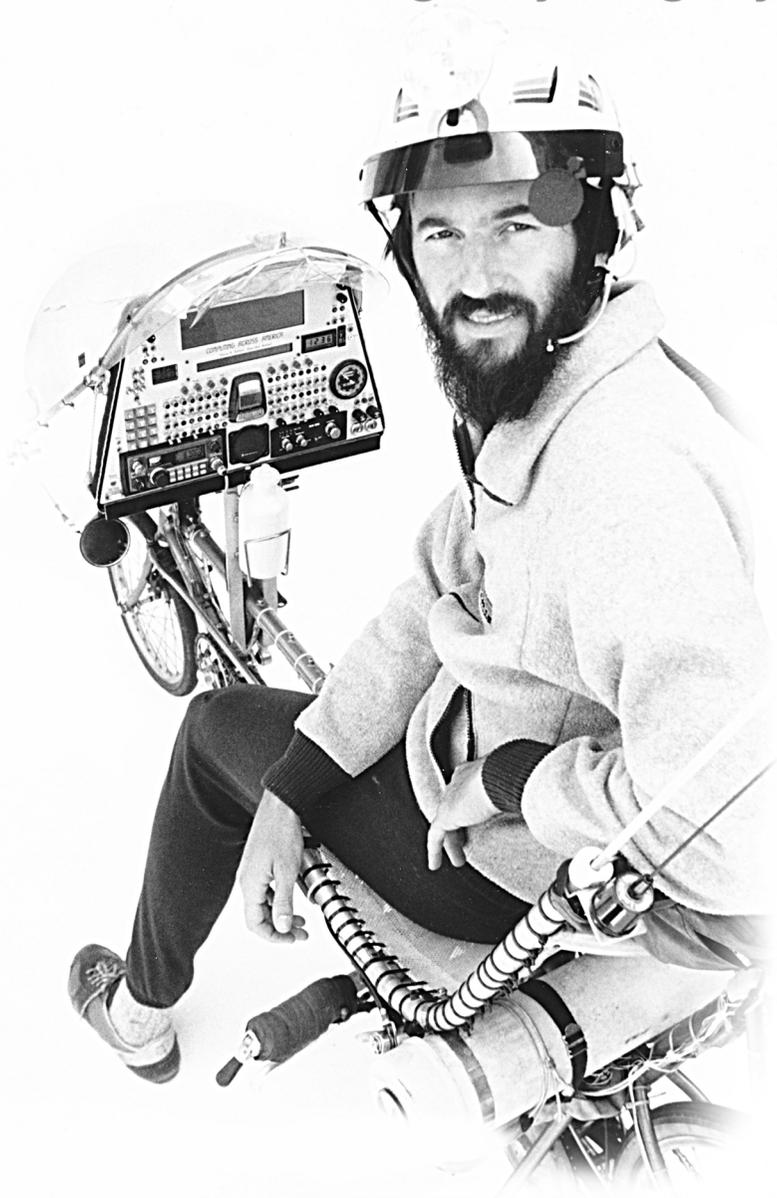


# High-Tech Nomad

17,000 miles on a geeky megacycle



**Steven K. Roberts**

# **High-Tech Nomad**

17,000 Miles on a Geeky Megacycle -  
Computing Across America

Steven K. Roberts

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# Sample Chapters

Welcome to the teaser edition of *High-Tech Nomad!*

At the moment (April 2014), I am writing about the first 10,000 miles aboard the lean recumbent nicknamed *Winnebiko*... I had not yet added a binary handlebar keyboard, satellite earth station, heads-up display, or any of the other gizmologically intense systems that rolled out of the Bikelab as 105-speed, 580-pound *BEHEMOTH* 8 years later.

This version of the book sample contains 3 chapters:

**The Idea is Born** — the epiphany that led to my developing a technomadic toolset and escaping suburbia.

**The Towpath** — an absurd and initially terrifying encounter with a group of convicts in the Maryland woods.

**An Awesome Voyage** — a somewhat prophetic adventure aboard a J36 racing yacht, making the leap from Key West to Clearwater to avoid backtracking on the Keys Highway.

As the book progresses, I will occasionally update this sample to include more (or different) chapters. I'm estimating the final size to be on the order of 1,000 pages, with extensive technical details in addition to road stories ranging from scary to the romantic.

You can sign up [to be notified of publication](#)<sup>1</sup>, and there is a [Facebook page](#)<sup>2</sup> for the book. I also have an [archive of articles](#)<sup>3</sup> and other material referenced via footnotes throughout the book.

Warm cheers from *s/v Nomadness*

— Steve

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<sup>1</sup><https://leanpub.com/technomad>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.facebook.com/technomadness>

<sup>3</sup><http://microship.com/articles>

# 1 – The Idea is Born

*What's the matter Steve? You going to be a bum all your life?*

— Phyllis Roberts (my mother)

Suburbia is not a place; it is a state of mind.

It has little to do with the section of town you happen to live in; it has nothing to do with the size of your paycheck. It runs rampant in some places and lends its name to whole neighborhoods, but the meaning of the word “suburbia” has outgrown the civic jargon of which it was born.

You live in suburbia when the cycle of work and play becomes dangerously unbalanced in favor of work. You live there when your success is measured by dollars instead of happiness, when the demands of your lifestyle force you into an ongoing upward career struggle. And you are suburbanite when *change*, *evolution*, and *growth* start to sound more like counterculture concepts than the basic objectives of daily living.

Suburbia can happen anywhere, for it has almost become the default mode of this insane world. It can happen to anyone, and it happened to me.

