

# ODYSSEY OF THE LONE RANGER

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## PART ONE

Pitch black and frozen in the snow-choked Rockies north of the border, and all Justin Simoni could think of was making it to the cabin.

He'd felt the frigid air trying to penetrate his clothes, watched puffs of his labored breathing illuminate and disappear in the night sky; he'd seen the Grizzly tracks stomped into the snow.

Simoni was on day two of the 2011 Tour Divide, a single-stage, self-supported mountain bike race that would take him through two Canadian provinces and five U.S. states from Banff to the border of Mexico. Deemed "the world's toughest bike race," it's the longest off-pavement cycling route on earth, traversing 2,745 miles of mountainous, variable terrain that crosses remote passes of the Continental Divide 39 times. By the

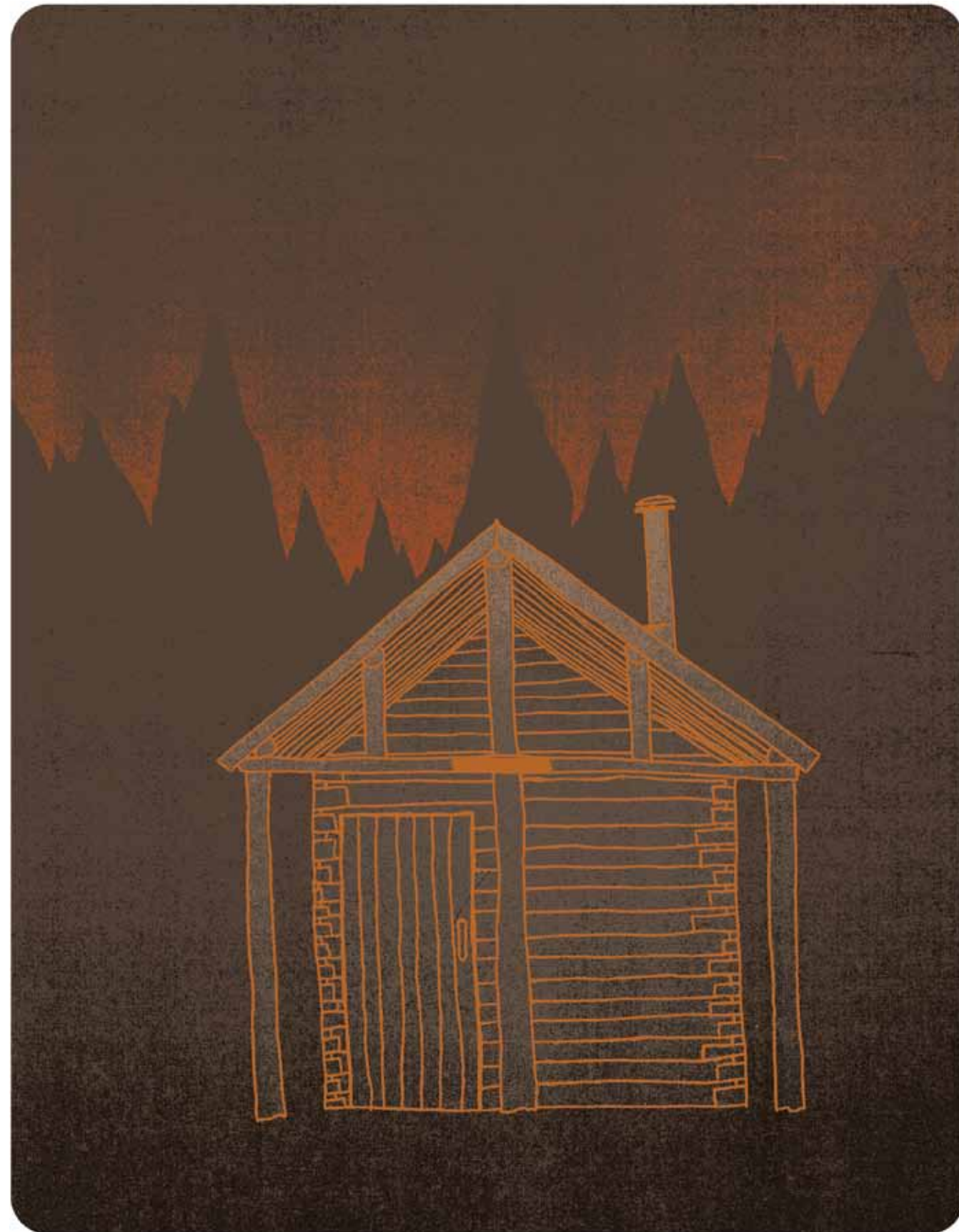
end, riders ascend some 200,000 vertical feet. That's equivalent to summiting Mount Everest from sea level seven times, on a bike.

