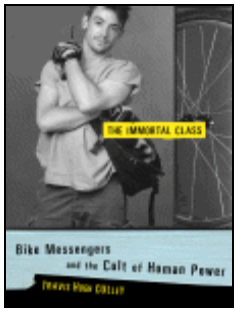

If the following looks familiar, then you've read *The Immortal Class: Bike Messengers and the Cult of Human Power.* If not, get in touch with Villard Books or your preferred distributor of same.

Alley Cat

Of Sickness and Success

by **Travis Culley**

> *There is no immortality and no reward for heroism, except in the glory of being remembered in some great poem.*
> -- Walter Kaufmann, Tragedy and Philosophy

To Haewon, the idea of racing made little sense.

She'd come from good schools and had spent most of her life in college and career-related studies, residencies, fellowships. Her life had gone from graduation to graduation, degree to degree. Naturally she couldn't see the sense behind the bloody foolings of a bunch of crazy messengers.

But I found that the world down here was remarkable organized. Even if it was loud and bombastic, rebellious and unconventional, the people were often fixated on levels of personal status. To each other, messengers were highly cooperative and yet among each other, they were fighters to the bone. It was a tight society where one could be promised lasting respect and recognition for what they could offer to the community.

For most of us, there was no religious incentive to strive for greatness, or even goodness. Most messengers were not divided into souls and bodies, goods and evils or egos and ids -- our psyches could not be cleft or viewed separately. Why live? Why fight? Because history could just roll right over our heads and forget us all. Young men and women with years of hard living inked or etched into our skin, with the jeans and sweaters that we've worn since we ran away from home, with limited resources and limited opportunities, we, some of us, were still striving for glory with the will to be remembered for what we do well.

Seems we have little else. Outside of our artistic pursuits and our useless degrees, what else might mark a messenger's status? Some of the messengers I know have no solid education, some of them have no aspirations beyond covering a few outstanding bills and then taking it easy. Some of us look like militia and speak of ourselves as anarchists but, in fact, we aren't that revolutionary.

No one watches out for us. We do whatever we want to do because no one seems to care. Any predilection we have toward anarchist ideals is supported not by our extremist appetites as most people assume. The free market, the family, the department of revenue, and the well-fare system have done little for us. We really wouldn't be here if there were an easier way in sight. Our anarchy is not idealized. It is simply lived through the disregard of the people around us.

All of these messengers I met seemed to surf a tide. They ran from poverty while committing most of what they earned to their own work and creativity. Having little food left on the table, their money went to bike parts, art supplies and pints of brew at a bar named Phyllis's on Division Street.

They were black, Asian, Latino, Latina; they were parents and the runaway children of wealthy lawyers. They were 13th generation Americans whose lineage has suffered the sagas of our war-torn farmlands. They had come from Poland, Japan, Hawaii and Peru, from the suburbs, the homesteads, the war fields of Iraq, the public housing projects down Taylor Street and elsewhere, bearing the stretch marks of a deeply polarized political system. They got to this country by plane, by boat and by land and together, riding in groups or talking in groups, they looked like a rainbow coalition surviving on the outskirts of the thunderdome.

They had stopped playing the games of the capitalist system. Instead they had burrowed themselves beneath it and dug out the culture and the creativity that they were seeking. They weren't looking at the free market to find their reflection. They were looking at its buildings, its ventilation systems, its ducts and docks and shafts, its sleeping subways and its cracked asphalt.

To the world, these messengers are like rats, too low to concern the average man; thus they duck his conventional rules, traditions and the means by which they find their credibility. They are free, but somehow, sadly, indistinguishable. Among messengers are many different kinds of people though no one seems to ever shine a light on that. I have taken elevators with guys who stunk of liquor, wearing the last pair of clothes they own. I had a conversation with a man whose afro was mangled and tainted with his own vomit. I could see a line of the dried residue crawling back behind his ear. He was a messenger. I was a messenger. Yet we were so many worlds apart.

