back to the road. Then I looked up. Not a cloud in the 'new moon' sky. Countless stars twinkled. Rather than feel insignificant, I felt privileged. I'd go on to see so many wonders, but at that moment understood that no sight on earth matched the view from it.

In the daylight, American 'wildlife' took a different turn. On the road, I'd see the mashed bodies of all kinds of animals, thankfully never a person.

Along a country road, a hawk perched on a telephone wire, suddenly dropped as I got closer. Shot? I didn't hear one. I stopped and carefully neared where the bird had fallen to discover that Mom was protecting one of her chicks that had wound up in the grass. Feeling like a naturalist, eyes squinting like a camera, I backed off, an image forever captured.

Zooming down a mountain, a pronghorn stood in the middle of the road, staring me down. Had I been driving a car, it would have been no contest. As I had no horn, I yelled. Only at the last second did the antelope bolt for cover, not nearly as scared as I was.

Every day came with a high and low point. There would be times when I didn't think I could pedal one more mile. Once, after a long, long ride, I wanted only a flat piece of earth where I could sleep till dawn, when suddenly a pack of dogs burst out of the woods and charged at me. A shot of adrenaline, I stood high and pedaled for my life.

Much later in life, when going forward seemed impossible, I remembered those dogs.

My last trek started in the fall of 1976. For Thanksgiving, I was 'Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike'. I rode from Baltimore to DC in a snowstorm. Heading for Florida, I couldn't outpedal the cold. In North Carolina, when I woke up to the sound of my own teeth chattering, I headed for the Charlotte airport and flew to Atlanta. Yet again, my dear aunt Jackie rescued me. After a warming week with her family, I headed south again. It wasn't until I heard a miraculous sound that I knew I had finally escaped the cold...

Crickets chirping; on a Georgia road, I stopped and listened to an insect orchestra that played only warm weather dates. The hottest road band in the country.

The best free campsites in America have kept lawns, sometimes fresh water, and even shelter once in a while---Little League fields. Must have stayed at more than a dozen, but always in foul territory. Sometimes I'd eat dinner watching a game.

Any patch of grass will do in a pinch. I didn't know I'd found a special one until a car pulled up next to my campsite.

"Waddaya mean 'no'?" yelled the driver at his passenger. "It's only a fucking tent."

He pulled out for another spot. Not long after an open Jeep pulled in. The driver invited me out for a few drinks. The cute blond gave me a nice smile. After I took down my tent and threw my bike in the back, the other passenger, a guy in his thirties, pulled out his pistol and fired a shot in the air.

Off we went for beers and met a Native American.

"'Ugh'," said Pistol after 'Chief' had left. "Prairie nigger!"

At 2:30 AM, Blondie and I were alone in her second floor bedroom. The ramshackle house had gaping holes in the sheetrock; her brother would get angry and drive his fist into the walls. Not much left to get mad at any more. Hopefully, not me.

"You're riding all the way across the country!" said Blondie, her eyes alight. "I wish I could get outa here."

She wore a one-piece thin pullover outfit. She had lovely legs. Catching the light, the outline of her body revealed a nice ass and still-developing breasts.

A loving look, a sweet lie, one kiss and...

Blondie was sixteen.

Before dawn, I was awakened by an older woman brandishing a flashlight. Alone in her son's bed, after Mom confirmed that I hadn't screwed her underage daughter, she invited me for breakfast.

"Mom'll talk your ears off," Blondie warned me in the morning.

Over toast and a single egg, Mom let into her long-gone husband and her crazy son.

As I rode away, I looked back, and for a moment, wished they both had bicycles.

Like 'Captain America' in 'Easy Rider', I had no need for a watch; I slept when it got dark, and got up with the sun. The road kept time.

In the spring of 1975, I was riding up to Crater Lake National Park. Often I'd have to get off and walk. Ten foot poles, plow-markers, were spaced on both sides. As I got higher, the winter's snow rose to Biblical heights like a parted Red Sea on ice.

Five miles from the top, I came to a fork in the road and took it, heading east and down. And down I went, faster and faster, the snow on both sides dropping inch by inch and I felt like I was in HG Wells' time machine, hurtling through the Ice Age. Fifteen miles later, I got a patch of grass near a lake, took a swim and got stung by mosquitoes.

Back to the present, the future would come at dawn.