But Simoni wasn't riding at all. Some 30 miles from the nearest remnants of civilization, a semi-abandoned coal mine camp (55 miles from an actual town), he was dragging his bike and gear along as he snow-shoed the route in frigid determination, using one telescoping hiking pole as a makeshift ice axe on the steeper pitches. He was covering ground at the heartbreaking clip of a half-mile an hour.

That spring, heavy snowfall had enveloped much of the northern Rockies, forcing race organizers to devise a series of detours around the most snowed-in areas. That didn't fly with Simoni's vision of the race. For Simoni, whose

background is art, the Tour Divide was a performance piece. To travel through a harsh, desolate landscape in Emersonian self-sufficiency represented the filling of a blank canvass with something beautiful. It wasn't about speed or winning, but taking the most aesthetic line through the wilderness. He became the rogue competitor, the only one out of 64 riders still in the race with enough lunacy to disregard the detours and ride the original route.

That morning he'd eaten three breakfast burritos while pouring over maps of the upcoming Flathead Valley, a winter-bound nowhere grimly referred to as the "Serengeti of Southern Canada" for its population of large, carnivorous animals. He pondered what lay ahead: How many miles of snow will there be? What happens if a bridge is out at a river crossing and the water level is insane?



What if I go 150 miles and then get stuck? The Grizzlies. There's no one out there to help. There's nothing out there but snow and trees and hungry animals emerging from dens of hibernation, frigid June nights that would fit seamlessly in with the middle of a Canada January. It might as well be the Himalaya out there.

Simoni shook away his doubts. "Where's your sense of adventure?" he says now, remembering how he'd guilted himself into it. "I don't know what's going to happen, but forget it. I'm going to do it."

He went to the store and loaded up on three days worth of food from the bulk bins, pedaled out of town and up an empty dirt track. In the distance: nothing but white-capped peaks, vertical and foreboding, with exposed granite meeting the upper reaches of avalanche chutes. After 200 feet of elevation gain he hit the first snow patches, soggy and impossible to ride in or walk with bike shoes. There was no choice but to strap on the snowshoes, start the slog, and hope the cabin he'd heard of actually existed.

"You take two steps, drag the bike, take two steps, drag the bike. It was exhausting work," says Simoni.

He summited three passes that day. The downhill to lower elevations weren't any easier. Where the snow was melted, the dirt roads became unrideable creek beds littered with downed trees from earlier storms.

"I wanted to reach the cabin because every time I hit snow there would be all these animal footprints," he says. "Like, bear tracks—serious, huge bears. And if there wasn't bear tracks there'd be bear scat, and if it wasn't bear scat it would be the remainder of some meal."

At 10:30 at night, Simoni finally hit Butts Cabin. There was wood chopped and an axe for splitting



kindling. He lit an enormous fire, laid out all of his clothes that were either frozen stiff or wet from sweat and sleet and rain. Then he noticed the girlie calendar—"The Girls of Canada"—hanging from the cabin wall, open to the previous month. In the flame-warmed bliss of Butts Cabin on the second night of a grand journey, miles and miles from any other human, it was just him and a still of Miss May watching the blaze turn to embers, the night return to full dark.

"I was like, for the second day of this race, this is pretty spectacular already," says Simoni. "Doin' pretty good. Feeling pretty wild."

Simoni, a wizard-bearded ectomorph sporadically residing in Denver in unfinished warehouses, basements, art spaces or friends' converted music studios depending

on the ebb and flow of finances, wasn't always interested in bicycles. Several years ago he was a car-driving art student who excelled at neglecting his health, preferring instead travels of the imagination, expansion of the mind, transportation from the luxurious seat of a gas-propelled machine.

First, he attended the University of Colorado at Boulder, but between frustration at the lack of resources devoted to the art department and a series of personal hardships (His mother, who he learned had been a closet alcoholic his entire life, and his father, who had terminal cancer and didn't know it, both died within six months of each other. Between the two deaths, his girlfriend broke off their relationship.) he dropped out of college to get his head clear. Eventually he found a home at the

Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design, where he established a personal artistic brand of semi-performance pranksterism.

