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RICHARD BEN CRAMER

editor

GLENN STOUT, series editor

STEVE FRIEDMAN

The Race of Truth

FROM BICYCLING

CHOOSING IS AN ORDEAL. Chicken korma versus chicken rogan josh should not matter so much. To the ravaged cyclist, though, it is a matter of life and death. He needs to be vigilant. How can he afford not to be? Ten years ago, just a short bike ride from here, the racer peered through a chilly, driving rain and glimpsed the future of his sport in a blinding instant and what he saw brought him fame and riches and love. And then, for the past ten years, the mad vision tortured him.

He can't afford such prescience anymore. He can't survive the agonies it exacts. His doctors have warned him. His wife has pleaded with him. Even his former competitors and detractors, the ones he spent years challenging and vanquishing and mocking, with the hubris only a Prometheus on pedals could summon, even they wish him nothing but peace, because they have witnessed the disfiguring price of revelation.

He was an inventor and a visionary and a champion, who twice stood atop the cycling world by riding farther in one hour than anyone ever had, and, today, he needs to forget all that. He needs to concentrate on the moment. The doctors have told him that, too. Otherwise, what happened that Christmas might happen again. He couldn't bear doing that to his family. He needs to calm down, to take care of himself. He needs to order dinner.

But how can he? Korma versus rogan josh is just one of the agonizing choices facing him. His eight-year-old son wants Kashmiri naan, and though there will be plenty to share with his ten-year-old brother, the eight-year-old isn't much of a sharer. The older boy deserves his own bread, to make him feel special. Garlic bread — that

might be the answer. How does the older boy feel about garlic bread? He doesn't feel so great about it, but he *really* doesn't feel great about sharing. The older boy is dyslexic, like the cyclist was when he was a child, and he is clumsy, too, just like his father. The cyclist wants to protect his firstborn. He wishes someone had protected him. He will take a chance: garlic bread.

The decision has cost the cyclist. He is blinking, squinting, grinding his jaw. It is September, chilly and damp in this coastal Scottish village, even inside the restaurant. But he is sweating. First his brow moistens, then beads appear on his broad forehead, and before long — even with him gulping at his pint of Diet Coke — sweat drips down his aquiline nose and onto the table.

His eyes are grayish blue, and he squints and blinks and clenches his jaw during times of stress, like ordering dinner, or when he hears a question that causes him pain, like one about that Christmas. He is olive-skinned, dark-haired, five-foot-eleven and 161 pounds, with broad shoulders and heavy, muscled thighs. In racing close-ups, his high cheekbones and angular jaw combine with an unusually full lower lip to exude lupine menace. At thirty-seven, he has gained about six pounds, taking the edges from his face. Combined with the nervous tics, the effect now is more prey than predator.

The bread arrives and the boys are squabbling and the first pint of Diet Coke is gone and the sweat continues to drip from the racer's nose onto his appetizers, which he has ordered with enormous, excruciating difficulty.

"Oh, for God's sake," his wife says, doing a brave imitation of a laugh. "Wipe your brow."

The racer laughs, too, a small, helpless sound.

"It's a mark of health, you know," he says. "Sweating like that."

"Not Including the Man-Hours"

Bicycling's giants strap on heart monitors and watt-measuring computers and hire coaches who calculate maximal oxygen uptake and calibrate recovery time to the millisecond. They travel with nutritionists, and they ride state-of-the-art machines produced by sophisticated engineering costing hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Graeme Obree lived in Irvine, Scotland, a grim little town in a green, hilly district hard on the Irish Sea. When he was twenty-eight years old, broke, in debt, and on welfare, he announced that he was going to break one of cycling's most prestigious and time-honored records. He said he would do it on a bicycle he had built himself, for \$200 ("not including the man-hours, naturally"). He ate canned sardines and chili con carne, vegetables and marmalade sandwiches ("a pretty good diet, I'd say") and boasted that he trained by "riding when I feel like it."

