

## FALSE FLAT

By

Randy Ford

The long hot afternoon, which had taken its toll, had almost come to an end. Most of it had been uphill, where a large sprocket had to be used, struggling as the rider had, up a long false flat, imperceptible at times, but still up. His face had turned a bright red, an indication of hard work and sustained effort.

On the open road, hewn and shaped by a long journey, the bicyclist was placed in jeopardy by the touch of something, which he couldn't shake, but by then, was oozing out his pores. Though he had very little energy left, and his legs ached, there was a sense of pride there that kept him going. I remember that when I caught up with him, and straddled my bike, feet on the ground, water alone could not satisfy my thirst. It normally did.

Mike and I had known each other for several years, mainly through our interest in bicycling; which didn't mean we knew each other well, though we might have thought we did. Mike, from what I could see, had exactly the qualities I admired. Really, he was outgoing and likeable. A good man, he seemed to have everything; a home, a wife, children, and a job. From what I knew, before we took off on this bicycle trip, he had used those good qualities to win a wonderful position at the university and was well on his way to making a name for himself there.

Touring on bicycles that summer gave both of us a chance to get away from very hectic jobs. Straight ahead of us the highway rose up a steeper grade, hopefully to a true

summit. Our maps didn't give us a clear picture of the terrain; otherwise we probably would've taken a different route.

The previous evening we had camped on a level spot of grass in a roadside park that appeared safe. It had been a peaceful night, with a little traffic noise and only a siren or two. It suited me that no one else shared this location with us, where we had besides a toilet, running water and a picnic table. A nearby street light lent us some light; and because of the grass, we saw no reason for a ground cloth.

Sometime after the moon had sunk and I'd been sound asleep for a good hour or so, Mike screamed. I immediately thought the worst: someone or something had attacked him or had threatened to.

"What!" I cried, scrambling out of my sleeping bag. "What is it, Mike!"

The screaming and ruckus that Mike created ceased at my insistence, and there he stood in his underwear, pointing at the ground.

"Sport, let me show you. Bigfoot!" yelled Mike, as he motioned for me. "Bigfoot, I swear it was Bigfoot. Come see! Look here! Sport, look!" Then adding with more emphasis, "To prove it, here's Bigfoot's footprint."

Out of curiosity I took a look but ended up angry. I examined the spot carefully. Nothing. Nothing, it seemed. I thought he had concocted a hoax that seemed awfully juvenile. Now, I'm sorry that I didn't take the incident seriously.

Only if I could have studied the inside of his brain, would I have seen a curtain close as Mike frowned and shut his eyes in pain. I did not see the confusion and darkness I now imagine was triggered in my friend by the rigor and daily test of a long bicycle

tour. Afterwards, I felt blindsided and thought someone, anyone, should've warned me. If I'd been prepared, if I had understood or recognized the symptoms, had had training, had prevailed, had asserted my will...too, too many "ifs." But beating myself up didn't serve a purpose.

The next morning Mike began riding without a helmet; he didn't seem discouraged, even managed a smile. But he rode with his pale face slumped down over the handlebars in a way uncharacteristic of him. By his side I peddled, my fair features protected by layers of sunscreen, which had partially dissipated. My heavy load, and indeed my whole bicycle, would've seemed old-fashioned and ridiculous to a purest. But there was something beautiful and practical about my setup. I would compare Mike and me to other adventurers who have set out unprepared for what they ultimately faced, and now were either resting in their graves or filled with guilt and regret. Besides, I couldn't control Mike.

When the sun had reached its summit, both of us reached ours and paused there to catch our breath. We were then in the final phase of our journey, but neither one of us knew it: we had planned a cross-country trek.

"I need to air out my feet and take a leak," said Mike, as we dismounted. "No one's coming. This may be our last chance."

"Ever?"

"You know better." Thus speaking, with sadness in his face, and before he took off his shoes, Mike found a bush. I was about to join him, when he yelled, "Hey, Sport! Look! See there! It's a jackalope!"

Perhaps because of the Bigfoot incident, I tried to ignore this latest absurdity. Mike's dramatics...for I would not use the word prank...consisted of waving a finger and jumping up and down.