Bikes came into play when his Geo Metro, which he'd taken cross-country and throughout the Rockies despite its propensity for overheating and losing brakes, fully and finally broke down. He bought a \$10 junker at a pawnshop to get around town and realized quickly that motorized vehicles have no place in the matters of life and adventure. Movement is so much more interesting, so much more rewarding, when self-propelled.

Simoni dove deep into the Denver bike scene, and inspired by the ventures of his new friends at the bike shop he frequented, Salvagetti, embarked on his first long-distance ride: a Denver

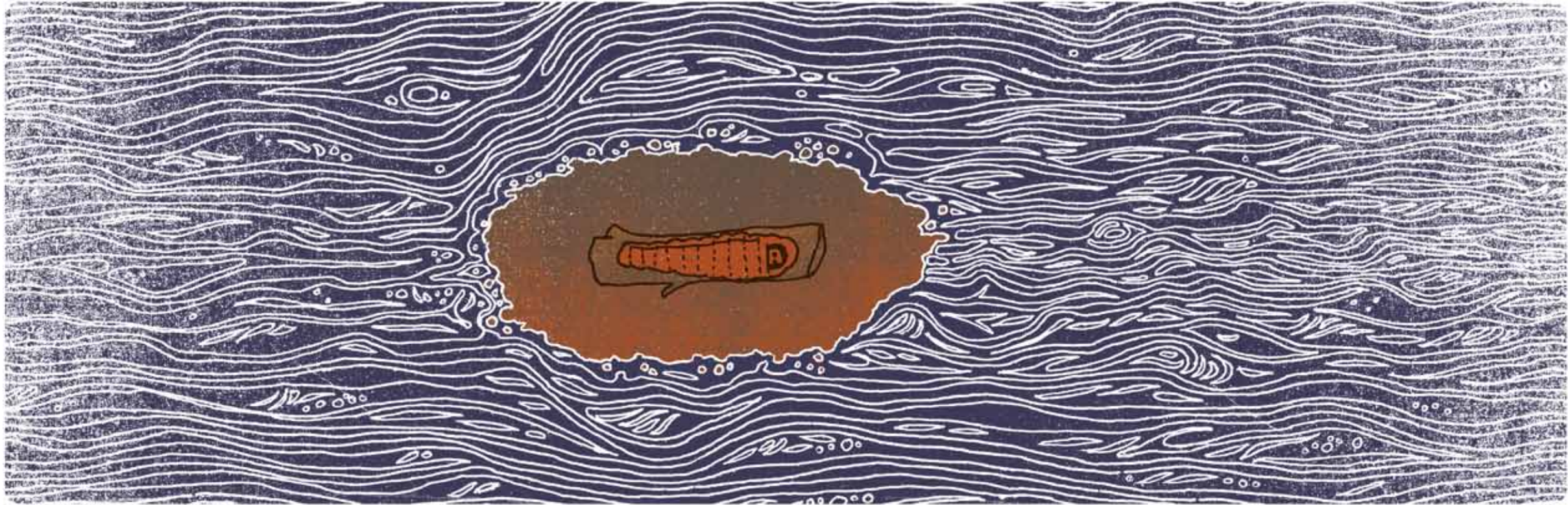
to Boulder jaunt that left him aching but enthusiastic about the wonders of the bicycle. This simple machine could take him *anywhere*.

Before long, Colorado's urban centers couldn't contain him. He'd court the mountains of the Front Range, seeking out obscure, high altitude trails of increasing distances. He started saving up for longer adventures in unknown territory: to the West Coast to ride from Vancouver to the border of Mexico along the Pacific Coast Highway; to Europe to follow the route of the Paris-Roubaix spring classic, race from Paris to Amsterdam. At home, Simoni was a regular at critical mass rides, hanging out with the pseudo-Anarchists in town attending potlucks and bike proms. He'd meet up with the bike messengers and started racing Alley Cats. On a

separate trip to France, he spent two months along the Tour de France route, wondering what it must have been like in its earliest days: devoid of support teams, dope, celebrity and slickness. A thing not unlike the Tour Divide, a challenge of the spirit, mind and body on terrain unpaved, self-supported, a race not for any profit other than the enrichment of the soul.