I was slow to notice, of course. I spoke glibly of the deepening economic spiral of my life in terms of “cash flow” and “debt capital.” I waved at my Dublin, Ohio, neighbors, but after four years didn’t really know them. I worked on my writing, calling it “freelancing” while requiring an absurd \$3,000 a month to stay afloat. I wasted time endlessly yet was unable to take a vacation, for recreation was just a time of nervous guilt over uncompleted projects.

Dissatisfaction mounted. I kept rearranging the office and drafting business plans — but the stagnation deepened, punctuated by dreams of escape and travel. I fought my way from one monthly crisis to the next while managing to look *successful* to the rest of the world.

“Hey, wow, you’re a writer!” someone would say. “What kind of stuff do you write?”

“Oh, mostly high-tech — three books on computers, magazine articles about artificial intelligence and micros, stuff like that. I also do technical writing and consulting for a few corporate clients.”

“Man... what a life. I really envy you. It must give you a lot of freedom.”

“Yeah, freelancing is a license to be a generalist. There’s nothing I’d rather do for a living.”

*(Except play.)*

One afternoon in the spring of 1983, I went for a bicycle ride with Walt Spicker, an engineer at the Anatec division of Atlantic Richfield. For a year or more the company had been my sugar daddy, paying me a healthy hourly rate to write documentation and sales literature for their line of industrial process control systems. Walt and I had struck up an early friendship, and we crossed paths every few days to cycle the lazy farm roads, swap engineering war stories, and swill gin-and-tonics until we began stumbling into each other and talking about women.

Off we went into the flat corn country west of town, pedaling away the routine frustrations while idly discussing the latest hirings and firings. We were on Avery Road, an hour into the ride, when something strange appeared in my rearview mirror and began to gain on us.

I didn’t know yet that my life was about to change its course, that a nexus was upon me.

The apparition — half human, half machine — slowly grew in the mirror. “Walt,” I said at last, “I think were about to be passed by a recumbent.”

“Aw, Roberts, the election’s not till November.”

But the image kept getting larger, soon revealing itself to be a distinguished-looking graybeard on an Avatar — Robby McCormick riding a low-slung black bicycle that looked like a sleek lawn chair on wheels.

He pedaled comfortably alongside us, gnarled legs out in front of his body, weathered hands resting on grips below the sling seat. He grinned and called a greeting to us two youngsters hunched awkwardly over old-fashioned ten-speeds.

We plied him with questions. “How much faster is it? How about stability at higher speeds? How is it for touring? Is visibility a problem? How much does it cost? Are there any discomforts? Ever have trouble with dogs? Do you ever actually *get* anywhere, or do you spend too much time answering questions?”

Robby chatted easily as we cruised along, informing us that in the three years he had owned Avatar serial #1, he had put over 18,000 miles on it. No more back problems or strain: this energetic 65-year-old was averaging more than 500 miles a month and loving it.



*Aboard the Avatar*

I started dropping hints, and he finally asked with a laugh if I’d like to give it a try. We swapped machines.

I pushed off with my left leg and immediately realized just how

alien a balancing act this was. A bicycle? With a succession of wild over-compensations, I swerved from one side of the road to the other, more than once dropping a foot to the pavement to prevent the embarrassment of crashing this enchanting \$2,000 instrument.

But then it started to make sense, and the corrections became smaller — a biological closed-loop control system being brought into tune. Within moments I was exploring the gears and zipping along with a healthy tailwind, exuberant, excited, moved even to whoops of delight. Instead of perching on a tiny hard seat, I leaned back in a comfortable sling; instead of having to strain my neck to look around, I could take in the scenery as if relaxing in a rolling easy chair (a bike-a-lounger?). My hands hung at my sides, resting lightly on responsive handlebars. It was beautiful.

Robby huffed alongside on my red antique, looking a bit absurd on the giraffe frame (I'm six feet four). His hips swiveled in a parody of the hula while I cruised in luxury.

“Like it?” he asked.

I laughed out loud. “Like it? I think I'm in love! Where do I sign?”

I climbed back on my suddenly boring Miyata and rode along in silence while Walt gave it a try. Like a tiny revolution, something was fomenting in my brain, something radical and insane and somehow exactly right. I was almost afraid to recognize it, but a great understanding was dawning; with a sudden maniacal grin I poured the power to the pedals and left my friends far behind.

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It was the memory of a grand scheme, the almost violent recurrence of a fantasy I had entertained off and on for a decade. An idea was crashing the quiet gates of suburban complacency, tempting me with sweet mad images of exotic adventure. This would be my way out: I'd get rid of everything, move to a recumbent bicycle, and travel the world.

Yeah...

Actually, I had tried before. Over the years I had collected travel brochures, maps, and random bits of touring gear. At times of stress the idea would resurface — usually dying quietly after a few minutes thought; sometimes sending me on month-long dead-end projects of trip preparation. But always there had been one basic problem: no money.

Well, there was still no money — but I had a plan.

After Robby bid us farewell and turned south toward his Arlington home, Walt caught up with me. “Alright, Roberts. What the hell kinda crazy caper you cooking up over there?”

“Why, Walt, what do you mean?” (Was I *that* transparent?)

“I know that look in your eyes. You’re either thinking about starting a business or planning on writing a book. And they probably both have something to do with recumbents.”

I spoke through my panting with quiet conviction. “Walt, I’m never spending another winter in Columbus. I’m going to build a recumbent and take my writing business on the road.”

“Yeah, right. I can see you dragging an office around the country in a bicycle trailer.”