Then there are messengers on another level entirely. Kim Morris is an English professor/bike messenger. Otis Gunn is a stock broker/bike messenger. Chris Powell is a sponsored racer for True Value. To the mainstream, we're rats, all of us. Even among ourselves we're rats -- except, of course, those of us who share in our carefully strewn castles of legend and history, those who commit themselves to the memory that they will leave behind by being somehow different, incomparable, faster than all the others, brave -- but first they have got to prove themselves. That is why we scrape each other up when we fall. That is why we stand together. That is why we race. It is our way of establishing what Haewon called "credibility".

Cap'n Jack had first been known to me as the guy who won the world's most dangerous messenger at the Cycle Messenger World Chapionships in San Francisco. He ran the course backwards. Timmy The Drunk had gained his notoriety by messengering Chicago for 22 years. Superdave, as rough as his appearance might seem on the surface, he won credibility for being one of the most dedicated couriers in the city. He is at every major race and in every competition in full red white and blue livery, bringing up the rear. He may not be fast, but he's Superdave -- and he has a tattoo on his leg of himself as Superdave to show for it. Greenfield had gained his respect for organizing the charity driven courier concerts in local clubs. He raised money for a few cycling organizations, a local community center, a domestic violence support group and a health clinic that offers free HIV testing.

Jason Neri, a young man, still a kid, earned his credibility the hard way. The word was that Neri began messengering when he was only fourteen. Now, hardly twenty, he had been through more shit than most people get in a lifetime. His hair was cut tight and died lime green. He was pierced in his lip, tongue, nose. Whatever he had tattooed on his back and shoulders traveled all the way up his neck to his jawbone and then again out his sleeves.

Beyond the harsh demeanor, there was something magical about this kid. He was more secure and more damaged than most of the others couriers I'd met and talked to. Year after year, growing through adolescence, he had to face down drivers, cabs and fellow couriers who were unsure how to incorporate him into their tightly knit, and well-hidden society. Being too young and too intense, people had their opinions, but I think most people feared him. Had Icarus himself survived his fall from the heavens, he would have looked something like Jason Neri.

This is our kind of credibility. It is a story, a heritage that will be recorded in the tombs of the local courier 'zine and be remembered to whomever cares for what whatever it's worth.

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It was 4:30 that Sunday morning when I pushed open the back door of my building and mounted up in darkness. I was rolling through the silent and suspended atmosphere of downtown Chicago, spinning to warm up my right knee.

I had heard about these alley cat races. They are different from a professional bike races because they are designed to simulate the specific problems that messengers encounter on a regular basis. I had heard of races that involved elevators, jelly doughnuts, stairs, oversized boxes, shots of vodka -- anything these untamed minds could come up with. Alley cats are both demanding and dangerous as most of them involve intense speed and are directed through busy streets, where unsuspecting traffic is, to us, just another obstacle.

By the ungodly hour of the morning and the stillness of the streets around me, I knew this race would lack humor. It would be "a fifteen mile breakneck sprint," as Crazy Todd described it to me a few days earlier. When Todd says anything that is not a joke, you know to take it very seriously. I remember when he did laugh it was after saying, "Marcus is probably going to race us into the cement train supports on Hubbard and give a prize to the guy that gets up first."

I didn't find his idea very comforting but rolling past the abandoned tents in Grant park, left there from the last of the summer events, I realized that there was every chance we would be run through very unpredictable terrain. Let it in, Travis. It's just like the cold, you have to let the cement wall in, I philosophized to myself morbidly.

I pulled in to the gravel parkway surrounding Buckingham Fountain. The scene did seem a little bizarre so, for the fifth or sixth time, I checked the handbill. No question: there was supposed to be a race going on here. I waited. The sky was cool and clear, tense with an eerie stillness. My stomach trembled. I could smell the first signs of autumn, like an airborne plague, coming in from the lake. Standing in front of the empty lot, I felt like I was staring at a paradigm shift -- as if I was standing at a cliff that would, at any moment, fall into an abyss and I think that is exactly the kind of ride I was up for.