"The Tour de France is a different thing now, and I'm not that smooth," says Simoni. "But if you have this romantic desire to partake in something that happened 100 years ago, what do you do? Well, the Tour Divide is kind of the same thing."

Matthew Lee, the Tour Divide legend whose won it five times and now serves as race director, calls it an "anti-race" that's stuck



to its 100 percent self-supported, DIY ethos since its inception.

“It was designed so everyone could participate. There didn’t need to be any infrastructure. No administrators. No nothing. Everyone just show up and race on your honor and report your time at the end. There will be no entry fee and no prize money.”

The official website describes the Tour Divide’s challenges as “to keep moving and be moved; exist well outside one’s comfort zone in tackling a cross-continent bikepacking odyssey; finish as fast as possible without cracking.”

For Simoni, the Divide didn’t appear on his radar until years later. He was growing accustomed to the art of long-haul bike trips, but the kind that allowed for ice cream stops and long rest days, invitations from cute girls with private pools. Compared to his trip in France, riding the Divide seemed like insanity, not even a consideration. With the

Divide, it’s, “Sorry girls, I’m answering to a higher power.” And he wasn’t ready for that.

What he was ready for, however, was a hike-and-bike extravaganza through New Zealand, using its extensive backcountry network to find the more desolate, wild corners of the country.

But he didn’t know what was in store for him. Early on in what was supposed to be a modest three-day hike, he made a wrong turn, forded a swift-moving river and wound up on what was rapidly becoming a smaller and smaller island, all sides surrounded by the rising tide of a flashflood. And shortly, Simoni looked up to a dark sky sending down the year’s first snow.

As the sun set and the temperature dropped, Simoni cocooned in his down sleeping bag and perched on a log at the highest point of the island, and prayed that it wouldn’t become submerged during the night. Every few hours he had to ring out his soaked sleeping

bag, which contained a bottle of boiled water at the bottom to keep frostbite from invading his feet.

“I couldn’t get off this little island in the middle of the river for three days,” he says. “I was just waiting for the water to recede—and it didn’t. I was like, whoa, I’m going to die at 27. How ironic.”

It got him pondering the absurdity of unnecessary risks. Even the most epic adventure couldn’t possibly be worth premature death. “It was the closest I’d ever been to really getting myself in trouble and almost dying.”

On the third day, the water finally withdrew enough for him to retrace his steps to the other side, and he made a sodden walk back to the trailhead. He retrieved his bike and rode 60 miles to the nearest town where a doctor told him he was fine, just some infected scrapes and a mild case of “Saturday Night Palsy,” the effects of compressed nerves in his arm that had been penned underneath him while on the island.

It wasn’t the last time he’d be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Having taken a fancy to riding to the base of the Front Range’s highest mountains, and then either biking or hiking up them, he was later stranded in his tent on an abyss-overlooking ridge near the summit of 13,587-foot Mount McClellan, pounded by hail and shrieking wind, thinking that inclement weather, whether it be a rising flashflood or a high-country hail storm, was not a force to reckon with. It got him thinking about safety, but also, increasingly, about attempting the Tour Divide.

Two days after entering the wilds of Canada’s Flathead Valley, Simoni emerged in the town of Eureka at one in the morning, dead last. There, he made his first call-in to the MTBCast, the race’s communications service for riders to leave messages of update and encouragement to those on the path and fans following the race online. In the recordings he sounds at a loss for words, but elated, like a man who succumbed to the joys

of tripto/psilocybin/psychedelic substances and rediscovered how amazing the world is:

“Hello! This is Justin ‘Mountain Man’ Simoni, AKA ‘The Artist.’ I made it through the Flathead Valley of British Columbia. Very quickly—lots of snow on Flathead Pass. Just—desolation. There’s no one there because there’s no way to get in it. Incredible night at the Butts Cabin. It was just me and Miss May on the girlie calendar. Another slog through Cabin Pass. Beautiful Mountains and a perfect, perfect eggshell blue day on the inverted ridge, and then a midnight traverse over Gulpin Pass and on to Eureka.”

Simoni bivied on a patch of grass between Eureka’s church and the old library. He slept four hours before mobbing Café Jax for much needed calories, and then checked the Tour Divide message boards. He found that his half-mile-an-hour, completely-different-from-what-everyone-else-was-doing expedition was garnering much

attention. (Tour Divide riders are all equipped with a tracking device that broadcasts their exact whereabouts along the route.)