Every state had a history remembered with memorials and monuments, revered sites and tourist traps. I saw, I learned, but *feeling* history...

On a country highway in Kansas, once the route of covered wagons, not a car, a truck, or even a cabin was in sight. The heat bore down. Not a speck of dust rose in the still air.

What was it *like* to be a pioneer? I wondered. Could I have been one?

I got off the *Finest*, took off my sunglasses and visor, and began walking my bike, imagining myself as a 'real American', braving the elements and wild Indians to make my dreams come true.

Not for long. Within five minutes, I was back on the *Finest*, understanding that I wasn't made of the stuff that made my country great.

The 'Fountain of Youth' and '*El Dorado*', the 'city of gold' are American legends. For the cyclist, was there a mythical 'Yellow Brick Road', a 'heavenly highway', a magical route across the country?

Never heard of such a thing until...

On a hot Saturday afternoon, beads of sweat dripping from my brow bounced off the frame tubes as I pedaled. Out of water, I pulled into a little shop in the middle of a forest. My lips parched, my mouth dry, I filled my canteen from the outside faucet and drank deeply.

"Awgh!" the water was terrible, undrinkable.

Inside a lovely young blond sold me a quart of grape juice. Mixed it half and half with the water and still couldn't get it down.

That's when I met Mr. Pigg, a local in his early forties who admitted he'd done a lot of fighting over his name.

"They got water problems here," he said and we talked a bit about where I had come from and where I was going. Then he told me...

"If you had a car or a truck or were riding a motorcycle, you wouldn't be able to go," he said. "But on a bike, you can take it."

This I had to do. I put my bike in the back of his pick-up and a couple of miles later we came to the site.

"Been workin' on it for years," he said. "It's gonna be open in a couple of weeks."

Laid out before me was the 'Holy Grail' of cross-country cycling: A 'virgin Interstate'.

"You can go for about ten miles," he said. "Then use the exit to get back on the main road."

The almost-finished Interstate stretched out before me, four lanes, clean and open and empty.

"Why?" I asked Pigg as I set out.

"Millions of cars, trucks, buses and motorcycles will be taking this road," he said with a country smile. "I wanna be able to say I saw the guy who drove it first."

I don't remember the Interstate's number; as if a number could serve as a memory. Beyond the guardrails, trees lined both sides. Swept of gravel, not a cigarette butt or candy wrapper marred the road. It was the silence that struck me. Shifting gears, the clatter of my chain seemed to echo up and down.

There was no wind. I could no longer feel the heat. No riding on the shoulder, hunched over as cars and trucks whizzed by me. Straight down the middle, following the double yellow line, I felt like Dorothy Gale, but not wanting to go home just yet.

After nearly an hour, I coasted into the exit. Getting back on the route soon to be bypassed by anybody and everybody going anywhere, I knew that one day, when I learned how to drive and had a car and maybe a family, that I'd take to the Interstate. But with a special feeling; Mr. Pigg saw to that.

One Fourth of July, a family let me pitch my tent in their back yard. Nothing ever made me appreciate freedom more than waking up to a panoramic view of Leavenworth Prison.

Like a leaf blowing in the wind, was I on the verge of forgetting my roots? Like a little boy away at summer camp. I'd call home once a week to let Mom know where I was and that I was doing just fine, thank you.

Years later, Bernie would tell me that when Mom talked to her friends about her children, the first thing she'd bring up, "My son went cross-country on a bicycle..*twice!*"

Cleanliness being next to Godliness, when I passed by a lake or a stream, it was bath time. Down went the bike and into the water I went, wearing a bathing suit, of course.

Only once was there a problem.

"I saw your bike lyin' on the side of the road," said the angry cop, looking down at me as I washed up in a shallow stream. "Thought you'd been hit and runned. I was looking for a body."

Back in the day, getting a bicycle on an airplane at the beginning or the end of a trip was straightforward. A heavy cardboard box cost \$20. Twist around the handlebars, take off the pedals, and up, up, and away.

But after crossing the toughest state in the lower 48, Pennsylvania, 'up-downs', for 302 miles, at the Ohio airport, I couldn't get one of the pedals off!

The ticket clerk brought in the airport manager.

"No," he said adamantly. "Can't do it."

"Sir, are you telling me you won't put a *bicycle* on your plane?" I said. "This is Canton, hometown of the Wright Brothers, *bicycle-makers* before they were the first to fly."