“It wouldn’t have to be *that* big. All I need is a portable computer and a base office here in Columbus. I shouldn’t even have to carry a disk drive, since I can transmit copy to my home system, whenever I get done editing it — and I can use the CompuServe network to take care of daily business communications. Walt,” I added, looking around at the beginnings of sunset coloring the sky over bare cornfields, “I really could live like this.”

“I’m sure you could. Until the money ran out.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Look Steve, in the year I’ve known you I’ve heard more harebrained schemes than I can even remember. There’s only one thing that’s gonna get your ass outta debt, and that’s work.”

“I’m talking about working.”

“No, you’re talking about playing — which ain’t a bad idea at all if you can get some sucker to pay you for it. But don’t hold your breath.”

“Man, it can work. All that overpriced house in Dublin is good for is giving me a place to keep my junk, of which I have far too much. I’m a struggling single *writer* — why the hell do I need a three-bedroom ranch on an acre in suburbia?”

He took a swig from his water bottle and replaced it in its cage with nary a glitch in his pedal cadence. “I can’t argue that point, but I still don’t think you’re gonna pull off this crazy trip. I give you about a week to get over it.”

“I’m serious about this one, Walt.”

“I’m sure you are.”

I grinned over at him. “Well then, how do you feel about getting together on a recumbent-creation project?”

“Now that might be interesting. Wouldn’t mind having one o’ them things myself!” And with a hearty wave, he veered off for dinner, pedaling alone the last mile to his beautiful wife, devastatingly cute little girl, and comfortable home.

I rode slowly back to my cluttered house: a place of unfinished projects, overflowing office, dirty dishes, tall grass, dust, and around-the-clock computer-cooling fans. I left the bike in the yard, walked in, grabbed a beer, and slumped on the couch with the cat on my lap. In my thoughts I soared down mountain roads, sailed along in balmy ocean tailwinds, and cavorted with campus beauties all across the US of A.

My present life felt like prison.

I was ready to escape. The certainty was growing so fast that it frightened me. For most of my adult life I had been a homeowner, an entrepreneur, a technophile, a collector of trappings. My living room was office and library — a place of file cabinets, thousands of books, photocopier, computer systems, steel desks, and clutter. The rest of the house was crammed to the rafters with tons of crap, none of which seemed at all important in the context of life on a bicycle.



*My suburban livingroom*

I would have to trash my lifestyle while still living it. The Idea was only ninety minutes old and I was already cataloging the myriad tasks that lay ahead.

The phone rang. A willowy friend from Marysville invited me to a cookout in the

country, offering that always welcome alternative to work. Without so much as a nod to the looming deadlines, I showered and dressed while fantasies of the road swirled in my head — along with the rapidly growing certainty that this could actually happen. I climbed into the leased Rabbit GTI (complete with a vanity license plate: **WORDY**), and drove through Dublin’s cute old-fashioned shopping district, then past the gas stations and onto the highway.

There. On the radio. I turned it up.

The voice was haunting, lonely, free. “My love is in league with the freeway. Its passion will rise as the cities fly by...” A guitar, articulate and clear, spoke with a sort of measured mournfulness yet came across as energetic, the blues of the highway, a perfect complement to The Idea. It was the birth of a theme song. I turned it up further.

“Distance and longing, my thoughts do collide — should I rest for a while beside...” My vision fogged; the song was conjuring poignant

images of travel.

“Leading me on, leading me down the road.” Robert Plant called eloquently to the traveler awakening within me, and bid him arise and flourish. I glanced up at the Escort radar detector to make sure it was on, then pushed the speedometer to eighty, high on movement, high on the dream, high on US Route 33. The miles drifted softly by... and I could have driven forever.

But here was the Marysville exit, and there was Madelaine, and before long the evening was in full swing. Small talk and big talk; barbecue and video games; a country house and strangers meeting. But as the night grew colder, action withdrew to the living room and the keg, focusing the voices and stinging cigarette smoke onto far too small an area. Impatient with the oppressive air and bored with conversation, I strolled alone to the campfire.

Perched on an upended piece of cordwood, I gazed into the dancing flames. I could have been anywhere. I fancied myself alone in the high Sierras, contemplating the ancient mysteries of fire after a hearty freeze-dried meal.

Yes, goddammit, yes! I would sell the clutter of my life. I would unload it all with a massive garage sale, then use the money to build and outfit a recumbent bicycle — including a portable computer for word processing and communications. A base office would be necessary, so I would find an assistant and a suitable workplace. I’d develop some new magazine markets, locate a New York agent to help line up a good deal, and, well, everything seemed so clear there in the flames that I was impatient to get on with it.

I wanted to escape as soon as possible: I sat in the starry night and visualized myself rolling off into the West on my tattered red swivel chair, dragging the clinking remnants of the bonds that had kept me chained to my desk for so many years. A laptop computer with a modem would be my link to the universe — inhaling and exhaling mail, articles, and maybe even a book.

Now and again people dropped by my little oasis of Deep Thought on the edge of the tame Ohio woods — perhaps bringing me another beer, perhaps just curious about the silent brooding back hunched alone by the fire out there in the dark. How could a guy stay so long away from this six-foot longhaired beauty giggling at a Space Invaders video game? Who is he anyway? He's sure an antisocial sonofabitch...

I sipped my beer absently, thinking about bicycle lights and sources of electrical power (solar? hmm...), camping gear, file-handling, small-town cash transfers, frame geometry, and how the hell I was going to get everything ready before winter. Sometimes I just visualized a US map and dreamed; sometimes I frowned at the immediate and difficult problems. But never did I question the Idea; I just tossed another log on now and then as the hours passed.