“What’s that one guy doing?” one commenter wondered. “He’s completely off track.”

Another asked, “Did he get lost?”

“No, no. He’s actually doing the route. Everyone else is doing the detour,” they were told.

“You know,” Simoni justified, “I’m not the guy that’s going to win this thing. But I sure as hell would rather be the guy who tries to do the part that no one thinks they can do and has to turn back.”

With the first section completed, Simoni proved to himself that it could be done, and he wasn’t about to bail. He left Eureka and aimed himself in a circuitous route that would eventually bring him to Whitefish. Between the two stops, while the other racers took to the highway in a

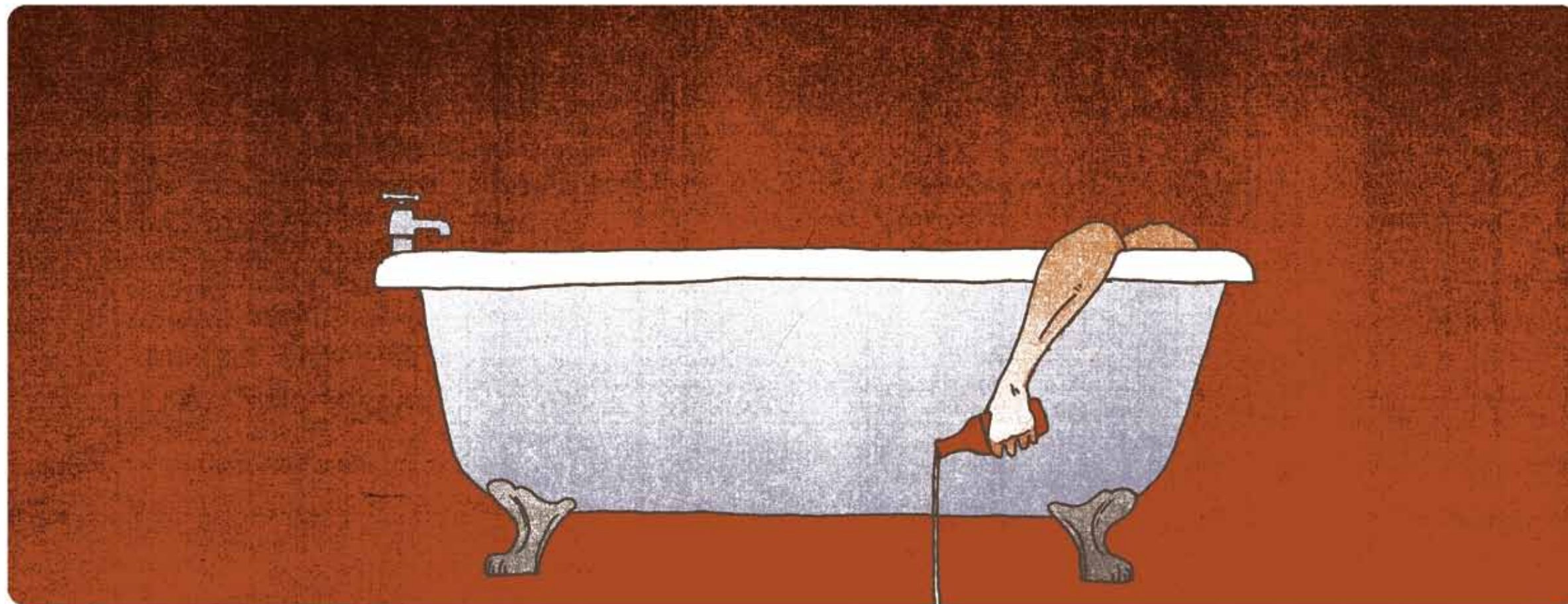
straight shot, Simoni faced two continental divide crossings.

Whitefish Divide was an avalanche zone of destruction: scattered rubble of fallen boulders and downed trees, a “Beware of Bear” sign covered nearly to the brim in snow. “Is the snow consolidated?” Simoni wondered, with no real way of gaging the freeze/thaw cycle that affects such conditions. “Eh, basically.” And decided, somewhat tentatively, “This should be fine.”