All along the road we had seen jackrabbits with huge ears; and once or a twice, a herd of antelope saw us and ran. But jackalope! Unfortunately, Mike wouldn't let it go. A herd of jackalope and Big Foot standing ready to cross the highway? No, not antelope, not jackrabbits. Jackalope! Was he sure? All people who believe in such an animal stand up and applaud! And conspicuous among all of them will be my friend Mike.

Jackalopes were but five-foot-high critters and had long ears like jackrabbits, which made them seem twice their actual size.

"Mike! Jackalope!" I whined, giving him a little push with my gloved hand. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes! Yes!"

And right then I decided not to get angry as I had the night before. I could still be a skeptic, but this time - only this time- why not humor him? "Now wait a minute! Mike, yes. Yes, I see one. Gee whiz! A jackalope!"

Then, for the rest of that day's ride, my friend and I continued our playfulness. Thus happily we traversed a series of balanced hills, flew past and between three cinder cones, and enjoyed an honest-to-goodness flat into Badger.

While we rode through town and found the city park, a motorcycle gang, who came roaring up the street on their huge machines, took a break near us. There were four men, four women, and, in a sidecar, a little girl and boy. They gave us a dirty look. Mike

glared at them. It looked like a dangerous situation. “Halloo!” Mike waved. Indeed, I didn’t like that.

Dressed in black, the bikers seemed as tired as we were. Only, God did they appear tough, as if they didn’t really give a fuck. Even the two little children had that attitude, as if their innocence had been robbed from them.

“Hi!” was Mike’s salutation, and “hum!” replied their leader.

I was glad to see that exchange, Mike looking confident, though in a loud and reckless way. A blunder here could’ve meant someone might’ve gotten hurt.

“Is this your first time through here?” asked one of the motorcyclists. “Not a bad little town. Better than Ruby.”

“Friend, it’s filled with armed crazies,” answered Mike without hesitating.

The motorcyclists, who from the beginning seemed leery of Mike, now turned away from him in such an obvious manner that their disdain couldn’t be mistaken.

“It’s true, guys,” continued Mike, crossing boundaries that had just been set. “Sport and I have been talking to people around town, and they told us that a motorcycle gang came through here two weeks ago and really messed things up. And you know what that means: it means you better not stop here.”

“And why not?” remarked one of the women.

“You heard what I said,” said Mike, eagerly, “for the sake of your children. From my experience in Badger, I can tell you it’s an awful place. They hate strangers on motorcycles.”

“Well,” said the leader of the gang, “we don’t scare easily. Just because we ride motorcycles doesn’t mean we’re trouble makers. Sometimes we walk hand-in-hand with the law. Sometimes we’re it. So bring ‘em on!” Then looking straight into Mike’s eyes, he asked, “And who are you?”

“Me? In me, you see a tiger,” Mike exclaimed.

“Tony! Well, I’ll be!” declared the biker leader. “Hey, gang! Meet Tony the Tiger.” They all laughed at that.

“Forget him, Zed,” urged the leader’s woman.

“Zip it man!” The biker’s voice bellowed. “We’re tired and intend to stay put. We’re stopped here under these fine oak trees, and nothing’s gonna keep us from it ‘cept divine intervention. Tony here seems pretty determined to make an ass of himself, but we not interested. Okay, okay...”

As Mike, wobbling on his feet, lunged, I tripped him and leered. I had to do something, and my friend had to have known that I would because he was in the wrong. He knew it, as he shook and screamed at me, “You!”

By the time I helped Mike get back up on his feet, the biker had returned to his friends.

“Come on, Mike!” I said, as I pulled him in the direction of our bikes.

By then, the whole gang had stationed themselves around one of the largest trees. The two children, at last freed from the constraints of the sidecar, immediately began to run around. Laughing and having a good time, the group behaved as most any family would. It was Mike who had serious problems, but, as of yet, that hadn’t occurred to me.