Looking down, I saw tire tracks -- ten or twelve thin rivulets snaking through the gravel past the fountain. I followed them to the east side of Grant Park slowly, cautiously, not knowing what to expect.

There, scattered along the steps, huddling and slouched in darkness, were the shadows of some of the top athletes in our hidden biker society. UV, Andy Gregg, Jimbo, Ken Thompson and Skull were deep in concentration, surrounded by their road bikes that were upturned or lying on the loose rocks. Bobbo #285 was there passing out centimeter thick joints for us to share while we waited for the rest of the group. His face, typically a bright Fu Man Chu smile, was now round and clear. As he smoked and passed the bud, he looked outward at Lake Michigan -- a black sheet of endless space. He seemed to be listening to it, as if it would come alive and speak.

I was sitting next to Zero. I felt comfortable around his unbarred cynicism. While the other bikers (including myself) were layered up in polyester and spandex, Zero was true to form in a leather Jacket, a pair of torn up corduroy jeans, and a baseball cap turned backwards pressing down the blonde dreadlocks beading down from his scalp.

Talk was sparse and tense, occasionally bottoming out into silence.
"Did you sleep?"
"A little."
"Are you carrying anything?"
"No way. Not a patch kit, nothing."
"What if you flat out?"

"Then I'm screwed."
Zero asked me about Gregg #35, if he was "out."

I told him he was but he is probably still jittering from the thousands roaches that infested his holding cell. We laughed that we were going to issue him a special black and white stripped jersey to commemorate his stay in the bing. Then we both shut up and focused on our breath. I was drawing in long clean breaths of air. He was dragging on a Camel.

Registration meant putting seven dollars in the cash award pot and having your name scratched into the backside of a crumpled piece of paper. Marcus Moore, the messenger mechanic hosting the race, collected the cash and pocketed the final check-in sheet by 5:15.

The intersection of Congress and Columbus, which would serve as the start (and finish) of the race, began to buzz with speed-crazed athletes. Some of the bikers, like Skull, were spinning in wide circles, pedaling in a high gear to loosen up the knees. Others, like Eric Sprattling, were straddling the bike and stretching. Eric has, for many years, competed professionally in a cycling team and he told me that if it weren't for "death games like these" he would lose his edge on the circuits. His shaved black thighs in a blue skin suit looked like tree trunks.

One of the bikers, Ken Thompson, leaned over to tell me that this was the most stacked raced he'd ever seen.

It was clear that I didn't stand a chance but I pulled up to the starting line all the same. There would be no starting gun, no flag to drop. The stoplight on Congress and Michigan would do. We lined our front tires up along a crosswalk and prepared for the next green. Rehearsing the course in my head, I could see that this was going to be a unique way to spend a Sunday morning.

We would navigate ourselves one mile through the Loop to the first checkpoint on the second Randolph Bridge. From there, we would follow a specific 13-mile course. On the back end, from the Des Plaines Bridge to the finish line, we were again set free to route ourselves until we crossed this finish line again.

Our eyes watched the green light turn red. Some one called out: "This is it." My arms tingled; my heart began pounding. To my right were three cyclists, including Crazy Todd. His playful energy was gone. He was watching the light, consciously breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth. To my left was Jimbo, a gentle and handsome artist. His face was staring at the light as if he wanted to break it. On the other side of Jimbo were twelve more cyclists, forming an erratic line of helmets.

Marcus then ignited: "Everyone, listen up! The route can change suddenly. A couple of us have noticed street barricades down in the parks. If you can't get through them, detour around the entire park. If you can get in, best of luck."

Silence followed as we continued to watch the red light, knowing that any second now in the middle of a blink... a thought... a breath... "barricades?"... "GO!"

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Off of the line, I somehow took the lead and shot down the hill on Congress, following the course I'd plotted the night before. Leaning into a sharp corner I noticed Bobcat, one of the most notorious and dangerous ex-messengers, sharing my lead. He was tucked in behind me so that he wouldn't have to face the wind. I had never done anything like this before. I didn't know about drafting techniques, and I certainly didn't know I would depend on them for the rest of the race.