He made it through without drama, but by the time Simoni was somewhere in the middle of Red Meadow Lake Pass, he was lost. Night arrived and a dense fog had rolled in. The trail disappeared under the snow and all directions looked the same: blank and black and cold and shrouded in a cemetery-like vapor.

“I got so tired, it was so late, and I was walking a half-mile an hour for so long that I just got to the point where I didn’t know how to go forward. It’s not like it’s a technical climb,” he explains. “I don’t have to bring pitons out and bang them into a wall. But it’s just the worst kind of snow slogging you can imagine.”

Noting that the pass’s name included the word “Lake” and reminded of previous misadventures in New Zealand, Simoni decided to bivvy. An icy plunge, while surrounded by miles of snow without a way to warm up and no shelter, would result in frostbite if lucky, hypothermia and death if Mother Nature treated him with the indifference it did every other creature in the forest. By now, Simoni decided that when accidents happen, it’s generally the snowball effect of a collection of small mistakes. So he put on everything he had, slid into his four-years-old down sleeping bag—the same one he’d had in New Zealand—and



weatherproof bivvy sac. He curled up around the trunk of a gigantic tree and went to sleep.

Four in the morning: Simoni awoke soaked and freezing. Soon a thin haze of light streamed into the horizon, signaling a mandate to resume the trek to Whitefish.

His next call-in: “This is Justin ‘Lone Wolf’ Simoni,” he reported. “Rain most of the night, found shelter underneath a large pine tree. Not the *optimal* time to find that my bivvy is not 100% impermeable to water. A touch hypothermic.... Waterproof socks made out of plastic bags and packing tape my saving invention.”

Simoni had prepared, but not for this, not exactly. Yeah, he’d been riding in the mountains. He practiced walking his bike in the snow over Colorado’s Boreas Pass, sometimes even for miles.

But *this*? No. Not 10-, 15-, 20-mile stretches of soulless misery piled end to end for days at a time.

In the months leading up to the Tour Divide, Simoni was in “Monk Mode,” a hermit-like existence devoted to the obsession of exercise and suffering. He averaged thirty to forty hours per week in the saddle and covered 1,200 miles a month on all kinds of terrain. Living in a friend’s basement in Denver at the time, his daily regimen consisted of waking up late, looking at his bikes and taking whichever one wasn’t broken for a five-hour ride. Waiting for him at home in cans and bags would be a simple meal of rice and beans, because, as he says, “that’s all I could afford.” At six or seven p.m., he’d begin the brewing process of several French Press pots of coffee and would work “till my eyes would be dripping,” doing all he could to keep his business—web design and other

computer-associated sorcery—afloat. If it were storming out, he’d either brave the weather and practice snowshoeing with his bike or hop on his roommate’s rollers, put on Kung-Fu movies and pedal for three hours straight. With adrenaline pumping at the fight scenes, he’d be screaming, “All right! Kick some ass!”

He’d pass out hard every night, get up the next day and do it all over again. Still, the Tour Divide was proving to be next-level misery, something for the masochists. Of course, he had himself to thank for it.

Simoni arrived in Whitefish at 3:00 p.m. His stay consisted of replacing his chain (he’d eventually ruin three more), then eating a donut while drinking a beer in a bathtub where he lost consciousness in the warm water as episodes of

*The Deadliest Catch* rolled on in the background. And later, contrasted harshly by the tiny mountain town, washing his clothes in the electric-light-crazed madhouse of a laundry mat placed inside an arcade placed inside a casino.

Simoni grew up the last of four siblings in a household of *über*-athletes. His father, a self-employed social worker, was also an ultra-racer who regularly ran 24-hour races around tracks, changing direction every six hours to circumvent debilitating dizziness. His sister was a track star who still has unbroken records at the high school where she now teaches English. Justin—not so much. He loved skateboarding, and to a lesser extent, rock climbing, individual pursuits that were “somewhat lonely pastimes, but mental.” He never liked school, preferring instead to brood over subjects of interest on his own.

They lived in a quaint New England community founded in 1634 near Hartford, Connecticut. It was the picture of suburban docility, an oaky, Andy Griffith fantasy complete with a white picket fence, a cliché cemetery nearby that always seemed to be fogged in and a church modeled after another in Boston.

