

## Chapter 6: 30-Something by Reid Vanderburgh

I had just turned 31 when the Choir formed in October of 1986. The summer before the Choir formed, I had already decided to ride my bike once again to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, in 1987. I was planning to be gone for about five months, and now felt conflicted about this, as the Choir had quickly become very significant to me. Nevertheless my plans had been set and I was also looking forward to my prolonged adventure.

The Choir had its first performance for the Portland lesbian community at International Women's Day, 1987. When we were announced, the audience of perhaps 500 gave us a standing ovation for setting foot on the stage of the Northwest Service Center! This was the last time any standing ovation was so easy... It was difficult for me to imagine spending months away from these women, who had already become the most important family I ever had. Yet on May 2, I departed on my odyssey. As I rode east toward Mt. Hood, the only thing that kept me from turning around in sheer terror was the knowledge that I'd sublet my house until late September.

I had financed this tour by banking the \$2,000 I received the previous summer for my work on Artquake, a regional arts festival. Back in 1984, a friend had called me and asked me to be a volunteer at this festival, which I'd never attended at all. I ended up coordinating all the signage for the festival, producing much of it myself. I was intrigued by sign-painting. The fact that this was a non-paying gig didn't faze me; all my work for the theater company and the women's newspaper had been volunteer. In 1985, I was invited to be the one of the festival coordinators, and was paid to do so. I held this position off and on for seven or

eight years, only taking off the summer of 1987, for this bike tour.

What got me through the first weeks of this tour was the following quote I'd copied out of Reader's Digest just a month or so prior to my departure: "I did not see the whole. I only saw this rock ahead of me; I only saw this poisonous snake which I had to kill in order to take the next step. I only saw the problem directly in front of me. If I had seen the whole thing, I would have been too overwhelmed to have attempted this." (Sir Henry Morton Stanley, jungle explorer) I still have the post-it note I wrote this quote on. At the time, I affixed it to a large U.S. map I'd put on my living room wall, with my route drawn in felt-tip pen. Later, this quote would become the paradigm for my transition, also.

After the first two weeks or so, I had adjusted to living on the road and no longer had any doubts I would succeed, that I could go anywhere. I rode through 22 states and two Canadian provinces that summer. I had become a Chicago Cubs fan because they broadcast all their games on WGN television. That summer, I saw two games at Wrigley Field, the last season before lights were installed. I rode my 80-pound all-terrain bicycle over Trail Ridge Road, at 12,183 feet the highest paved road in the U.S. I dipped my wheels in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans in the same summer. I visited my friend Julie in Boston, enjoying bombing around that town which has too many potholes and too little traffic control. I went to Provincetown. And I went to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the only time-delineated goal I had all summer.

I felt strong and powerful, feelings I seldom had when not on my bike. Only once during that summer was this feeling shattered, once again in a way that could have been a pointer to me had I been willing to see. I was riding on U.S. Highway 1, north

from Boston up the Atlantic coast. It was very hot and muggy in Boston, and it was Saturday. It seemed the entire city was leaving town heading toward Maine. In a small town, I was fending off traffic and feeling very hot and bothered by it all. I was wearing a tank top and shorts, my usual biking garb in such hot weather, and a man on the sidewalk whistled at me and said in a very turned-on voice, "Oh, babe."

I immediately felt a rush of hot fury that had me shaking for hours. I turned my fury on him and said, "Fuck off!" in my most drop-dead voice. I reached into my pannier and fished out a Hawaiian shirt, putting it on over my tank top. I was absolutely furious with him for reacting to me as if I were a woman, though of course I did not put it that way to myself consciously. I used to react the same way when someone would call me "sir" or if a woman saw me in a public bathroom and questioned why I was there, both of which were common experiences. I am six feet tall, and seeing me as a man was a natural "mistake" – I really had no reason to react to such incidents with intense anger. No reason, except that "sir" was more appropriate for me and I wasn't ready to admit it.

For the most part, however, I felt happier and more centered that summer than at any other time in my life. I was producing endorphins by the truckload, and working very hard physically. My body was in such wonderful condition, I couldn't help but have a happier outlook on life. Yet still, it has never been a body image issue for me. No matter what kind of shape I was in, it was still a *female* shape, and that would never please me.

After the music festival, I felt flat and aimless. I slowly rode to Minneapolis. Once there, I realized I just could not stand the thought of riding the midwest twice in one summer. I flew to Seattle on my 32<sup>nd</sup>

birthday, September 1. I called my sublet, and made an arrangement with her that I would return on September 19. I spent the next 18 days riding around the Olympic Peninsula, my first trip to that part of Washington. I was in such splendid physical condition by this time, spending 18 days riding 400 miles was much too easy and fairly torturous. I bought the thickest paperback book I could find and did my damndest to make it last nearly 3 weeks.

I spent my last night on the road in the public park that is part of the Trojan Nuclear Power Plant, 44 miles north of Portland. The next day, I fairly FLEW to Portland, I was so excited to be coming home. I was in town by noon. I'd asked Naomi, who was overseeing things in my absence, to invite my friends (Choir and otherwise) to a welcome-home potluck/party for me at 5:00 that Sunday afternoon. Obviously, I was early. So I spent the afternoon in a SE Portland park, finishing the book I'd bought. As I rode up Hawthorne on my way to the potluck at Naomi's house, two good friends passed me in their car, on their way to my welcome-home party, and I thought, "I'm home!"

Few Choir members were at my welcome home party, as the group had just spent most of the afternoon in a tense processing meeting that culminated in the then-director leaving. This was to become a familiar type of scenario as the years went by, but at the time, I was merely disappointed so few of my Choir buddies were there to welcome me back from my odyssey. But Erin and Liza were there, and they were the people I most wanted to see, anyway.

After the party, Erin and Liza insisted on loading my bike and gear into their truck and giving me a ride home. It was nearly dark by then, and I had no light on my bike. Somehow it just wasn't right that I didn't pedal that last three miles on my own, arriving home under my own power as I'd

left it 5,285 miles and 4½ months before, but I did not insist. As we pulled up, I saw a cat lying on the sidewalk outside my house. She was thinner than I'd remembered and it was fairly dark by then, so I said, "Are you my cat?" She ran to me, meowing and rubbing against my legs, so indeed, she was my Bear Cub, welcoming me home at last.

I spent the next few months doing all kinds of projects around the house. I had so much energy, I just didn't know what to do with myself. Despite my very minimal riding the last three weeks of my trip, I had never been in better physical condition. Upon my return, my resting pulse rate was 40 beats per minute. Hills that had seemed somewhat daunting prior to my departure didn't even quicken my breath. The only physical ailment I had was some damage to the nerves in my fingertips, from the pressure of the handlebars on the ulna nerve, which meant I could not comfortably ride my bike for some time. (I have permanent numbness in some of my fingertips to this day, though very slight)

I had quit my half-time job at the law firm to do this trip, so had no job to come back to. I was doing some freelance word processing and enjoying working at home very much. I was uncertain what my next work-world venture would be. Little did I know that within months of my return from this wonderful odyssey, I was to become involved with a woman who would rock my world and change me to the core of my being.

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