A newspaper truck passed us on Dearborn, a major downtown artery. If Bobcat could trail me, it seemed logical that I could trail the truck. I ducked in behind it and tried to keep up. As a rule -- which I had temporarily forgotten -- one should never follow too closely behind a vehicle. A

huge metal plate covering street construction suddenly appeared from under the truck. I jumped the bike, hoping to clear the plate and keep my speed. But I flew too high and landed too hard. As I hit the ground the chain popped off of the chain ring, and Bobcat flew past me, dragging a pack of those big league bikers along with him. I hurried to a stop, got the chain back on and as soon as I could, hammered off again.

My spirit was shattered. Looking up, I saw the whole group swarming the streets, fanning out and converging into near collisions under the flashing yellow streetlights. Throw in the towel, Trav. You won't catch them, I thought to myself. But quitting is hard to live down, hard to forget.

I shot forward into a sprint that burned my thighs and calves. Even my hands began to sting with heat on the handlebars. In this frenzy to make up lost time, I nearly killed my dispatcher. I didn't even see him until his back tire dodged my path. Had I, for a moment, gone blind? I didn't know.

I knew that we would all regroup on Randolph, through the first checkpoint. When I climbed over the first of the two bridges, I saw everyone out ahead of me. Pedaling hard on the downhill side of the bridge, I managed to regain some lost time and pulled in tight with the nearest group I could catch.

We soon formed a razor-thin line of seven bikes, each drafting the other like a toy train. This can't possibly be the lead pack, I thought. I'll have to lose these punks in a minute or so. I've got to ride with those who are winning. Once I caught my breath, I pulled out of the back and crept forward. Slowly I passed Skull, who was easy to identify by his short cut, orange hair and black shades. He slipped in behind me as I came alongside UV (Uval Awazu), a Japanese-American mechanic and courier. Next in line was Jeff Benjamin, a little guy, built like a hockey puck. Then came Andy Gregg, winner of the last alley cat. In front of Andy was Eric Sprattling. Eric has been known to bike from Chicago to Madison Wisconsin, win second place on a six-hour time trial and then bike home again.

Leading the pack (though not for much longer), was Bobcat, once the winner of every messenger race in the city for a stretch of two years. He still takes home trophies from larger races in the US and Canada.

By the time I got to the front, we were leaning into Ogden Avenue, a long, wide, quiet roadway with nothing obstructing our vision for miles. Still, I was squinting to try and catch a glimpse of this lead pack up ahead, but I saw no one. The wind soon became a problem as I was pulling the entire pack behind me. I tried to keep the pace but my legs began to tire. I was a human windshield growing weaker and weaker against the breeze. I realized that I had only one chance of surviving this race: follow the people who were following me. I needed teamwork.

Skull soon pulled up ahead of me whispering, "I'll take it, Trav." Thirty seconds later, Andy passed him and then, like threads in a delicate fabric, we began to weave in and out, smoothly and efficiently, rotating the lead, sharing the workload against the wind. Soon we were attuned to each other's breath, rhythm, speed and riding style. Our tires were, at times, less than an inch apart -- so close that I could have reached out and touched skull's spike studded belt.

To the city, we were nothing but shadows darting through red lights on a sleepy Sunday morning. But from the inside of the pack, we were a single machine in seven parts, switching gears as the winds shifted, changing the lead before we tired out, calling out in line "Brake!" "Clear!" "Bump!" "Car!" and so on, as the hazards came up. The consideration and refinement of these maniacal speed junkies was incredible.

When I began to feel that we were getting close to Douglas Park, I didn't know where to make the turn. "Here?" someone called out. No one seemed to know. Confusion grew, and the whole pack began to spread out with uncertainty. I crept up behind Bobcat and set all my doubts aside. If anyone knew the route, he would.