“It was cool growing up there,” says Simoni. “But once you become a teenager it’s really boring. If you want to do anything exciting you’d have to go to Boston or New York,” he says. He eventually escaped the confines of Connecticut, drifted for a while until his brother—who like Justin was a gifted artist, loved skateboarding and had few friends growing up—persuaded Simoni to “get my shit together.” He finished high school strong and then committed himself to the life of an artist at CU, and later, the Rocky Mountain College of



Art and Design (RMCAD). He was the kid who would be late to most classes, but would also break into school afterhours and on weekends to work on his projects.

While still at RMCAD, Simoni disappeared from classes for weeks and returned with micro-photo installations from a cross-country trip. He'd taken to the road in his Geo Metro with a copy of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. He'd find his name in letters in the Russian epic that had nothing to do with him, skewer the clippings with a straight pin to form miniature sculptures and would take pictures of them in the landscape as he traveled from Colorado to Seattle. The project became his graduation show. (Years later, he extended it when he rode the West Coast, continuing the installations from where'd he'd left off at Seattle's Space Needle.)

Another project was a portrait of Jack Kerouac, a mosaic comprised of painted letters taken from the first page of *On the Road*, documented by a time-lapse video of the 180-hour long formation process. And later still, Simoni launched *The Next Big Thing*, which became, as *Westword's* Alan Prendergast wrote, "a satiric meditation on Warholian fame."

"*The Next Big Thing* took a good half a year of my life to execute," Simoni wrote on his blog. "Very simply put, I decided one day to become famous. The idea was that if I told enough people that I was, people would believe me and treat me accordingly. It worked."

He plastered Denver with 5,000 flyers featuring "a very smug self-portrait" and the title of the project; he dressed up in a suit comprised of said flyers; and

planned media spectacles around town by crashing art openings and dance clubs. The culminating event was a celebration of Warhol's factory, in which he dressed up as Andy Warhol himself while a band played Velvet Underground covers and a Valerie Solanas look-alike stalked the crowd with a gun.

Simoni's last class at RMCAD was a capstone, which required students to read "this "horrible, horrible book" with "all these awful" declarations: "You will never make money doing this. You will stop making art as soon as you get out of school. You're going to be afraid to ever try this again. So start looking for another job."

*Fuck that humbuggery*, Simoni thought. He immediately rented out a live/work studio, which was immediately condemned and scheduled for implosion.

Fortunately, he was also interning at the Andenken Gallery in Denver, the owner of which heard his plight and sympathized. Together they built a new studio in the gallery where Simoni lived for over three years. He produced art and hosted galleries. Events were scheduled every Friday night, events like "Post-Apocalyptic Night," which had a chocolate fountain, a thunder dome and fights between roller derby girls. Simoni dressed up as Snake Plissken from *Escape from New York* with a cobra tattoo painted on his stomach and an eye patch. He refereed the matches.

His art was becoming almost meditative in its complexity and bombast; his bike rides longer and harsher; his concept of "extreme" began to include spectacles he was perfectly capable of participating in. It all culminated in a single realization: it was time to ride the Divide.

In January, Simoni sent Tour Divide organizers his letter of intent. He began with a quote from Edward Abbey, a rumination on the rights of the "venturesome minority" whose paths should never be obstructed:

"Let them get lost, sunburnt, stranded, drowned, eaten by bears, buried alive under avalanches—that is the right and privilege of any free American." Simoni continued with his own words: "My heart is strong ... I would not take this challenge as a fool's romp. But I also wouldn't accept Adventure if there was none to be had! This will be a quest of the spirit, another small step toward my own enlightenment, a performance of art in the noblest sense: to draw one long, single, simple line through incredible terrain, with a simple bicycle. Before I start the Tour Divide, my hope is to cast away some of the weight that makes my own self so heavy—so that gravity itself has

little pull on my Machine and I as I fly up barren mountain passes and dash down lush valleys."

If only.

Richmond Peak, Montana: a run-down Simoni using a telescoping hiking pole as an ice axe; a nearly vertical ridge pitching him and his bike down into a basin of deep snow; a lone tree catching the bike, Simoni smashing the hiking pole into the slope to self-arrest and coming to a stop ten feet away from his gear. Simoni kicking steps into the snow, gripping the bike and in explosive jumps, propelling himself and the bike up the slope, over and over for hours until finally hitting flat ground. More snow. More slogging. More exhaustion. But pure beauty. Perfect desolation.