Back home alone at 3 a.m., I blearily looked about in my garage. There it was, buried in mostly unnecessary junk and harboring a few spring spiders. There. Its legs were bent, but it would do for starters. I dusted it off and refreshed the phone number with a black felt pen. Leftover from the last attempt at escape, it was about to sway once again in the gusty breezes of passing cars.

Holding the flashlight in my teeth and shivering with more than chill, I planted the sign in my front yard:

**FOR SALE BY OWNER**

764-8836

Preparations had begun.

# 11 – The Towpath

*Grub first, then ethics.*

– Bertolt Brecht

I paused after the long climb on Maryland’s US40 to gaze at the sign and ponder the feelings a driver might experience when deciding whether to “ditch” his truck off the side of a mountain:

## **ALL TRUCKS STOP**

**STEEP DOWNGRADE NEXT 9 MILES  
THROUGH HEAVILY CONGESTED AREA.  
DESCEND IN LOWER GEAR UNTIL NOTIFIED.  
IF BRAKES FAIL, DITCH TRUCK IMMEDIATELY.  
PROCEED WITH CARE**

I gave a light push and coasted on.

At Frostburg College, my dining-hall routine netted an evening of computer-talk and dorm life – the experience as identical to the other colleges as it was different. Staying at a succession of campuses is like listening to *Pictures at an Exhibition* performed by The Philadelphia Orchestra; Emerson, Lake, and Palmer; and Isao Tomita.

Morning: bright cold sunshine, glittering on the frosty campus. The fall colors were gone on these higher elevations, the trees bare in mid-October. Students enroute to early class puffed along in little huddles, books gripped slippery under nylon parka sleeves.

Over breakfast, my host asked about my route for the day.

“It looks like my only real choice is to stay on US40,” I told him with a shrug of resignation. “I’m not too thrilled about it, but the only alternatives involve worse stuff down in West Virginia.”

“Why — what’s wrong with the towpath?”

“The what?”

“The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal towpath — hell, it’ll take you all the way into the middle of D.C. without climbing a single hill!”

This didn’t seem possible. “A path? Like a hiking trail? Nah, this isn’t much of an off-road bike.”

“I don’t know, man. A lot of people do it on ten-speeds. They call it a hiker-biker trail, or something like that. Check it out — it starts in Cumberland and runs along the Potomac all the way.”

Within the hour, I had ridden gravity the rest of the way to Cumberland, asked around a bit, and wheeled the bike between the posts of a “car filter” to begin riding this historic route — a deep dip into American history. Way back in grade school I heard about this canal — but like everything else it had seemed irrelevant and impossibly remote.

Opened in 1850 after decades of grueling construction and cost overruns, this 184-mile thoroughfare was a key commerce route before being obsoleted by newer freight-handling methods. Until its closure in the 1920’s, it carried coal and other cargo between Cumberland and Washington D.C., making and destroying fortunes in the process. [The canal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chesapeake_and_Ohio_Canal)<sup>4</sup> is a masterpiece of hydrological engineering, and elegant lift locks, gates, tunnels, and waste weirs still stand in testimony to the ingenuity of the designers and the sweat of the laborers.

The gravel towpath alongside the canal was for the mules, which pulled the barges through this ruggedly beautiful country. But the

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<sup>4</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chesapeake\\_and\\_Ohio\\_Canal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chesapeake_and_Ohio_Canal)

canal shut down in 1924 and has since become a national park with campsites offering toilets, drinking water, and firewood.

I removed my helmet and rode into the woods with the rare sense of relaxation that comes from no traffic, no concrete, no neon, and no signs but for little wooden mile markers beside the leaf-strewn path. The going was smooth in most places, though occasional hidden tree roots tossed me off the ground to fall with a fishtailing jolt back into whispering leaves.

I maintained a stable 13 mph through all this, delighting in the sun-mottled fall colors: after the barren branches of Frostburg, I seemed to be turning back the seasonal clock. The Potomac sparkled through the trees to my right, and I was often startled by flashing white tails as deer took flight through the woods. Such sweet relief from the noise and exhaust of the highway — I savored the wind in my hair, the smells of the forest, and the tangible sense of history permeating the place.

After a few hours of this cycling dream, I rode through a 3,000-foot tunnel as spooky as it was picturesque, recalling tales of the feuds and brutal labor that had been involved in its construction. Knocking five miles off the route dictated by the serpentine Potomac, this hole through Paw-Paw hill had become the most legendary feature of the canal. In close blackness pierced only by my headlight and a distant dot of afternoon sun, I saw rope burns on the railing, weep holes on the walls; I strained to hear the echoes of turn-of-the-century mule-drawn barges. Abstract textbook history was taking on dimension.



*Entering the Paw-Paw Tunnel*

This was all very stirring, but it was time to seek a place to sleep. I stopped at one of the well-maintained camping areas lying along this cycle-touring bonanza and found that a pedaling couple had already arrived.

I joined them and pitched my tent, creating a high-tech campsite that contrasted visibly with their economy shelter and heavy bikes. We pooled our resources toward the creation of dinner, firing up identical Swedish firebombs to yield a feast of chicken casserole, corn, and more. Then, feeling the ghosts of long-dead barge captains swirling through silent midnight air, I zipped myself in.

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I awoke in the mist of morning, the river an unseen whispering presence. Trees floated in the ghostly blanket of fog, and even my own sounds were hushed by the heavy air. Not wanting to wake my neighbors in their barely visible sagging tent, I decided to skip breakfast and hit the trail.

But everything in my life, it seems, now had zippers on it. The complete touring system included roughly ninety-two feet of the stuff, and as I broke camp their sounds knifed cleanly through the soup: sleeping bag zipper, tent door, tent fly, packs, briefcase, jacket. Everything sent out little zizzing signals that slowly penetrated the brain of the snoring camper a few feet away. I heard a stir.