Away we went.

'Culture shock' is defined as 'a state of bewilderment and distress' often experienced by Americans serving overseas in uniform or as Peace Corps Volunteers. But in my own country, in my hometown?

Returning to New York City after four months on the road, I got on the ferry in Staten Island. In the late morning sun, Manhattan gleamed like a magical place. I walked my bike off and found myself on Wall Street during lunch hour. Everywhere around me were people of all ages and sizes and races, a sea of life so crowded I couldn't ride through it. Talk about 'Not being in Kansas anymore.'

From San Francisco to Kittery, Maine, from Buffalo to Miami, 39 states over nearly a year on my bike. Where *is* America, 'Land that I love'? 'From the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans white with foam', where is 'My home sweet home'?

On one of my early treks, I packed a notebook and kept a day to day diary. Descriptions, mile count, observations...I quickly got tired of it. Feeling, *knowing* freedom from coast to coast and I lacked the words to say it.

Was America a land, a country, a government? After thousands of miles had my quest to find the essence of my country failed? Had I been a naive fool to believe I could find it?

Years later, not on my bike, but on a *boat*...

In 1986, I went with Mom and Bernie to the Fourth of July unveiling of the 'restored' Statue of Liberty. Hundreds of thousands would show up, but we'd get the best seats in town for only 25 cents.

We parked the van in an overnight area and walked to the harbor crowded with a ocean's worth of ships and boats, tall ships, their sails unfurled, warships, yachts, and pleasure craft. And the one we wanted: the Staten Island ferry.

It was still light when we got on board and set out for Staten Island, just a couple of nautical miles away. The boat was crammed with Americans - whites, blacks,

Hispanics, Asians, young and old, rich and poor, and I couldn't help but wonder how the millions of immigrants who created this country must have felt that very first time.

The Statue of Liberty had been unveiled by President Reagan earlier in the day. As the sun set, the party was only beginning.

More people got on for the ride back. The Statue stood unlit. We couldn't see it. Above New York City, only a few stars could penetrate the metropolitan haze. The boat had to pass a big ship that blotted out Liberty Island.

The ferry listed as hundreds of passengers went to the starboard side, awaiting the Statue lighted for all the world to see. And then, there she was, the Lady of Liberty, all fixed anew and aglow in the night.

I didn't know who started it. Maybe an old man, maybe a kid began to sing..."God bless America."

All joined in. We knew the words, felt every last one of them, a spontaneous chorus proud and grateful and honored. The largest fireworks display in US history couldn't light a candle to us.

America is not a statue or a mountain or a plain. Beyond a nation, America is a spirit burning within each of us.

As for the African-American 'community', the Irish-American 'community', the Native American 'community', and the Hispanic-American 'community', Asian-American, Jewish-American, Gay-American, Catholic-American and Muslim-American 'communities' --any 'community' that puts 'American' *second* in its title...

First and foremost, we are *Americans*, descended from cultures around the world. And singing together on the same boat, 'through the night with the light from above', American children will *ascend*.

My last night on the road was in Brazil. My Portuguese was so good that Peace Corps allowed me to spend the last week of training on my bike, taking a 150-mile trip to visit an experienced Volunteer.

In America, I had taken a glass of water and a toilet for granted. Not so in Brazil. I'd sold my tent, so I'd use my Air Force raincoat for night cover.

Two days later I arrived at the Volunteer's house, but no one was home. At a sidewalk cafe, I waited over a big pizza and a string of beers. As the afternoon waned, I got drunk and reasoned like one: if my host didn't show, I'd have to pay for a hotel. None of that. I staggered to my bike and a couple of miles out of town, found a flat grassy spot back off the road near a barbed wire fence.

I had barely covered up when it started to pour. Then the beer and the pizza made my stomach and my bowels rumble. From under my raincoat, stark naked, I bolted to the barbed wire fence and holding on for my dear wet life, began spewing from both ends.

I prefer to remember my peak. Not as a cyclist. Best I ever got wouldn't have earned me third string on a fourth-class racing team. But as a knight errant on a quest, free and going somewhere...

Route 40 out of Denver, the Rockies behind me, biting at the sky like snowcapped teeth, made me want to shout, "*Wheaties* this, Bob Richards. I took the mountain route! Who's the 'Champion' now?"