"I'm going up Togwotee and Union Pass, and on to Pinedale." Simoni was at an ATV Rental/Subway sandwich shop in Island Park, Idaho, chatting with a local about his plans for entering Wyoming.

The local scoffed, "You're not doing any of that. Twenty miles of Union Pass is under snow." But Simoni was emboldened from his previous exploits. He was untouchable. More snow? Big deal.

"You know how hungry those bears are?" the local countered, proceeding so insistently that Simoni started having serious doubts. Getting stuck in the mountains just beyond the Grand Tetons would mean he'd have to backtrack over 100 miles—in Grizzly country. He thought, *Maybe this guy's right? Maybe it is time to take the detours. I feel good about what I've accomplished already.*

He decided to e-mail Matthew Lee to tell him that he'd changed his mind about doing the original route. "It's been fun, but I'm done snowshoeing this race,"

he wrote. "The locals are saying Wyoming is way too crazy."

A few minutes later the Subway sandwich artist walked into the ATV side of the building. She was holding a phone, said, "I'm looking for a really dirty, funky, stinky biker."

Simoni looked up, "Me?"

It was Lee. He'd "spot-stalked" Simoni using the live tracker and called Subway. "I don't want to say that you have to do this," he told Simoni, "but you should really think about it. I think you can do it."

"The locals say it's impossible, man. Gotta trust the locals."

"Yeah—but they don't know who you are or what you've done."

"... Or how stupid I am," Simoni said, but relented. "Okay, man. For you."

Lee remembers the conversation well. "At that point he had already been through so much. He was alone and had been struggling with all these massive passes. He was coming up on a critical junction where he was going to have to make a decision about whether or not to take on another really big snow stretch. I kinda wanted to see him hang on to his laurels of riding the main route throughout the entire race. It was definitely badass. And it was definitely a little crazy ... but it worked out."

Which is to say Simoni survived.

First: he got lost—again. At its summit, Union Pass becomes an expansive subalpine plane, and with a blanket of snow there was nothing to differentiate the route from any other portion of the wilderness. He searched for hours, ditched his bike to search with less burden, lost it, and by the time he was reacquainted with his gear



a thunderstorm was rolling in. Thinking there might be a forest service station with topographic maps in an earlier bailout town to help him *orienteer* his way over the pass, he backtracked 25 miles to Dubois, losing 2,700 feet of elevation gain in the process.

Second: the perpetually broke Simoni was having more money trouble. An electronic funds payment he'd been waiting on was inexplicably stalled. Hard cash was lean. He ended up purchasing the topo maps and a pair of sunglasses on credit. Peanut butter, bread and water were his sources of sustenance throughout the state of Wyoming.

But he made it through, first out of the mountains and then the seemingly infinite Great Divide Basin, a semi-arid desert of brush and antelope and wind. Then on to Colorado, his home turf, the terrain he could ride with his eyes closed. After that, a sunbaked New Mexico, which he assumed

would be a breeze compared to these high alpine sections. Hope was restored, and Simoni pedaled into Colorado with spirits high.

There's the myth of the cantankerous, post-impressionist artist, where half the time they're drinking themselves stupid in the bar and the other half they're manic, staying up all night painting in a kind of Zen-punctuated frenzy. "There's some truth to that," says Simoni, and like the myth, he throws himself into projects with feverish obsession.

"I've always been someone that's never done one thing. In school, someone starts their painting style and they refine it and refine it and refine it, for years. And their art is beautiful. It's incredible. But I can't do that. I have to get heavily into something and then do it. Like the Tour Divide, I had never done a mountain bike race in my life. I bought the bike [a 30-speed Kona] April 1<sup>st</sup> and did the race in June. I had two

months. The last time I had been on a mountain bike I was fifteen."

Simoni frames everything he does as an art project, and there are three phases to every art project: the research phase, the phase when you create, and then afterward when you think of what you did and formulate what it means.

"Creativity isn't a faucet," says Simoni. "You can't just turn it on and get creative ideas. It's fickle. There's a cycle. When you're out of ideas, that's when it's time to do research and take ideas in. Read books, see what your friends are doing, ask questions, study other artists and thinkers and performers until your own ideas blossom once again." Riding the Tour Divide was research. "What will happen if I push myself to my physical and mental limits? Who knows? And maybe it is intangible, but"—pointing to his heart—"it's in here." ☺

(For Part II visit [switchbackmb.com](http://switchbackmb.com))

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