And then a zipper.

I looked over as a shaggy head emerged from the tent and peered about in squinting confusion. “What’s going on out here, man, it sounds like a troop o’ Boy Scouts takin’ a leak!”

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On the move. I bid my friends farewell and set out, hungry but energized by the brisk morning. Through heavy forest and open fields, over surprise bridges and deeper into the mountains I went. I saw not a soul, and passed by Hancock enjoying the ride far too much to stop for breakfast. I munched a granola bar and moved on, catching glimpses of I-70 running parallel with the canal between Hancock and Big Pool. There was almost a sense of cheating, so easy was this languid passage through the country I had feared. With every glance at the superhighway through a clearing, I was reminded that all the world is not as idyllic as this quiet path.

I was glad to be where I was.

Suddenly I saw it: the remains of a recent accident. It had been a bad one — a twisted 18-wheeler lay broken in the ditch, its cargo a splat on the hillside. Police lights flashed. The wreckage chilled me, for nobody could easily survive such a disaster: nearby there had been agony or even death, casting a morbid pall over a day of such gentle calm that it could have materialized from a Bambi film.

I stopped, half-curious, half-depressed. I was just taking a swig from my water bottle and reaching for the camera when I heard a rustle in the leaves behind me.

“What the hell’s *this*?” asked a deep black voice before I could finish turning around. Five men emerged from the forest — five big men, tough-looking and clearly no strangers to violence. Four were black, the fifth a burly redhead. One was clad in black shirt, black pants, and black skullcap, with only a gold tooth to reflect the soft woodland sunlight. The man who had spoken was a giant, matching my six-foot-four height but possessing half again the mass — all muscle.

I grinned uneasily. “Uh... Hi... This is a bicycle. I’m riding across the United States, and it’s kinda like a race, so I gotta go now...”

Gold Tooth interrupted me, his voice an odd mix of curiosity and low menace. “You got a gun on that thing, man?”

“Uh, well, I thought about it, but decided it would just get me in trouble.”

“I heard *that*,” a third replied. “You don’ wanna be messin’ with no fuckin’ gun, man. Them muthafuckahs get you fifteen years in Maryland, man. Fifteen fuckin’ *yeahs*.” He grinned savagely and jabbed himself in the chest with a calloused black thumb. “Just ask *me!*”

In the ensuing moment of silence, a bird called out brightly — a high, free sound — a cheerful tweet hidden somewhere in the brilliant autumn foliage.

Of course I had to ask. “So, ah, where you guys from, anyway?”

The redhead guffawed. “Hell, we’re *convicts*, man, from the Maryland Correctional Institute up at Hagerstown.”

“I see. You escaping, or what?”

He grinned and started to reply, but the giant laid a strong hand on my shoulder and interrupted. “I think we oughta fix our travelin’ man *up* here, don’t you?”

There were murmurs of assent, and — unable to effectively protest — I set off with them into the woods, glancing back nervously at

my exotic bike suddenly all alone on that oh-so-scenic C&O Canal towpath.

We headed toward the highway, then through the trees I saw a yellow truck with an official seal on the door. A lean cop with a shotgun half-dozed on the hood, and some other convicts moved about casually.

“So, uh, you guys a work-release crew?” I asked tentatively.

“You got it, my man. We here to clean up that semi what roll down the hill over there.” We were still walking, not toward the prison truck but into the woods, away from the others and further from the somehow-reassuring cop.

We came to a clearing, safely out of sight of the road. No trucking company officials or police would find us here, and the giant glanced quickly around before leading me to a lumpy mound concealed in the bushes. It was about three feet tall and covered with a musty canvas tarp, and the six of us stood around it for a moment in silence. Another bird tweeted.

In a voice low and conspiratorial, the giant identified the contraband. “Our stash, man,” he said, “the truck was *full* of this shit.” My eyes widened as he bent to pull back the musty canvas. Now what was I getting into? Would I be living with these guys soon?

With a flourish he whipped the tarp aside. There, right there on the ground before me, close enough to touch, was a huge mound of Sara Lee pastries. There must have been two or three hundred boxes — a sweet-tooth’s dream, a pastry fantasy. A Sara Lee truck? On a day without breakfast? I shook my head and salivated.

The giant bent to pick up a box, then shoved it into my hands. “Have some walnut cake, my man,” he said in a powerful voice. “This shit’s excellent.”

Gold Tooth stepped forward. “Oh man, you don’ wanna be messin’ with no goddamn walnut cake. You want cheese danish, man,

cheese danish—*that's* where it's at." Another box plopped onto the first.

The redhead handed me another. "Hey, you want some of these apple things, buddy?"

And so the pile in my arms grew — as I stood in the Maryland woods with murderers and bank robbers who began arguing over the relative merits of various pastries. "How can you eat that shit?" said one to another. "Check *these* out, man, there ain't even no compar'son." The food had thawed since the wreck, and beads of moisture covered the supermarket-bright boxes in my arms. A brown maple leaf clung to a package of pecan coffee cake.

Trying to contain a crazy laugh that was fighting to escape, I said, "Wait a minute, I'm on a bicycle! I can't carry all this!"

"Let's go," said the giant.

So back we went to the towpath — back to the bike standing untouched at the center of a small circle of convicts. They laughed at our approach. "Hey, the dude got him a stash o' Sara Lee, man! Yeah, check it out! Mo'fo' be ridin' two thousan' *miles* on that!" They plucked the pile of boxes out of my arms and squeezed them under bungee cords, behind the seat, between the packs, everywhere.