Even after reflecting on it, I still couldn't make sense out of Mike's tiger statement. He had an imagination of the strangest kind. "In me, you see a tiger." Yeah, sometimes he seemed ferocious enough for that. "In me, you see a tiger." A tiger. It seemed impossible to know what was really going on with him. But more like a pussy cat, or else I couldn't have tripped him. A pussy cat? No, not him!

The Mike I knew, an undersized, wiry person, in bicycling shorts, and built right for a slayer of giants...notwithstanding his shortness...had an attitude of defiance worthy of a professional wrestler. He gave the impression he could whip anybody's ass.

Well, we hightailed it out of there. Took advantage of a tailwind while we had it. Twenty clicks in the same amount of minutes. For the fun of it I had start thinking in terms of kilometers instead of miles.

That evening we camped on the other side of the state line, pushed that far so that it would seem as if we had made significant progress. Paying attention to the road, I hadn't looked at Mike. I hadn't seen his fragility until after we set up camp and he started sobbing.

It seemed clear that something had been bothering him, but now, as we both picked through tins of sardines, he revealed for the first time the troubles he had at home. He talked about this and that problem and sorrow and how sometimes he felt so down he couldn't get out of bed. He said he couldn't bring things up with his wife without there being a fight. It hadn't been easy or always clear, his world.

Disappearing into a vague dream or haze, he'd stared off into space until he mumbled something in disgust...about something that had happened years before, that

had been held over his head, or was hammered into him. It was like the voice of doom and devoid of meaning. Absent and trodden down, he pointed to things that I couldn't see. It would shake him. It came easily. Bringing it up then... Well, I would've preferred not to have been involved.

He would have to get up, aimlessly wander and begin again the same story. It would hover over him in the shape of a monster, the material of an unshaped nightmare. He would go inside himself, he said, only to find more confusion.

In the middle of the night, too, beholding all the stars reflected there, he saw aliens. He said he also heard conversations from outer space. The messages were conveyed to him by shortwave that he could pick up without a radio. He claimed he listened to the most ethereal of all voices, the voice of God, coming in clearly with the wind. Visions of joy there must've been for I heard it in his voice, as he sang old hymns.

I couldn't tell if his tears were real and felt embarrassed for him. We stretched out on top of our sleeping bags. The stars moved slowly across the sky, almost close enough to touch, or so it seemed to both of us. Breathing slowly again, he said, after all he'd been through, it felt good to be alive and that he expected to live forever.

"Can't you see me as a tiger, shot for someone's trophy," he resumed, "but that manifestation is only part of it. But Sport, how much pain have you caused me, my having faced the same insensitiveness everywhere? I've had to put up with all of it on my own, at the height of my potential and at the moment I achieved tenure. Oh, Fate! Why have you turned against me? Why have you ruined me? What are those voices inside my head, when the outside world can't hear them? How can I feel strong, when

I'm overwhelmed by frailty? Don't I look forward to death and at the same time yearn for some way to get out of it? But I have had my moments! I could've given birth to a million ideas. I keep them all up here in my head, and there they crowd each other out. I've tried to break away, see all of America! But my past, following in hot pursuit wherever I go, will eventually catch me. Then I hear 'shame on you!'"

During this tirade, Mike gestured in dramatic fashion; and as he got more into it, there appeared to be the possibility of an explosion...very contradictory of the picture I had of him as a quiet, gentle, harmless, poor professor. He had impressed me with his intellect.

Eventually I asked him about his wife.

"What's this? Do you think she cares?"

I wanted to think she had the capacity for sympathy.

"She never accepted it!" added Mike with considerable agitation. "Why, the whole world knew! By all accounts, I'm a failure. They never see the good and always stress the bad."

"I'm not one of those."

"Well, Sport, if you really want to know, oh, I'm...I'm afraid my wife is dead."

"Dead? What do you mean dead?"

"She and the children, too," sobbed Mike.

From then on, he would ride in front of me, way far ahead, and as if he owned the road. One day, after I hadn't seen him for an hour or so, he waited for me and shared an

epitaph that he had just composed for himself: a farewell to his dog, which he urged me to read at his memorial service, the last word he said for an “ungrateful world” to hear from him. The piece, along with two or three others, subsequently written down, I kept in a leather pouch I wore around my neck.