What followed over the next few years — world hour records in 1993 and 1994, world pursuit championships in 1993 and 1995, domination of time-trialing in the mid-'90s — infuriated cycling's image-conscious racing aristocracy as much as it inspired the sport's fans, dreamers and wheel-happy Walter Mittys. Obree's bike was as ungainly as it was original, his riding style as awkward as it was effective. He was funny and, on his bike, funny-looking. He was also something of a loudmouth, often complaining about rampant blood doping in professional biking, years before the highly publicized French and Italian drug investigations of 1998 and beyond proved him right.

After his first and most shocking world championship, in 1993, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) conducted a telephone poll and named Obree "Scotland's most intriguing sports personality." That's when bicycling's bureaucrats set out to destroy him. Or he began to destroy himself. He's still not sure.

"Don't Worry About That Boy"

He was a clumsy child, falling into streams, knocking into walls, cracking his head open so often that "the blood poured out every other week." His brother, Gordon, older by fourteen months, was the smart one. His little sister, Yvonne, was tougher than either. Graeme was dyslexic and sensitive, terrible at sports, terrible in the classroom. He liked building things, and would have enjoyed metal-work class if it weren't the central gathering place for his huskiest tormentors. Rather than working, he often stood with his back against a wall, a chisel in hand to ward off attackers. "It took me a year to make a trowel and half of a plant-holder bracket. I

could have finished both in half a day," he says. "I hated most of my childhood. The only way I had any social interaction was by getting in fights."

His father, John, says, "As far as we're concerned, he was just a normal boy. I wouldn't go so far as to say he was dyslexic. We just thought he was lazy about reading."

He wished his parents loved him more. Sometimes, he wished he were dead.

"I have no idea how I managed to pass as normal in school," writes Kay Redfield Jamison in *An Unquiet Mind*, her memoir of manic-depression, "except that other people are generally caught up in their own lives and seldom notice despair in others if those despairing make an effort to disguise the pain."

Obree pedaled. He'd discovered that by riding as hard as he could, he could almost forget that he didn't have any friends, that his parents always seemed disappointed in him. He began racing by fifteen, on a burgundy, pre-war bike, and at seventeen he won his first race, the eighteen-mile Ayr to Girvan time trial. Total haul: £50, or about \$100. He kept conquering local races, but he never won what he really wanted.

In 1985, when Obree was twenty and had found enough success on the local racing circuit that he'd parlayed his winnings into ownership of a local bike shop, his father came home early from work one afternoon and found his son sucking on the pipe of a canister of welding gas.

"He assured us it was an accident," John Obree says, "and he seemed to be perfectly all right afterwards. I tried to get him to seek medical attention, but he seemed to be all right."

This was all right for Obree: hopelessness, terror, a crushing fatigue that sent him to his bedroom, where he would wait under the covers — sometimes weeks and months — for the miraculous moment when the blackness lifted and was replaced with delight and otherworldly energy that made the horror show almost worth it. In good times, he never slept more than two or three hours a night. He hatched business schemes. He read Victorian novels, biology texts, essays, dozens of books at a time (never finishing any). He met a local girl, Anne, got married, won scores of time trials. He twice set the British record for distance in an hour. He sold the shop and joined with an investor to start a bike business.

For seven years, he alternately endured and reveled. By 1992, when he was twenty-six years old, it was mostly about enduring. His business had failed. Obree was broke, in debt, and Anne was pregnant. They often scabbled through kitchen drawers looking for coins to buy bread. He was taking government-sponsored typing and filing lessons — welfare — so he could become a receptionist.

He watched on television that summer as an Englishman named Chris Boardman rode to first place in the 4,000-meter pursuit at the Barcelona Olympics. Obree had raced Boardman many times. He was one of the few who usually defeated Obree, but not always, and not by much. And now Boardman had a gold medal. What did Obree have? Debt. Disappointed parents. An obscure place in local biking history, reserved for provincial oddballs who crouched when they pedaled.