Wearing a bulletproof poker face, hoping to trick and possibly shake the group, Bobcat whipped out of third place and took a hard right into a curved roadway going straight through the park. While the group panicked and scrambled back in line, I was tucked neatly behind Bobcat's colorful Klein road bike.

The street was smooth and black, newly paved like a road out of a racer's dreams, with bright yellow lines that drew out into a wide right turn. I stood up in my pedals and pushed forward to feel the wind and I found myself exhilarated, laughing out loud, passing Bobcat to get a better view of this perfect roadway. Good roads in Chicago are rare.

Soon, these gorgeous conditions would degenerate into the cracked and broken asphalt of Sacramento Boulevard, the next leg of the course that would bring us into Humboldt Park. The pack tried to keep its line but now we were swerving around potholes, over railroad tracks, through periods of total blackness under bridges and into intersections waking up with light traffic. Our teamwork had begun to fall apart.

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On Sacramento, the challenge was to maximize rest. This meant staying away from the front as much as possible, sometimes exhausting the leader by refusing to pass. Occasionally, the leader would have to swerve out of the front position so that he could find shelter from the wind, behind someone else. Not Bobcat. When he was out front he was tireless. But you had to watch him closely. He would swerve to shake the next rider from behind him or to swing the group into potholes.

We began to slow our pace to preserve energy. Then, suddenly coming out from the back, Eric Sprattling rocketed ahead. As he flew past me going at least 28 miles per hour, he looked at me and said, "Thought I'd change the pace." He had hardly broken a sweat! Panic set in and we all stood up in our pedals to catch him. I was out of breath, my legs felt like they were ripping but I managed to keep pace with the group.

By the time we caught Eric, we were rolling into the entrance of Humbolt Park. The course through this shadowed space was a wide street that lead through a path of tall trees turning 270 degrees around a lake. But unlike the last park, street lamps were rare here, causing long periods of near blackness. Once inside, I took the lead again and routed the group through a labyrinth of hazards. I could see only a few feet in front of me, and the terrain was covered with potholes.

Out of the blackness came two long yellow poles, bound together with a thick chain blocking the entire road. I didn't know what to say. "YELLOW BAR" would make no sense. I stumbled over a few syllable and came up with "BRAKE!" I squeezed the levers in my hand and skidding down to a slow roll. There were two alternatives: right or left. The curbs on either side had deteriorated into loose gravel. I shot left over the street rubble, hearing the pack behind me calling, "Brake!" and scrambling to some decision about it.

The sky was just starting to lighten and shadows hung over us like ghosts. The road opened up again and the group converged into the drafting system we had established. But the rough conditions kept breaking up our teamwork. "Gate!" -- another huge barricade blocked our way. Scanning the curbs, I decided to stay right, hugging the inside of the wide turn. UV pulled up behind me as we slid over a curb mashed into dust and rocks the size of fists. The tires slid out from beneath me as I tried to push forward across Division, the major artery intersecting the park.

There was no traffic, but I had to jump down onto Division from an eight-inch curb I did not anticipate. I was half way across the street by time I registered the curb. But having only seconds to save my health, my wheel and the race, I could not figure out the oncoming obstacle. I shouted, "think!" but had only enough time for a few groggy words to pass through my head: Curb? I went down a curb. Up? Curb? Up? Curb? Looking up, I saw an eight-inch cement

block looking me dead in the eye. FUUUCK! I jumped the bike, flew through the air screaming and landed it onto a pile of rocks, wheels first.

UV was not so fortunate; he was right on my tail so he couldn't see the curb coming. But I kept pedaling, trying not to think about how serious his accident may have been. Soon, I could hear trees, birds and distant traffic. There was no one within earshot. The road was all mine.

I kept the lead heading toward the last barricade and California Avenue, where I stumbled out of the park onto the empty street again. Turning eastbound on Augusta, I caught a glimpse of the rest of the pack behind me. A tight machine now in five parts, they were eating up all the distance I had gained, coming at me like a torpedo. All my dexterity and luck were turned swiftly into extra weight as I had no one to hide behind, no one to draft. Soon all five of them were butted up behind me, hiding from the wind and refusing to pass. I couldn't hold it much longer. "Brake!" I shouted and gripped the levers. On both sides bikes flew past me and I was left in the rear.