“Sport!” he called, over the noise of a passing truck, “what would you think if I told you I was the incarnation of a huge, ferocious cat?”

“That wouldn’t surprise me, Mike,” an answer I gave without thinking. “But nothing would...surprise me about you.”

“Well, hit me with the bad news,” continued Mike. “With all the carnage and road kills I’ve seen today, in round numbers, how many do you think?”

“Oh, I don’t know...more than there should be, I suppose.” Even to me my reply seemed lame.

“Well, sir,” said Mike, “there was a time, and not very long ago, when I wouldn’t have noticed. Now I mourn the death of every creature, from here to Timbuktu, from California, from the Finger Lakes of New York. You stare. Perhaps you don’t believe that I place greater value on those small creatures...rodents, snakes, turtles, and the like, smashed by cars and trucks...than on myself and a future I’m not sure I have.”

“I won’t argue with you, Mike.” I answered, “But I don’t know how we could’ve saved those animals.”

“You can say that now, but you’ll regret it,” said Mike, bitterly. “Of course, you’ve heard how I failed.”

I didn't reply but looked down the highway, where I saw a mirage, shimmering in the heat. Mike now appeared more desperate than ever. He was sunburned, dehydrated, and spent. His face showed not only signs of fatigue but also of something darker, more sullen and obstinate than I had ever seen before.

“Well, now, Sport,” he began, “there's a nest of black widows we need to kill.”

Then, after a morning comfort stop, we came out of the store together. Mike suggested that we sit on the curb while I ate an orange and he, an avocado. We sat juxtaposed to the gas pumps of a busy establishment situated in the middle of the Y at the junction of two major highways. We had come in from the west and had intended that day to continue in that direction. I hadn't slept very well, only relinquishing to sleep after struggling over what to do about Mike.

“You're either against me or for me,” he began again, “but don't be neutral. Neutrality is equivalent to death and should be filed away as such. Speaking of that file, it should always be kept open, and organized, for easy reference, in case you forget, for life is way too short to have to look something up. If there's a page in there that tells you how to know when you've come down to your last meal or whether to drink or die of thirst, let me know. Me against you, not you so much! To tame, to hunt, and to order, and believe me, people have tried. I haven't talked about that, have I? Have you ever attempted to find substance in a bubble? Or tried to grab one? Little bubbles bursting all around? When people have extended a hand to me, sometimes that's how it's been for them. All I ask of God is to give me one day of light without confusion, so that I might

feel decent and human again. Instead of being treated like a criminal, I need to see the sun. You think you can repudiate that?”

“I can’t repudiate it. I’m not in the position to repudiate anything.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said, as he stood up and fetched his bike. “How’s the orange? I think I’ll keep this seed until I can find a good place to stick it in the ground. The earth needs a fresh start.”

Then he took off without waiting for me. That was how he got so far ahead.

A few minutes later, I pushed on, thinking I’d soon see Mike. At least an hour went by and still no Mike. At that point, I didn’t much care. Facing a cool breeze I suddenly felt free from the pressure of compassion and understanding. Mike must be flying, I thought.

Rarely since we had started our trip had I felt such freedom, the joys of freedom and the opportunity to really see the scenery. Solitude except for an occasional car. Many more pickup trucks. Suddenly I became aware of all the jackrabbits. Jackalope! I cackled. In certain important respects at least I could still find humor in a situation that should’ve filled me with sad foreboding. I’ll never forget that feeling, mixed with humor and bewilderment. It sure was a beautiful day. I had lost count of how many days we’d been in the saddle.

Peddled as fast as I could; spinning when the wind let me, and when the wind blew hard, that was okay. That’s right! Okay! I appreciated the punishment. Ride! Ride! Still no sign of Mike.