The early pain in my butt and legs and hands had long passed. I had become my own engine making myself go. Full of confidence, an aura of invincibility surrounded me, as if my wheels were making the earth spin.

That's when I saw him coming over the rise. At first I thought he was riding a motorcycle on the shoulder, but as I got closer, I saw it was a bicycle, loaded beyond belief. I coasted across the road to meet him.

Over the miles I had met other cyclists touring. I always checked their bikes first; is there anything I can learn? One guy rode a clean bike and carried a full pack on his back.

"If you and a mule were going to the mountains," I asked him. "Who'd carry the gear?"

A guy and a girl just packed raingear and stayed every night at a different motel. She was wearing a green halter without a bra. Typical what little boys remember. Her large breasts must have been so soft.

Others reminded me of whom I had been before I learned from the road, but this guy! His big, black machine was a British 'cast iron clunker' that had to weigh nearly fifty pounds clean. Its saddlebags were immense and he even had a 'paperboy' basket in front. However far he had come couldn't be much and I doubted he'd ever make Denver, but I was polite as I stopped next to him.

We shook hands. His name was Hans. In his middle thirties, short and stocky with clear blue eyes and a weather-beaten face, he reminded me of one of Rommel's elite Africa Corps from WW II.

"*Sind Sie Deutsch?*" I asked, eager to show him how worldly I was.

We spoke in German for a while about where he was born and the town I had been stationed in so many years before.

"Where are you coming from?" I finally asked, figuring maybe fifty miles at most.

"Alaska," Hans said.

"And where are you going?"

He showed me the book in his basket - *500 Spanish Verbs Fully Conjugated* - he would flip the pages as he rolled along. "*Tierra Del Fuego*."

The tip of South America!

"On this bike?" I asked.

"Ja," said Hans. "I keep going. Before Alaska, I rode across China and then Borneo."

"How long have you been on the road?"

"Nine years."

"I don't understand," I said. "What do you do for money."

Hans' face lit up when he smiled. "I have two arms and two legs. When I need money I go to work."

Nine years! Borneo! I pedaled away wondering where I'd be going next, for how long and *why*. Within a year, I'd be studying Spanish in Costa Rica with the Peace Corps, but as good my *Espanol* got, I knew I'd never be in Hans' class.

I spent nearly a full year on the road, made no money, had no sex, and earned no college credits. I had a responsibility only to myself; who was I going to be?

"Completely impractical," said Mom repeatedly.

She and Dinah Shore lived long, full lives.

It cost me more to get my *Finest* repaired than to buy *The Spirit of Mighty America* forty years before. Can't ride as fast or as far as I used to, but back in the saddle, I feel as free as I ever was.

Took me a lot of miles to learn the road's lasting truth: *Consider the whole tour*. You're not going 25-30, 35 or 40 or even 60 years. Life's a long haul.

I always want to be on a quest, to wake up and go somewhere new, that every day will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience,

Three more stories and this literary quest will be done. Then there's this project that's been challenging me for years. I've still got somewhere new to go.

So do you.

MAKE AMERICA A BETTER PLACE.

LEAVE THE COUNTRY.



Ainda!



© Artist unknown

"Nothing carries the spirit of American idealism and expresses our hopes better and more effectively to the far corners of the earth than the Peace Corps."

President John Kennedy

Latin America Staging Site Miami, Florida, 1977

"Welcome to Peace Corps and soon to Brazil," said the regional director to more than twenty new arrivals. "Glad to see everyone's here, safe and sound and on time. Finally, the paperwork is done and I can introduce each of you to the group."

"Mary Abbott," he said and a small woman up front raised her hand. "Mary's been a nurse for six years, specializing in childhood diseases. She's going to be a big help in the Brazilian hospital system."

"Pete Adams," was the next name on the list and a wave from a guy in the middle brought friendly nods. "An hydraulic specialist with a master's degree in civil engineering. Pete will be digging wells in the Amazon Basin.

"Kevin Ahearn..."

In the back, I raised my hand.

"An Air Force veteran and former VISTA volunteer, Kevin has a degree in physical education and rode here from New York on his bicycle."

A lot of chairs moved.

"The journey has just begun," I said.

In Brazil, Peace Corps training was a full immersion in language and culture. Near the end of the four-month program, a government official came and told us the positions and the locations we special education teachers would be assigned.

The first place he mentioned was —so bad he didn't want to talk about it. As he reeled off the rest of the jobsites, not one was anywhere near a decent beach. That bummed us all out.