I started struggling with a box of apple danish, at last securing it under a bungee cord. The giant grabbed the walnut cake. "Gimme that!" He stuffed it between the fairing and the electronics package on the front of the machine. "Don't worry, it'll stay."

We said our goodbyes, with elaborate three-stage handshakes all around. I was slapped on the back, given the thumbs-up sign, and wished luck. And as I rolled along the towpath once again, festooned with pastries, I looked for all the world like a bizarre commercial for Sara Lee.

"I've already met a lot of strange people on this trip," I mused, munching cheese danish through a sunny clearing. "But so far, the convicts take the cake."



*The C&O Canal Towpath from the seat of the Winnebiko*

## 21 – An Awesome Voyage

*I'm just a son of a son, son of a son,  
son of a son of a sailor.  
The sea's in my veins, my tradition remains—  
I'm just glad I don't live in a trailer.*

— Jimmy Buffet, “Son of a Son of a Sailor”

**January, 1984.** I wandered the docks of Fort Zachary Taylor with a yellow plastic band affixed to my wrist — one of those crimp-on ID bracelets they hang on newborns and corpses. In a sense, this was a rite of passage as well: I had tired of my decadent tropical interlude and now looked out to sea. It was time to move on.

But acquiring that little yellow bracelet had not been easy. It was a closed party there on the sun-drenched docks: A yacht race was inbound from Fort Lauderdale and they couldn't have the teeming masses getting in everybody's way. To pass through the gates of this old Navy base for the occasion, you had to have both money and connections — a tricky combination for a broke nomad.

The connections were easy enough. Ken Burgess, who had let me stay on his boat for a couple of days, not only hobnobbed in the local yachting culture but also carried a military ID. But the other problem was a little harder: Even though the price of admission was embarrassingly low — like \$15 — I didn't have it.

It was time to hustle some cash.

In a tourist-oriented place like Key West, anything out of the ordinary can be elevated to street theater. I had occasionally joked about cruising Sunset, passing the helmet for donations — so what

the hell. Desperate times, desperate measures. I pedaled over to Mallory Square and began the show-n-tell, my helmet upside-down on the seat and primed with a dollar bill.

Within minutes, I had an audience. In a stage voice, I spoke of Sara Lee pastries, high winds, and lowlife guitar-swingers; I held high the computer while rhapsodizing theatrically about the Miracles of Modern Technology. I told a Miami lawyer what kind of computer to buy, turned a Houston engineer on to CompuServe, and put a wide-eyed Boston cyclist in touch with Jack the framebuilder.

Then I pedaled away in the dark with \$34.80 in my pocket, wondering why I hadn't thought of this a week earlier.

So there I was, a wealthy man at last, standing beside my freshly polished bike on the dock. I waited for the influx of fellow yachties, knowing that before sunset I would have water passage to somewhere.



*Trolling for a boat ride*

The first ship in, by a comfortable margin, was *Thursday's Child* — a sleek 60-footer designed for the staggering feat of singlehanded

transatlantic racing (she later broke *Flying Cloud's* New York to San Francisco record around Cape Horn by 8 days in 1989). Her decks were covered with solar panels, and all control lines terminated in a maze of winches and cleats at the helm. I gaped. As fellow users of photovoltaics, wouldn't the owners of this half-million dollar beauty invite me aboard for a ride?

They didn't, but the afternoon was yet young. The docks grew crowded as boats poured in amid scattered cheers. Rafted three deep along the walls, they bobbed gently in the harbor: *Motivation*, *Sinbad*, *Go For It*, *Puff* — all told, some \$25 million worth of wind-powered hardware. Crews scurried about in tired jubilation, stowing sails, coiling lines, and hoisting high their beers in the eternal camaraderie of the sea. No... it wouldn't take long.

I kept up a banter with the circle of bike-admirers and soon met Bob Horst — bald on top, silver on the sides, dark-moustached in front. He eyed the *Computing Across America* logo emblazoned across my fairing in patriotic colors, and with a twinkle in his eye began asking well-informed questions.

He mentioned that he owned not only an Apple Lisa and a Minneapolis computer store, but also a J36 racing yacht known as the *Awesome!* As soon as I spoke of my quest, he offered a lift to his home port of Clearwater. But where to stow the bike? We popped open a couple of beers and talked it over.

"How about here?" I asked, pointing at a long open area along the railing near the well-instrumented helm. It looked easy enough to me.

He squinted at me critically. "You ever sailed before?"

"Well, Hobies..."

"You don't want *anything* in the way back here." He gestured to the winches. "It can get pretty busy."

"OK, how 'bout up there on the foredeck?"

“Two problems. Your bike will get drenched in saltwater, and it’ll get in the way of the jib. No, I think the stern’s our only hope.”

I looked, aghast, at the stern. The only way my eight-foot bike was going to fit *there* was on the outside of the rail, lashed to the ladder. My heart sank — which is exactly what I figured the bike would do the moment the first big wave came along. Filled with misgivings, I finished my beer and pedaled off in search of plastic sheeting, packing tape, and WD-40. And Dramamine — just in case.

I showed up at the dock the next morning, already imagining the professional diving operation that would be required to rescue my barnacle-encrusted Winnebiko from the murk of the Gulf floor. My job was to soak the machine down with WD-40 to protect the metal from salt water, then wrap the whole thing in polyethylene and tape securely. We would then tie the package on the back of the boat and hope it wouldn’t fall off. The harbor was peaceful, but NOAA weather radio spoke of 8-12 foot seas and 20-30 knot winds out in the open Gulf.