Along there was a lot of open space. No Interstate. Ranch country. You'd pass a school bus shelter out in the middle of nowhere, beside a huge mailbox and a long dirt road that generally disappeared up over the horizon. Miles of unbroken barbed wire fencing. Cattle scattered here and there. Curious horses that would run along beside you. Pinyon pines. Cactus. Salt bush, thistles, and scrub. Ravens. No crows in that part of the world. My effort was ever increasing, pushing me toward the red zone. I wanted to catch up with Mike. Then I didn't. Swore, and declared that I didn't care if I ever saw him again. Damn, another false flat. Only thing to do was to peddle a little harder, surprised by the life in my legs.

Still no Mike.

After a long sustained effort, I stopped at the summit for a drink. There were no vehicles, not a single one, except...wait! Something was wrong. It gave me pause. Nearsighted, I wore glasses but couldn't see that far very well because of watery eyes.

No question about it: there was something wrong.

With that morning's conversation going through my mind, I could hear Mike's words about the file he always kept open. It was but a coincidence, I hoped, if indeed he'd been hit by a vehicle driven by some yahoo who didn't care. My heart leapt to my throat, as I pushed off. I have no memory of most of that race.

I remember seeing Mike's bicycle lying at the finish line, half in and half out of the roadway. I mentally set a utility truck on the shoulder facing the wrong way. I looked for a body, but there wasn't one. Looking caused carelessness and a scary moment when I almost ran into Mike's bike. To this day, I don't know how I missed it.

The moments dragged on. I couldn't just throw my loaded bike down. Mike! Where was he? By now many of the details have faded. Where was he? Where? Where? The not knowing, that much, I could never forget. I still have trouble coming to terms with it. Now, for sure, because of him we wouldn't make our planned destination for the day. I got real pissed.

I hadn't made Mike any promises, so I could've ridden on. I felt like saying I didn't know him. I wished I didn't.

They kept pointing down in the ditch, and I finally saw Mike, as he crawled out of a culvert. I couldn't believe what I saw.

When he emerged, he had no shirt, no shoes, and seemed agitated. Moving slowly, he relentlessly searched for something. Through all the tall grass and the uncut weeds, he stepped with bare feet. Over glass and rocks...down on his hands and knees, in a fathomless daze...talking to himself...laughing, everything to an extreme. Torn, sobbing, screaming, trembling. Lost something. Lost everything. Tell me something, what was he doing?

Did I know him? Sadly, I did.

"Luckily I didn't hit the nut," declared one of the utility men. "My God, I thought he fell off his bicycle and was trying to flag me down. But he ran right in front of me. That's right. Right in front. Almost hit him. Luckily, I stopped in time. Look at him now! I wanted to help him, but he threatened me. I've called the State Police."

I asked how soon the army would arrive. I was told within an hour or so. The nearest hospital was even further away. So, like it or not, we were on our own. And there wouldn't be any subtleties involved.

So just where were we? With Mike. With his feet all cut up. Where were his shoes? And how did he look off of his bike with his shirt gone and no shoes? Half naked. All shot, I'd say.

“Where are your shoes?”

“Where?” he yelled. “Quick! Spiders over there, crawling everywhere. Long live black widows, ‘mid the red ants, diagnosing the red bumps, all up my legs and all over my butt! Quick! Spiders and snakes! Snakes! While thou beast doth strike! Ooo! Spiders and snakes. My, my, my! Take that, Snake. Taste good! Snake. I shall revert back to a more primitive method. I'll bite you. Umm, good! Adios, amigo! The venom tastes good like good venom should.”

I ran down the ditch and approached him gingerly.

“Mike!”

“Good appetite, sir? Like snake?” Needless to say, he didn't have a snake in his hand. “Careful. Easy, easy, man.” With his hand he said halt. “Your zipper's down.”

“What's going on, man?”

“It bites. It bites. It bites. It strikes! Strikes! Bite! You! You! Stay back!”

“Please, Mike! Mike, I beg you!”

“Shoo butterfly!” said he, as he picked his way through rocks and weeds. “Poor little people. I feel sorry for you. Gripes’ whipping boy. Ooo, Ooo, Ooo! Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!

“You hear me?” I asked, as I stepped toward him, and he lunged at me.

“No! And I wouldn’t want to hurt you.”

“You wouldn’t.” He threw a rock at me. “Come on, Mike.”