"What was the name of that first place?" I asked.

"Cuiaba," he said.

"Okay," I said. "I'll go there."

Glutton for punishment? Idealistic fool? Hey, this is the Peace Corps, an *adventure*! If I go to a —good place and work very hard, would I be able to create positive change? Whereas, if I go to a —bad place, I'll work even harder, but fail miserably, how much worse could I make it?

In the Third World, distance is not measured in miles or kilometers, but in time, *bus* time. Cuiaba was 17 hours away from our training site. I got on a bus and give or take a few minutes, 17 hours later, my bike and I were there.

Cuiaba is the capital of Mato Grosso, Brazil's largest state and sits in the geographical center of South America surrounded by endless jungle. In the heart of town was the big church with a four-sided clock tower, but two of the clocks had no hands, as if for half the city, time didn't exist.

When Brazilians complain that a city is *muito quente*, it's hot. The heavy heat hit me the moment I got off the bus. No one was there to meet me, so I hopped on my bike and started looking for the APAE school.

Like Air Force intelligence, the School of Visual Arts and VISTA, the Peace Corps comes with a unique challenge: adapt or go home. Exploring an alien city of 50,000, I felt like Captain Kirk, just beamed down from the *Enterprise*, boldly going.

Thanks to training and Brazilian comic books, my Portuguese was excellent. After asking directions to APAE a couple of dozen times, I finally arrived at the school near the center of town. I got off my bike in front of a high wooden wall and knocked on the heavy double door.

A woman opened the door and in I went. The APAE was two dingy rows of single-story buildings topped with rippled sheet metal. A kitchen, a bathroom, the director's office on one side, a string of classrooms on the other, surrounding a dilapidated playground, a skeleton of what it used to be.

The staff of ten were all women of various ages, sizes and colors and fifteen or so young children. All were mulling about and I could feel the stillness of the place as if all the energy had long since left and time had stopped ticking.

"Beam me up, Scotty"?

Not a chance. APAE had no place to go *but* up.

First things first. As I was alone, I couldn't afford my own apartment in the city. The middle-aged director was willing to help out. With her permission, at the end of the day, I set up my tent under the bare swingset.

I had no idea what I was doing or what I could do, but no more conforming to strict guidelines. I was the program!

Meeting the children would not be enough. The first thing they had to learn was how to have fun. I had to engage them, letting them feel the Peace Corps spirit, the American energy flowing from me. Each and every one was special, but one was more special than the others.

Twelve-year old Maria was a forceps baby⁴, pulled from her mother's womb. Her head badly misshapen, the right side of her body was sadly stiff. Severely retarded, she could only say one word: *agua*. Pale skin, ratty hair and wearing a garment resembling a potato sack...there are those who believe that disabled children have a special charm about them, a sorrowful cuteness. Maria was ugly, angry and belligerent, and as distant as a veritable space alien. No wonder I fell in love with her.

And the other children accepted it, figuring, —If this guy loves *Maria*, he *can* be our teacher.

The director assigned me to the largest room, a drab, lifeless space. I bought some paint, and not only added color, but giant Peanuts characters on the walls. The place became my home. I'd sleep on a gym mat protected by mosquito netting, courtesy of the Corps.

Then I got some flat pieces of smooth wood and a length of rope and made a swing. As I set it up, the children gathered around, wide-eyed with awe.

Up and ready, it was as if I'd cut the ribbon opening Disneyworld.

Maria charged through the others to be first.

"No," I said. "Wait."

She began stomping her feet, her twisted face reddening with frustration.

"Wait for permission," I said.

After ten hour-long seconds. "*Por favor*, Maria!"

She lit up full of joy, seized the swing and like a bird suddenly able to fly for the first time, took to the sky, back and forth.

I couldn't help myself; only music was missing and I broke out in song.

"Who loves you, pretty baby," I began. "Who's always there to make it right!"

I clapped my hands to the beat of her swinging and kept on. "Who loves you, pretty mama, who's gonna help you through the night!"

The children started clapping with me. The song became ours.

Every morning when they came in, they'd gather around me and I'd call roll. "Neval-*doh!* Eneal-*doh!* Orlan-*doh!* Lorin-*doh!* Ensign!...y Maria!"

Then with a clap.

"Who loves you, pretty baby!"