But after reconsidering the problem, we discovered that the bike might fit — just barely — in the forward cabin. We removed the wheels, flagpoles, and map case, then squeezed it down the hatch. With considerable juggling and teak-scratching we wrestled it through the galley and past the head, stuffing it at last into the starboard sail compartment. Much better. The bike would have to withstand two days of violent pounding, so I tucked my gear around it, padded it with everything from sail bags to towels, and lashed it down.

And we were off — motoring out of the Key West harbor, avoiding the brown water of shallow shoals while hoisting the canvas. The storm jib was used in anticipation of heavy weather, and I set to work on the tasks assigned: this wasn’t to be a free ride.

“What kinda knot you want in here?” I hollered above the wind as I straddled the open hatch and wrestled with the job of tying up the mainsail at its second reef point.

“Put any kind of knot in there you want. Put in the kind you wanna take out at 3 a.m., ‘cause when I can’t get it out, I’m gonna call ya!” The speaker was Mike, a rugged Tom Selleck sort with a quick grin, turtleneck sweater, and yellow boots. In the pecking order that was established, he was number two, followed by his wife Marcia, sandy-haired collegiate Dave, and finally me. Their objective was to quickly train me so they could get a decent night’s sleep after three days of racing and partying.

I had to ask how to do everything — turn on a light, tie a knot, use the head. That last item turned out to be more of a challenge than I would have imagined, for as the sea grew rougher it became nigh impossible to remain standing anywhere in the bow. Imagine: crouched in a tiny room with knees, ass, head, and arms braced hard against the walls, one hand trying desperately to aim at a little stainless-steel bowl while everything moves, including my dizzy perceptions. And just when I decide to cut loose, a big wave hits and the whole affair flies ten feet skyward, hovers for a sickening moment, then drops with a mighty <CRACK>. In the sudden need to avoid serious personal injury, some things have to take a back seat. Perhaps that’s why there’s a floor drain in there.

I was trained on the helm while it was still light (and while we were



*Bike stowed in the forepeak*

still in the relative calm of the channel). “Hey, this is a piece of cake,” I remember thinking. “Don’t know why all the fuss about storm jibs and reef points. I feel like an idiot in this life jacket...” I took a salty sip of beer, blinked away the beginnings of mild queasiness, and surreptitiously ate a Dramamine. Just in case.



*The Skipper*

The helmsman’s job is simple: hold the course. There was a big compass right in front of the wheel, and without any visual reference points on the horizon all I had to do was keep the needle pointed at 345°. No problem — but for the fact that a thirty-six-foot sailboat

doesn’t respond instantaneously to rudder movement. My first watch was an erratic sinewave of wild overcompensations, a large wet version of that ride, long ago and far away, on Robby McCormick’s strange low-slung bicycle.

“This is a little easier than riding the bike, eh?” called Bob, as a colorless dusk descended like a heavy pall of smoke.

I raised my thumb.

“I don’t know,” said Mike. “I think we oughta get him up there on the foredeck with his bike, pedalin’ away. Give us some more power.”

I chuckled at the thought. “Maybe with a big propeller I could keep this baby moving on windless days.” It was hard to imagine a lack of wind — spray was breaking over the bow and covering us with a sheen of seawater. The triangle of white canvas snapped hard, pulling us into open water at six to seven knots. I looked around and saw only water, sky, and the occasional color-coded styrofoam marker of a lobster pot bobbing in the swells.

“You better get some sleep,” Bob told me, taking the wheel. “And

get your foul-weather gear together — you're on at 3 o'clock and it's gonna be cold."

I crawled below and rooted queasily about, trying to find all the Gore-tex and polypropylene clothing that I had tucked around my bike. I lurched and spun, the experience of moving about in the tiny hold a crazy one of disorienting sensations. I fought for control over my confused vestibular system and laughed out loud down in the violently pitching bow.

Back in the pilot berth, my bundle of clothing ready for the graveyard shift, I stretched out on a narrow bunk and tried to relax. The thought of actually sleeping under these conditions seemed absurd: sounds of gurgling and splashing surrounded me; the metallic crunch of sail-winchings just over my head startled me; the creaks of stressed materials raised questions about the structural integrity of the ship. Sleep?

But it didn't take long. Somewhere in a dream squawked a marine weather forecast — the businesslike voice I had been hearing for decades on my shortwave radio now laden with personal significance. Those weren't just numbers anymore, I thought, as I lay there listening to the guy talk about squall lines. I dozed again, dreaming of adding LORAN-C to my bicycle and schooning across the prairies under a great blue spinnaker. It seemed only moments later that a hand shook my leg.

"Steve? You're on. Hold course at 345, and if it gets bad, just let out the main a bit. Kill the autohelm as soon as you get up there — it sucks down the battery — and holler for Marcia at five. And use the safety harness!"

"OK," I said with simulated confidence. "Good night."

I dressed and emerged into the chill, snapping my harness to the high starboard railing. This safety measure no longer seemed superfluous, for the craft leaned dramatically to port, driven by a gusty sidewind of twenty to twenty-five knots. I stood with one

foot on the slippery rail only inches above rushing froth. My hands, numbing already, gripped the wheel; my eyes flicked over the instruments in semi-comprehension. For a while I struggled to hold the course, but then I began to relax, flowing with the motion of the boat. Before long I forgot my fear that the whole mess would tip over and dump us sputtering and gasping into the cold water, and soon the violent sea started to feel natural... then exhilarating... then alive and part of me like a billion windblown gallons of pure high-octane adrenalin.