“A prime peeve! Pisser!”

Then there was a standoff. And we danced, as if tethered to a pole. The fool held his ground. As before. And became even crazier as my wrist watch went off. You should have heard him talking to himself.

“Cocksucker!”

I almost cried.

“Shoot me and get it over with.”

Where were the damn police?

“Kill me by inches.”

“Nobody’s going to hurt you, Mike. Please, come in.”

*“Como? I’s so silly, but I no longer cana stay in thisa world!”*

“Where are you going, Mike?”

“What?”

By then there were two or three other vehicles stopped along side of the highway: people rubber-necking.

“Cheering you on, Mike! We all are! You hear me, Mike?”

“Go away!”

I then gave myself up to a course of a very long struggle of begging and pleading; whether Mike heard me or not, who knows? ‘Cause he had snapped and saw spiders and snakes everywhere. He threw trash in the air. Well, Mike put on quite a show, schizo as they say. He cursed and yelled. Wandered around. Picked his way through the weeds. Who knew what was going on? But I think a primeval force came into play and that was what eventually allowed me to reason with Mike. No longer aware of how I did it, I know by the time the State Police finally arrived I had talked my friend out of the ditch. Unfortunately, they found him sitting on the side of the roadway, exhausted but as calm as could be. He seemed quite normal.

The police talked to me, not him. They saw me in a weary state, having endured a nightmare, and all they did was take a report and ask me what I wanted them to do. Hell, I didn’t know. And as fate would have it, the nearest hospital seemed a world away. Besides, by then, Mike had gathered up his shirt, put on his shoes, and mounted his bike. “Let’s go!” he yelled. He promised me that he wouldn’t cause any more trouble and begged me to remain his friend. I could’ve murdered him.

This time I kept up by drafting on him. I wasn’t about to let Mike out of my sight again.

By settling on a cheap motel on the edge of town, I hoped we could avoid some of the early morning traffic and get an early start. I naturally hoped we could and minimized Mike’s problems and the iffiness associated with them. By instinct, I knew, however, that I couldn’t take my eye off of him, which put me in a somewhat melancholy

mood. Anxious, I wouldn't say I was overcautious. But I did insist that we share a room and a bed. As a person who had never been in that kind of situation before, it impresses me that I had that much forethought.

The town reminded me of so many other towns. Every so often a train went through. It had one main drag, too, that accommodated the hurried and the slow alike; neither was given preference because with a declining population of a few thousand, there was no need for it. No one bid us welcome. No one knew us. Yet, in spite of that, I knew, if I needed it, there was help out there. And with a Bible and a telephone in the room, a television and all the other expected amenities, I couldn't think of anything else we needed.

Supper! A glance down the street told us we had that covered. Of course, our bikes and gear came into the room with us.

The bed took up most of the room, yet the bed never felt big enough. Within, by refracted neon light from a flickering motel sign, I took off my shoes and socks and looked at my watch, which warned me that it would be a long night. Time...I'd try to sleep, but Mike robbed me of that. He was all keyed up from his escapade that afternoon, with no thought or concern for me until he needed something, and then...screw him then!

I slept in my clothes; he, in his underwear. But neither one of us really slept.

I could hear the train and the traffic noise outside. Some cat and mouse maneuvering on a hard mattress, while doubts flitted in and out of my mind, and seemed to call for an end of our trip.

"Settle down please, Mike." In my heart I knew we couldn't continue. "Mike!"

“What?”

If we continued, I'd have to feign trust. The truth was I couldn't do that. I must confess that my thoughts then weren't so holy. But I was still there, and even a friend to Mike.

Around midnight, it started...the bed started shaking, but I knew it wasn't an earthquake. Mike had spasms and used that to pressure me to let him out of bed. My thoughts jumped from his destroying the room to a hundred other dire things that could happen. How dire? Catastrophic. I image anything could've happened if I hadn't held onto him tight. Meanwhile, I had to go to the bathroom. No, no, I'd just have to hold it and trust the urgency would pass.