“Everything,” he says, “was bleak. Pointless.”

His salvation came on a chilly Saturday afternoon when he was sitting alone, staring at his bike, in the Irvine bike shop where he still occasionally worked. A cold, horizontal rain was blowing in from the Irish Sea, beating against the storefront window. A slow reader, a lazy student, Obree nevertheless possessed an instinctive grasp of physics. He knew there were only two ways to increase speed: boost power output or reduce resistance. He was already pedaling as hard as he could. He stared out into the rain, then back at his bike. He kept staring at the bike.

What if he adjusted the handlebar? Moved the seat closer to the front, and rode with his arms completely folded under his body so air flowed cleanly around his torso? He'd have to learn to keep his entire body rigid. . . . But that would also increase pedal power. . . . But he could train his muscles. . . . And he would need. . . . But what if. . . ?

It took him three months to build the bike he envisioned. He used pieces of scrap metal from the bike shop and bearings he pulled from a washing machine.

In one of his first races, a ten-miler in Port Glasgow, he circled the roundabout at the halfway mark, where the race marshal stood with a local cop.

The cop had never seen anything like the bike — or Obree. He thought he was watching a handicapped racer trying to keep up

with the others. "Look at that poor guy," the cop said. "Somebody's gone and built a special bike for him."

"Don't worry about that boy," the marshal said. "I think he's going to win this thing."

"There Are No Words"

Obree's radical new bike was faster than anything he'd ever ridden, faster, maybe, than any other bike on earth.

To the gentlemen of the sport, Obree and his bike were a freak show — a lucky tinkerer on a monstrosity rather than an athlete. Professionals at the races called him the Praying Mantis, because of his riding position.

He'd come home from his receptionist training, wheel out his odd bike at dark, and ride as hard as he could, over the biggest hills, in the biggest gears, in the pitch black. If he pushed faster and harder, sometimes the black mood would lift, and *that* was the bike's real magic. "Everything made sense. It made more sense than it had ever made before. I was invincible. I could do anything."

Afterward, he'd lie in bed awake, fantasizing about the next evening's ride in an effort to quiet the question he could never completely ride away from: "What's the point," he says he thought, over and over. "What's the point? What's the point?"

One night he saw the point. He saw what would forever stop the pain. He would ride his strange bicycle farther in an hour than any human being ever had. Graeme Obree — clumsy, dyslexic receptionist-in-training on the dole — would triumph in an event so forbidding that most of cycling's greatest professionals avoided it, a challenge so ravenous it consumed even its champions. He would seek the Hour Record.

The race that Obree hoped would save him is merely a sixty-minute sprint around a banked track. In its utter simplicity lies its irreducible brutality. There are no coddling slipstreams, no coasting strategies, no tactical slowdowns. A man simply gets on a bike and pedals as fast as he can, as far as he can.

The Tour de France brings its champions worldwide acclaim, deep and flowing income streams, the hallowed yellow jersey. But it

is the Hour Record, not the Tour, that is known among biking cognoscenti, simply and starkly, as *The Race of Truth*.

"The absence of wind, the regularity of terrain, and the depth of self-knowledge necessary to maintain a near-peak effort for 60 minutes have chopped through the ranks of great cyclists like a tsunami across a coconut-festooned atoll," wrote Owen Mulholland, a prolific bike scribe, in 1991.

"How much hubris must you have to say, 'I can ride a bike faster in an hour than any person who has ever walked the face of the earth, and I'm going to do it in this place, on this day, at this time?'" says Andrew Coggan, a longtime cyclist and sports physiologist at St. Louis's Washington University. "That's why so many champions haven't even attempted it — they've figured out the ratio of benefit to reputation risk."

Obree called Mike Burrows, the premier designer who'd built Boardman's gold medal-winning bike, and asked him to improve on his vision. Burrows's luminous, pearly white version used carbon, was wider in front than Obree's, and more than four pounds heavier — but was aerodynamically more effective and mechanically more efficient.