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Approaching Milwaukee Avenue, I noticed that something was wrong. My half-numb face felt as though it was being pulled off of my head. My cheeks felt like they were back by my ears. My nose was sliding down my chin. Is this normal? I mumbled, losing control of my lips. I had been, for about 35 minutes, pushing my physical limits. Now it was their turn to defeat me.

I had only enough energy to keep my eyes open and my head up. Then my toes went numb and my hands began to feel like mittens. When the bike began to wobble, a different kind of panic set in: Can I finish this race? My head felt like a bucket of wet sand, and my vision blurred. The blindness I felt in the first leg of the race had returned.

I began to feel my consciousness slipping away. It was as if my ghost was trying to leave my body and I was telling it to stay. What the hell is going on? I began to shout internally. Then it hit me: I was suffocating. Breathing is a common problem for racing because, with one's knees rising into armpits and ones head tucked over drop bars, there is little space to put the breath. The highest point on a cyclist's body is the small of the back and it is usually working like hell.

Losing the race seemed inevitable, but I could not give in. I kept pushing, hoping the breath problem would just go away. I was somehow keeping second or third place steadily -- well, less than steadily, uneasily -- weakly, yes -- very weakly.

As we neared the city, over the Milwaukee Bridge, I began to taste my stomach acids. Another bad sign. I tried to keep the bike straight and going forward but if I didn't do something quickly I would wind up in a ditch or dumpster, or vomiting over the upcoming Des Plaines Bridge. I started taking deep breaths into my lower back. It was like sucking water out of ice cubes with a straw. I was gasping like a drowning man.

Then, flying through the air, I heard the spinning fizz of a tire going flat. Skull had disappeared. Now I was with four others, climbing up the thirty-foot incline of the second checkpoint. Across the bridge, it would be a mad sprint for the finish line, any way you could get there -- if you could get there.

For a split second, I glimpsed the Chicago skyline. Some of the most impressive buildings in the world stood close together, like the flags of a finish line. I was trailing Bobcat, prepared to follow him down the bridge and left, onto Fulton Avenue. Fulton was clearly the best choice. It would link up with the last diagonal block of Milwaukee. I figured everyone would take Milwaukee to Lake St. and Lake over the river because that bridge had no incline. As we neared Fulton, Bobcat, leading the group, stayed right. He wasn't going to turn.

Suddenly it occurred to me that the rest of the group would probably follow Bobcat. Why would they follow me? They don't know me well enough to trust me and that was my advantage.

When the turn came, I shot out of the group from second place and flew down the dark and chopped up Fulton Avenue for the short cut. There was only one rider I didn't shake. Andy Gregg, owner of the Blackstone Bicycle Coop, had taken the turn with me. At first sight you wouldn't expect much from him. But even in his thirties, and with a little gut and regular-guy look to him, he could make these younger bikers shake in their clipless pedals. He is deadly serious about everything he does and now he was in my wake, timing out the final sprint. Over the bridge he tore out in front of me. I kept my shoulders within his wake.

How do I lose this bastard? my groggy mind cried. Ditch him! I plotted, Leave him out on Lake Street with no one to gauge his speed. He'll panic! I stole a wide right turn onto Clark Street, leaving Andy ahead on Lake.

Now I was alone. That wasn't part of the strategy. "You idiot!" I shouted, "is that all your thick head could come up with?" Now, I had no one to gauge my speed. Where was Andy when I needed him? Amid all this adrenaline, exhaustion and fear, I shouted as loud as I could, my voice echoing off of the empty office building walls, "You idiot!"

In the heat of the final sprint, I tore into Michigan Avenue, now seeing Andy coming up swiftly behind me. Morning had come, and we were enveloped in a magical blue light. The streets were filling up with freight trucks and buses behind a blue veil of wet air. Andy trailed me as far as Adams and then made his move.