I felt the rhythm of the elements and learned to move with them in unconscious synchrony — free of the need to concentrate on wheel and compass, I grew enchanted by the scene. With every lurch, water broke around me in a phosphorescent spray, illuminated by the red and green lights of the bow. The white light of the stern set our turbulent wake aglow, and on the crest of a swell I could occasionally see the lonesome lights of a shrimper plying the waters far off to port. Overhead was the mainsail, a five-story sculpture of fabric glowing pale in the moonlight and propelling us across the water like a silent ghostly engine.

The moon was three days past full, and it played tag with those bright, swift clouds that always seem to make people shiver and mumble something about Sleepy Hollow. And stars — lots of stars. The sky was bright and dramatic, and I flashed the universe a “thumbs-up.”

Suddenly a wraithlike bird — or something — zipped overhead so fast that it was gone before I could finish raising my head. Staring up, I caught a meteor in the act. I looked back down to the instruments, which glowed orange in the night while reporting the observations of ever-vigilant computers and sensors. Everything, on and off the boat, was alive and changing — a secure feeling of high-tech here in the wild, ancient element of the sea.

Salt in my beard. Cold wind, numb hands, hawsers snapping. Endless sea, endless sky. There was a sweet loneliness about it,

the occasional light of that distant shrimper only intensifying the sensation of being on our own and exquisitely removed from civilization. Of course, we were hardly out of touch: one flick of the switch on the EPIRB and we would look like a five-alarm fire as far as the Coast Guard was concerned. But still... we were alone. I savored the notion, standing proudly at the wheel and scanning the distant horizon as if watching for the shores of a New World.

Then my watch ended.

And ended.

I tried to call out above the roar of the elements, but despite a full bladder and serious weariness I was loathe to turn over the helm to Marcia. It was a night of perfection, a dramatic transition between the languor of the islands and the madness of the highway. I stopped my hollering and stayed on till sunrise.

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The day began as a vaguely discernible light in the eastern sky, growing paler and paler until the heavens and reflecting waters were a single vast palette of glowing pastels. Charcoal clouds scudded through pinks and yellows, backlit gloriously until the sun suddenly popped into the scene to render sharp shadows where a moment before had been only softness. Venus, which had sparkled like a well-lit diamond, winked out abruptly.

Then I heard the unfamiliar luffing of the sail, took a quick look at the compass, and realized that I had stopped paying attention and was now wandering all over the Gulf of Mexico. I made an abrupt 60° course correction just as Marcia emerged from the hatch to take my place. Oops — er, good morning.



*Bob Horst and the Awesome!*

It was a day of bright sun and lazy conversation. Our steady tack brought us within twenty miles of the Florida coast, where the water was considerably calmer. By evening, conditions were so stable that even the hundredths digit of our speed seldom changed: the liquid-crystal display was frozen at 7.52 knots.

I went easy on the beer, washing down another Dramamine (just in case). We sat on the deck, idly swapping stories: Bob and I were both survivors of the personal computer's turbulent infancy and had even done battle with some of the same horrid old products. Schedules were forgotten in casual watch-swapping, and before long the speculations began: "Hey, isn't that Venice over there?"

"Nah, we'd be able to see the hotel."

"I don't know — it sure ain't Sarasota."

"Well, hell, go check the LORAN."

Nightfall again, Florida lights clearly visible. There was pleasure in looking at what I once would have seen as random twinklings on the

water and recognizing them as channel markers. We slipped past a lonesome moaning buoy outside Tampa Bay, flashing once every 2.5 seconds. Far up the coast lightning split the sky — but nearby were glittering city lights and buoys blinking in the balmy air. Our voyage was about to end, and I sat with my flute on the foredeck playing sad sweet music of wistfulness and change.

Then the universe saw fit to kick in a musical contribution of its own just as we passed the next channel marker — this one a softly clanging bell. I had stopped playing, and someone switched on the radio. Christopher Cross sang:

The canvas can do miracles,  
Just you wait and see...  
Fantasy — it gets the best of me,  
When I'm sailing...

I turned on my microcassette recorder and caught the song in a background of water and buoy, wind and sail. Yeah... This was entirely consistent with the flavor of my journey. There's no way to hurry on a bicycle, and there's sure no way to hurry on a sailboat. That van ride to Fort Meyers would have been cheating, but this wasn't even slightly out of context — merely a fitting conclusion to my stay in paradise.

We motored into the dark Clearwater Harbor at midnight, blasting the air horn long-short to wake the bridge-keeper. The piercing sound echoed from hotels and condos, and when we proceeded through the lights and sights of a city sleeping I could smell the road. I could almost see it out there — stretching before me to infinity.

“345°, 211 miles, 32 hours,” Mike observed.

“Right on target,” Bob answered.

“Dead on.”

I now understood the nautical addiction. I helped clean up and stow the sails, then crawled below to sleep alone on the *Awesome!* I thought about my bio-granddad and his epic voyage, three-quarters of a century ago, through the same waters. Civilizations and technologies might come and go, but the sea will remain...

I lay amid the restful lapings of tame harbor water and looked ahead once again. Just a son of a son of a sailor.



**Personal Note:** This nautical interlude had long-term effects, with the imagery of that night watch following me over the next quarter century. After the bike epoch ended, I shifted my attention to water with the Microship project... but that was still on a human-power scale with an amphibian pedal/solar/sail micro-trimaran. In 2006, I tried a “Microship on Steroids” in the form of a Corsair 36 trimaran, but less than two years later I bought a big monohull and named her *Nomadness*<sup>5</sup>. The 32-hour adventure described in this chapter had a lot to do with that, and is a reminder of how powerfully we can be affected by random events. The lesson in this is to seize every opportunity.

<sup>5</sup><http://nomadness.com>



*I could get used to this...*