They'd soon learn the first verse by heart and within a month, be singing and clapping with me.

Teaching, taking care of and cooking for 'exceptional children' was 100% woman's work. A tall, white American on a field trip with a gang of kids learning how to cross the street was a sight not seen every day in Cuiaba.

One day, a couple of Brazilian men on the street invited me and the children to the nearby outside restaurant for soda and a beer.

We talked politely until one got to the point: *Why?*

"I'm an American," I said proudly. "If I can dream it, I can do it."

"Cuiaba is an American dream?" he exclaimed.

They laughed. I laughed. I had to.

But very soon, a dream I'd never dreamt of dreaming, was going to come true.

There probably wasn't a man taller than I with blue eyes for two hours around. That got me a lot of stares, especially from women. One night I got *that* look. Selena was 19 and as beautiful as she was black. A 'Nubian Prize,' she reminded me of the young Lieutenant Uhuru on the original STAR TREK. With a glance I invited her to my table. Minutes later she was on the top tube of my bike frame being chauffeured back to my classroom.

Selena was clad in sexy shorts and a halter, but the first thing I took off her was the stringy, straight hairpiece she wore, as if to cover up her natural Afro.

"*No necessita,*" I said and she never wore it again.

Then, as they shout triumphantly in Brazil, —Goal... *GOAL*... **GOAL!**

Selena would come almost every night. While dinner cooked, we'd work up an appetite, then dine and have ourselves for dessert. She wouldn't be gone five minutes than I'd be finishing up the leftovers.

If Maria was my cover girl, 'Nevaldo was the poster boy.' A chubby, white 10-year old, he lived in a nearby orphanage and only recently found out his real name. The sight of his beaming smile every morning readied me for the day.

There were times when I'd get down. Nevaldo could feel it and he'd come over, reach up as high as he could, and pat me on the back.

"*Mi amigo*," he'd say to the world. "Who loves you!

Selena never did anything like that.

Nobody knew about Selena. Had Peace Corps found out I was doing at night while living at the APAE school, they'd take actions I didn't want to think about.

There's a certain 'look' a man treasures even above his mother's eyes filled with love and pride or his lover's gaze, happily aglow...

A new volunteer had come to Cuiaba, and we met for lunch at my favorite cafe. Halfway through our meal, heads turned when Selena entered.

She came and kissed me on the cheek.

"*Hola, amor*," she said with a smile.

"*Sete hora* (Seven o'clock)?" I asked.

"*Exatamente na hora*," she said, but I knew she'd come a little late.

Every man watched her walk away. The astonishment in that new volunteer's eyes....

"She, she's..." he said, his mouth agape. "She's *pretty!*"

Memory is a layered mound of moments. Selena came, apparently, before I did. One evening, after an intense series of appetizers plus dessert, she looked down at my naked body and her eyes opened wide.

“*Ainda!*” she said with a clenched fist.

I smiled back; irrefutable hard evidence confirmed that I was *still* rarin’ for more.

One morning I woke up early and immediately felt homesick; there was a coolness in the air, almost like Labor Day Weekend in New York.

I got on my bike and rode around a deserted Cuiaba. No one on the streets anywhere. It was like a *Twilight Zone* episode: a lone, confused survivor trying to figure out what had happened to his world.

Everybody came to school late, bundled up under layers of clothing. By noon the temperature had doubled and all was normal again. Winter had come and gone in Cuiaba, Brazil. And it was a bad one!

Maria could throw tantrums, hitting other children or breaking things. I would then take her firmly by the hand and face her to a corner.

“Stay here...*alone*,” I’d command.

Going back to the others, I’d make an extra effort to have fun while listening for Maria’s frustrated grunts as she stomped her feet.

After maybe a couple of minutes, I’d call out with a happy tone, “Maria... *Maria!*”

She’d immediately bubble over, bounding joyfully to return to the group as if nothing had happened.

Maria’s father was long gone. Her mother was a drunken barfly who showed up at school only once and came on to me.

I’d taken so much for granted about Maria. The most important thing I ever taught her was how to use a device she was completely ignorant of: a toilet.

There came that night. After a wonderful work-out, a homemade dinner and a terrific dessert, Selena told me that she was leaving for Rio.

I looked into her eyes as I digested her words. A fantastic body and an incredible lover and I couldn't believe that I wasn't mustering up my copyrighted American charm to persuade her to stay.