As we crossed Jackson, fighting for the lead, I saw Sprattling, Bobcat and Benjamin, the three-pack that Andy and I dusted on Fulton. Seeing us zip past two blocks ahead, the group, all in unison, let rip: "Fuck!"

I slipped in behind Andy, catching the last few breaths I could. We leaned left into the Van Buren ramp to Congress and started to climb it. I had to pass Andy on the incline if I had any chance of beating him. Then, at the last turn, he went wide. I took the turn sharp, pulled only a few feet ahead of him, and carried the lead over the Congress Bridge. Arms shaking, I coasted past the line, toward an empty gravel parkway, lit by a gorgeous sunrise. Again, I was alone.

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"Where is everybody? Don't tell me they left us here!" I collapsed on the loose gravel dumbfounded and gasping for breath. Andy came slowly to a stop and seated his head on his arms, panting. Seconds later, the others in the pack rolled in, some of them collapsing like I did and coughing. Finally I sat up, my head feeling like a cinder block. The next pack rolled over the line, and I began to figure it out. Marcus appeared and pulled up to Andy. He was sweating and breathing heavy, hardly able to talk. He pulled out the crumpled paper and asked who won. But Andy could hardly talk. Instead he just looked in my direction and Marcus's eyes lit up.

I looked back. "Me?"

"Hell yeah!" Laurence said emerging from a car near the finish. He saw those last turns better than I did. I couldn't see anything at that point, anything, that is, outside of the little buggish idea that was bothering me. Yes, I could see it now, an idea was fighting its way through my oxygen-depleted head.

"These hot shots need some humiliation! It is good for 'em, good for their game!" Sprattling congratulated, humbly accepting third place.
"Okay, then!" Zero, stood up to Bobcat, "You've got competition." As my dispatcher, he had a right to be especially proud of this victory.

I was clouded, confused. I was somehow less than everyone here, less capable, less ready, less anything. During the entire race, I thought there was a group ahead us. It was an illusion I had built because I could not accept the idea of winning. It was a miracle to me that I could stand at all, much less that I could stand among these very serious and talented couriers.

The weed was already being passed around, but I could not partake. I was standing up, walking off the fatigue. I leaned over, still dizzy, still confused, looking at those loose rocks again. Right there, from where I was, under the blue sunrise, on this red gravel, it was clear to me: I would never see my self in quite the same and way. They would certainly not see me the same either. To them, I was revealed as an insider, one of the few. Somewhere between us, a new respect was being bestowed on me, in the way of a forty dollar first prize.

I stood, walked away from this awkward shift in my sense of self and joined the group in laughter. I celebrated the fact that these people who were at once my competitors were also teammates. As red faced as some of them might have been at my success I knew that they would help me if I needed them. The bond was real, warm and respectful..

This unruly bunch, these colorful dropouts and rebels might be the only people I will ever be able to turn to and trust when my life is on the line. We all independently muscle through the same ignorance, the same abuse and the same every forms of disregard but between us a kinship runs deep. As we sat in a circle and enjoyed the sunrise, we were of a single mind, a single spirit, not for the pains that we had all endured but for the love we shared, the strength we felt and the spirit we celebrated in the underground domain of urban cycling.

Riding away that morning, the sun now high overhead, I felt a little sadness knowing that this victory would fall quietly on the world. For an hour or two I felt like the king of the city but then, riding below its enormous skyscrapers again, I could see that my throne was fragile. Victory here meant nothing to the world. Outside of that tight circle, my newfound awards and accolades, my feats and heroic deeds simply vanished.

I was a new man, a graduate, but no one seemed to notice, no one really cared. This time we share is the dark ages for the cyclist. Without each other, our greatest struggles would disappear like a lost language, like an endangered species, like a dream disturbed too quickly. Without each other our history vanishes, our justice vanishes and the culture that unites us admits a sad defeat.

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