Anne urged her husband to ride the bike he'd built himself. It was a touching sentiment, inspired by love and faith. In *The Race of Truth*, though, sentiment holds the same approximate value as a thatch hut on a coconut-festooned atoll, immediately pre-tsunami. So at 1:50 P.M. on a Friday afternoon in July, on a wooden track in Hamar, Norway, Obree mounted the Burrows-built machine.

Friends had warned him that he could not break the Hour Record. Journalists and biking fans on the street all told the Scotsman the same thing — he was attempting the impossible, trying to achieve the unthinkable. They were right, but they had no idea what he was really trying to do.

"Now take a deep breath," the starter said. "This is a very big deal, this is [Francesco] Moser's record, now get hold of yourself."

He pedaled as hard as he could, and it wasn't enough, so he pedaled harder. And when he had finished pedaling, and the hour was used up, Obree had traveled 50.8 kilometers (31.56 miles), farther than anyone ever had at sea level. A French television crew rushed him as he crossed the finish line, presenting him with a huge bou-

quet of flowers. It was a great achievement. But not great enough. He had fallen short of Moser's mark, set at high altitude in Mexico City, by three-tenths of a kilometer, less than two-tenths of a mile.

When Eddy Merckx, generally acknowledged as the greatest cyclist ever, finished his Hour Record in 1972, he could barely speak. As two thousand people cheered, including fifty-three reporters and the former king of Belgium, Merckx was asked about what he had done. When he was able to summon his voice, he said the past sixty minutes were "the longest of my career. . . . I will never try it again."

Obree told the French television crew he wouldn't accept their flowers. Then he told the track officials something else: "I'm going again."

Two Races of Truth — consecutively? Out of the question, race officials said. Obree insisted. The officials relented, but only if he returned to his hotel for the night. If he still wanted to race the next morning, if he could even *walk*, they would open the track.

He was there at 9:50 A.M., without Burrows's gleaming racer. The Scotsman mounted the dull, oil-smudged machine he'd cobbled together.

"Are you sure you're ready?" the starter said. "This is Moser's record now." It was the same pep talk.

"Are *you* ready?" Obree spat out.

"Yeah," the starter said, "but . . ."

The Praying Mantis was off.

To ride for an hour at faster than thirty miles per hour puts strain on the body that few people ever experience. A human heart can beat only so rapidly before it fails; most of us can get within ten beats or so of that rate for a few minutes before we have to cease whatever we're doing. Obree would spend an hour there. He would produce an enormous amount of pure energy as he sped around the track, but fully three-quarters of it would burn off not as propulsion but as heat — the byproduct of his effort. At rest, while the core of the human body thrums along at 98.6 degrees, skin temperature stays at about 95. Even with intense exercise, it usually doesn't get above 100. During The Race of Truth, Obree's skin would burn at close to 107. In one hour, he would burn about 1,800 calories — about three-quarters of a human's average for an entire day.

"You can't go any faster, and you also can't go much longer," Coggan says. "It's like you're flying a jet, and you've hit your afterburners, and you're going through your jet fuel at a profligate rate. At some point, you have to slow down."

"I felt as if I'd reached the stage of death," Obree says. "I think I rode right through it."

He pedaled 51.596 kilometers, more than 32 miles. He broke Moser's nine-year-old record by almost half a kilometer.

A Parisian newspaper reporter wrote, "There are no words in the English or French language to do justice to this story."

The Praying Mantis had died on that track. Obree was now The Flying Scotsman. The Ayr Man. The French referred to him as "L'Homme de l'Heure" (The Man of The Hour). When he returned to Scotland, "I got fifty messages on my answering machine, many of them saying, 'We want to pay you thousands of pounds to come to a track meet.' Before, I'd make thirty to forty pounds a week if I won. Now I'd make thousands just to show up."

"I Was Art"

No one knew his secret.