No begging or pleading. I didn't even bother to lie.

A quickie good-bye and I never saw her again and was surprised how little I missed her. As sensuous as we had been, I hadn't touched Selena and her exotic beauty had aroused only the standard part of me.

After a week of preparation, the school was as ready as it could be for an inspection by APAE bigwigs from Brasilia. This would be the director's show and I knew better than to upstage her, retreating to watch from my room.

The teachers played the children like dogs in a carny act. With every trick, the visitors became more enthusiastic. Then one suggested that the children sing.

The national anthem or a popular tune?

Suddenly, Nevaldo jumped to his feet, spun around and sang out, "Who loves you, pretty baby!"

"Who's gonna help you through the night," the other children joined in, clapping their hands, and dancing. "Who loves you!"

I will always hear them.

The school must have gotten a grant from Brasilia: the director bought a fancy new couch for her office. She had two daughters who worked part-time at the school. Anna, the taller one, had a sneaky smile and a body the shape and shade of Beyonce's.

One afternoon, she got me aside.

"I have some marijuana," Anna whispered. "If I come back here tonight, we could experiment."

Getting high and experimenting' with the director's daughter? Would it be like pushing and pumping that long, heavy sofa through the tight front entrance of her mother's office? How blissfully satisfied the director had been when the deed was consummated. Her daughter would get so much luckier...only in my dreams, always worth having, sometimes with her older sister.

Anna was sixteen.

During the Cuiaba summer, every blade of grass in the city withered and disappeared. Leaves would shrivel up and drop from the trees like stones. May was rainy season, so wet the school would close. My first vacation' was spent on the Amazon, and I came back full of energy and enthusiasm for the new school year.

In 90 short minutes with the director and staff, every shred of hope had been sucked out of me. They just didn't get it. The APAI wasn't just a school. Together we were having an adventure!

My second vacation took me on a tour of the country. When I got back, I was determined that no one would dampen my spirits. In less than a half hour they had drained me dry.

But no way would I let the children find out.

The APAE got a new director, a man whose first task was showing the female teachers who the Alpha Male was, ordering me around in front of the staff just to watch me obey his strict guidelines, beginning with the removal of the swing which spoiled the esthetics of the school.

Not long after, one of the teachers showed up with her hands together as if praying and deep sadness in her eyes; over the weekend at the orphanage, Nevaldo had gotten sick and died.

Someone had bought him shoes to wear in an open coffin, but I couldn't bring myself to go to his wake. I will always see him smiling and hoped that before he passed away, he knew who loved him.

A week later I left the school and moved in with a couple of newly arrived Volunteers. For three months I taught English as a Second Language at the city university.

My last morning in Cuiaba was free. I'd packed up my bike the night before and my flight didn't leave till after lunch. Plenty of time to say my last good-bye.

Around the city, at the jagged edge of the rainforest, rotted the *barrios*, where no American would house a dead lawnmower. The roads were dirt. The homes were tacked together planks topped with sheet metal. Few had windows and fewer running water. Piles of garbage outnumbered streetlights 5 to 1; rats to people about the same.

I had a pretty good idea where I was going, but not exactly. The late morning sun began its baking as I pulled up in front of a clump of patchwork shacks.

"Maria...*Maria!*" I called in my happy tone.

When she came bounding out of the second one to the left, I realized what a selfish jerk I was! My wallet was full of *Cruzeiros*, Brazilian money that would be worthless in the US. Instead of spending them all on soccer shirts for myself later at the airport, I could have bought Maria...a toy, a doll, a pair of shoes, *something*. I've never forgiven myself

"Who loves you, Maria," I sang as I held her in my arms. "Who's always there to make it right!"

She made a grunt that almost sounded like a giggle.

Whatever I said after that I've forgotten in two languages. Maria tilted her grotesque head as if she could see me better one eye at a time. The indelible beauty within her touched me all over.

But I could do no more.

As I rode away, I heard her crying. I could look back only once. God only knows what happened to her.

I pedaled to the airport feeling that my life just might not work out as well as I would like. Sooner or later I knew that I would settle down, marry and maybe have a son and *teaching*. But if things went bad, what would I do? Would I have changed so much? Would life no longer be an adventure?

And if they got *real* bad?

Forty years later, wife and job gone, and now I've got cancer, stage four!

So I'm gonna feel sorry for myself?

Ainda!