

# On the Way Up



**A Short (and Sadly) True Story**

**by**

**Fred Geuer**

**613-256-3234**

**[fred.mrg@sympatico.ca](mailto:fred.mrg@sympatico.ca)**

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Coffee in hand, the night's sleep not yet entirely vanquished from my brain, I closed the door softly and toddled on over to the car. Sitting behind the steering wheel I ran through the checklist; snack, water bottle, repair kit, helmet, riding gloves, bike. Check. One more sip of java and I was off.

I hadn't owned a bike since my trusty old CCM was turned into a pretzel by a car. That was a long time ago. Now I had gotten my hands on a nice little ten speed vintage Peugeot. My two wheeled jaunts had slowly turned into epic adventures. Heck, I had even made it all the way to a neighbouring town and back, a good 30km! I was ready for the big time.

So that morning I found myself heading into Ottawa to meet my brother-in-law, Matt. Matt is 10 years younger, bigger and stronger. But I had miles behind me and that pretty nifty Peugeot underneath me. Not that I'm competitive or anything.

I got to his house and unloaded. He stepped out onto his porch, "Oh, ya," he muttered in a relaxed voice, "that was today. Just a minute, I'll get my stuff." Behind the house he pulled assorted odds and ends off of a pile and produced a bike. It was a nice heavy town bike. Sensible, it had a parcel rack, fenders, light, a bell and big soft-looking tires. No road bike. My sister saw us off but not before pulling 'Big Matt' aside and telling him to take it easy. "Little sisters," I thought, "on respect, but they mean well."

Okay, I said to myself as I followed Matt towards the river, there are some nice pathways here, could be windy though. As I coasted along I estimated we had covered at least 5km already and I wasn't even warmed up yet. The rate we were going was just a little slow for me.

A few turns later we were heading up our first hill. We flew through a grove of trees, across an open stretch, down through a little gully, up the other side; just motoring along. Ya, this was great, the open road, great scenery. Nice. We got to a parking lot and Matt stopped. Stopping? Already? We'd just got going. Okay, my butt was a bit sore; it could use a short break I decided. I saw a sign: Pink Lake. "Hey, Matt, Pink Lake, is that that nice little lake with the turquoise water like you see in the Rockies?"

"Ya, that's where we're going," came the reply.

“Isn’t that up a bit of a hill?” I asked.

“Ya.”

“...Great,” I said a little too enthusiastically. “Let’s go!”

And we did. I was glad I had this ten speed now. I was going to get to use some of the gears I never needed on flat land. I looked down and saw I had one gear left to drop down to. I looked up the road and saw Matt wasn’t slowing down like I was. Occasionally he was jumping out of his seat and powering his way up the steeper stretches.

I soon found myself falling into a silent battle with a lot of self talk, not all of it positive: ...*breathe deep, it’s not a race, I’ve just got to get there.*’ I rounded another corner. *‘Stay strong. Is it even steeper here? Sure there isn’t another gear left? That lake can’t be that much farther. Matt must be just around that bend in the road, I’ll catch up when it flattens out. Breathe deeper. Ignore the pain, the fire in my legs. I can gut this out. Head down, focus on pedaling, just get there.*

And then, just like that, I was there. It really was flattening out; there was the Pink Lake sign. I turned off the road and came to a stop. “Thank you, God,” I muttered.

Matt was standing there with his hands in his pockets, reading the information panels on display for the tourists. I gingerly got off my bike. I tried to find my walking legs and straighten my back out in increments as I crossed the parking lot. I rubbed the sweat out of my eyes as best I could and tried to catch my breath and settle my heart rate down to where I could at least make a coherent comment about how nice the lake was.

“So what do you want to do? We could go to Champlain Lookout from here. I forget how far it is, but it’s not far. It’s really beautiful. You can see for miles.” Matt was looking at me nonchalant-like, bored, a bit, I was thinking.

“Ya, sure, sounds great,” I heard someone say. “Let’s go.” Let’s go? What the hell was I thinking?

I mounted up. Ouch, that hurt. I decided I'd buy a bag of frozen peas on the way home.

For a while we were cruising along on gently rolling road, side by side, chatting. I stood up going down hill to get some relief. The sun was shining. This was fun. I was having fun. We met three guys coming down the grade towards us, full spandex, bright red jerseys, funny looking shoes and aggressive helmets. They didn't return my version of the biker's wave but I was one of them I was thinking, my cockiness coming back.

Matt turned down a new road, we passed a beaver damn and I looked ahead, the road was rising up. "Is this it, the last hill, the one to the top?" My voice sounded an octave higher than I wanted it to be.

"Yup," Matt answered out of the corner of his mouth as he looked back. He was already out of his seat, dancing on his pedals as his bike swayed slightly from side to side. I watched in admiration for a few seconds before my mind was called back to the task at hand as my legs began to burn. It wasn't a slow onset this time. They knew what was coming and they were telling me straight, "Not again, we got you up the last one but we quit!"

I tried to think about something else. What gear was I in? How many were left now? It was a wasted question really because I already knew the answer; not enough. *Don't wimp out...* the self talk started. Two guys passed me going uphill, chatting about girlfriends as they glided by. One had to be ten years older than me. Soon I was alone on the road again. The self talk continued; *breathe deep, ignore the pain, just get around the next corner, I've got to get there soon, how high can it be? Okay, the next corner, it will flatten out. Don't give up....*

I couldn't ignore the pain any longer. My body was "wracked with pain." That wasn't a figure of speech any more. I would have yelled in agony but I didn't have the oxygen to spare. It was getting harder and harder to ignore the voices in my head screaming for me to stop. *Why on earth was I doing this anyway? Just stop and the pain will disappear.*

Through my sweat and tears I could see Matt floating back down. "We're about half way. See you at the top. How are you doing?" With that he whipped around and danced up and away again. I didn't answer his question. There was no use trying. I couldn't reach him from the hell I was in. This

was torture, no mistake. *Don't stop. Gasp, groan, cry like a baby if you have to but don't stop...* more self talk.

Then it started to get hard. Things were getting blurry around the edges. My pulse was pounding in my ears. The noise of my own breathing was coming to me from afar, echoing. I could see myself from somewhere outside my body. Introspection and self talk turned into a blurry struggle for survival.

I swear the trees began swaying in and out in time to my frantic, rasping inhales and exhales. I imagined the currents of air from my breathing spawning tornados somewhere in the world. Little kids and stray dogs were going to die. I could see black flies, mosquitoes, heck; anything on the wing unfortunate enough to fly over those hills becoming locked into a fierce battle as they desperately tried to escape the vortex violently pulling them towards my gaping maw. I could hear their terrified screams, their tearful goodbyes to loved ones. Small mammals were clinging to whatever they could sink their claws into, praying the fur wouldn't be pulled right off of their backs. I was at the centre of a whole forest caught up in a terrible struggle to find the strength to hold on for one more breath, one more pedal stroke...up...down...up...down... *please good merciful ever loving God...up...down...up... don't let the blackness take me ...down...*

The road fell away. I stopped pedaling and my nimble little Peugeot ferried me gently around another turn. I was there.

There was no sense of jubilation, no sense of relief or accomplishment. But I couldn't wipe the grin off my face. I was there. I had made it to the other side of pain. In the big picture it was a stupid, senseless, self inflicted pain I realized. I loved it. I had become a bike rider. It would be all down hill from here, until the next time.