Throughout the night, whenever he tried to breakaway, we'd struggle as wrestlers do. He'd accuse me of all kinds of terrible things, none of which were worth repeating. He exhausted me all over again.

The long, sleepless night finally ended, just as I had fallen to sleep. People in the next room had already packed their car. Sunlight crept through a crack and got in my eyes, so that I had to get up. Barely awake I stumbled over to the picture window to see what I could do about the light. I remember thinking we'd have to get up soon, an idea I resisted. It wouldn't be long before it got hot outside. How pleasant it must be out there, I thought.

Then I turned around. It took a few seconds for it to sink in, though it took much longer to comprehend what it meant. Where was Mike? A quick check of the bathroom: no sign of him.

Snarling, I found my socks and shoes. By God, if he hadn't somehow escaped! Goddamn it, goddamn, hurry, hurry. Stop! What was the rush? Let him go.

I heard a commotion. Suppose that meant Mike hadn't gone very far, and had somehow gotten out bed and the room without my noticing it? The sound of breaking glass alarmed me even more. Hurry! Forgo the socks. Hurry with the shoes. Thank God for Velcro.

Over at the office all was quiet and secure. Then Mike ran by and out in the street. Behind him chased several angry people. There was no time to worry about any damage.

He ran down Main, right down the center of the street, zigzagging in and out of traffic. Horns honking and disgruntled motorists and even outrage and disbelief until at last he cut across a Safeway parking lot and began a long marathon. The way he ran he had to have been in better shape than I thought. I could only hope that someone had called 911.

I tried to catch up with him on my bicycle. I pleaded with my legs: please, please give me more. Please, a little more. Please! Let it pay off. Let it not be too little, too late.

He ran on, and on...up a long hard grade, steadily and strongly, calculating his energy, or else how could he have kept going? The trouble in his head fueled those legs, and nothing could've stopped him. Finally, I caught up with him. I looked in his face and noticed the sweat and tears and saw his suffering. I suffered with him, though in different ways. I needed to catch my breath. My legs ached, and quite frankly, continuing seemed

pointless. I still had the option of finding a telephone and requesting the State Police to pick him up. “Listen, Mike!”

“Hey, Sport! Nice morning. Are you tired yet?” and he laughed at my misery.

We had just reached a crest after a false flat, and before we had a chance to look down, the blast of horns from a tanker startled both of us. We hadn’t seen it coming, or at least, I hadn’t.

“Is that so?” asked Mike.

At that moment, when he stood on the utmost verge of oblivion, I could think of nothing else to say. Mike glanced at me and faked a smile. His lips quivered. The sun shone brightly, but darkness and sorrow engulfed him.

The blast of the horns again, the tanker was sure enough coming. I knew Mike was desperate, but not that desperate. Was he driven by the voices to do it? God knows! I don’t. He had veered into the truck’s path. MIKE!

Perhaps we should be thankful he died instantly. Sit down while I describe the impact.

No need. Let it go. I don’t care to hear. We’ll never understand.

The State Police measured the skid marks from where the trucker first braked and the impact and determined the driver couldn’t have stopped in time.

It took me several tries to get Mike’s wife on the phone. After Mike’s comments about her, my curiosity was aroused. I didn’t know what to say or how to start. I had spent considerable time trying to divine the best way to tell her the news. Not knowing how she would react made the task seem impossible.

“There’s no reason for you to blame yourself,” she said. “Yes, it seems pretty bad. But I’m glad he had you for a friend, and that you were there when he most needed you.”

After we hung up, I thought, “Man, she sounds decent.” She couldn’t have been sweeter. I don’t know what I expected, but I certainly didn’t expect that. It’s a pity that we couldn’t have talked in person. Then I would’ve gotten a better picture of her. I think I remember that she excused herself while crying.

I decided to go ahead and continue the bike trip by myself. That whole way I struggled to make sense of my friend’s death. I didn’t blame myself, but neither could I feel at peace.

Reaching the Atlantic Ocean brought a sense of fulfillment, but disappointment still tugged at me: this trip had been planned for two friends, not a lone rider. I allowed my tears to mingle with the ocean’s surge.