He didn't want them to know. So as the reporters came calling, he created someone to greet them: a free spirit, a wild child who drank curdled yak's milk and trained only when the spirit moved him, biking's poor-kid bad-boy who made bikes with scrap scavenged from ditches and his mother's washing machine, and painted them with fingernail polish. They were half-truths, embellishments, and outright lies.

One facet of the say-anything persona wasn't artifice: the purist who pointed out, in every interview, how performance-enhancing drugs infected pro cycling, and how the governing board wasn't doing anything about it.

Biking fans adored him, never more so than when another cyclist set a new Hour Record only six days after Obree's magnificent ride, and the Scot vowed revenge. That the cyclist was Chris Boardman made the situation even more delicious.

Like Obree, Boardman was a time-trial specialist. Like Obree, he was obsessive. There, the similarities ended. Boardman was a pro-

fessional, a team member, with a coach, a manager, an Olympic gold medal, and a host of sponsors. He often worked out in a lab; his roadwork involved scrupulously crafted intervals. At races, his warm-ups were scripted to the second.

"Boardman was like a robot," says England-based sports physiologist Joe Beer, who coached Obree in the late '90s. "And I don't mean that as a put-down. Graeme would roll up to a race with his kit over his shoulder, in jeans, and he'd take his fleece off, roll up and down the road chatting people up, asking how they were doing, and the next minute he'd be on the track, going for it."

"I was art," Obree says, "where he was science."

That fall, at the 1993 World Track Championships, again at the wooden track in Hamar, the men raced each other in the four-kilometer pursuit. Obree won, setting a new world record.

That's the moment when adoration changed to something more primitive and powerful. That a man who trained when he felt like it and ate what he wanted could vanquish one of the most highly trained and analyzed athletes in the world — and that he could do it with such careless panache — it wasn't just a world record. It was a victory for the human soul, a triumph for scrappy underdogs. It was a stunning display of what unalloyed joy and unbridled faith could accomplish, wondrous proof that with belief in yourself, anything was possible.

If only people had known the truth.

"It was pure fear," says Obree. "It was a feeling of 'This isn't good enough. I'm not good enough.'"

For three months after the race, unbeknownst to everyone but Anne, he spit up blood every day.

"I've never heard of that happening to a human being," says Coggan, the sports physiologist. "It's quite common in thoroughbreds, though. The pulmonary blood pressure rises so much that capillaries burst and blood gets into the lungs. That's why you see horses frothing blood-flecked foam at the end of races."

In April of 1994, Obree traveled to Bordeaux to reclaim the Hour Record. His wife and his mother were walking with him when they saw a crowd of four thousand people surging toward the stadium.

"My mother turned to me and she asked, 'What are all those people here to see?'" he remembers. "I said, 'They're here to see me, Mum.' She said, 'Ah, no. That can't be. Ah, no.'"

He set a new record that spring afternoon, of 52.719 kilometers. He had triumphed, again, in *The Race of Truth*.

"Where Graeme Started to Disappear"

The Union Cycliste International (UCI), the worldwide governing body that sets the rules for competitive cycling, didn't like Obree. Maybe it was because he was a working-class loudmouth in a sport of traditionalists. Perhaps UCI president Hein Verbruggen had taken Obree's drug gibes personally. Or, as his supporters claim, maybe Verbruggen was protecting the athletic purity of the sport, making sure venerable events such as the Hour Record weren't cheapened by clever cheats and tinkerers.

Obree's brother, Gordon, died in 1994, when a truck hit the car he was driving. Obree felt himself sliding into darkness. "What's the point?" he kept thinking, fixating on his familiar, grim mantra. "What's the point? What's the point?" He tried to pedal it out of his mind. Just weeks before the World Track Championships, the UCI issued new regulations. Henceforth, it said, saddle position had to be X. The top of the frame had to have angles Y and Z. There were many rules, all of them collectively outlawing Obree's bike.

He had raced till he spit blood. He'd built the fastest bike in the world out of a washing machine. Did anyone think a piece of paper would stop him?

He tinkered with the bike, adjusted angles, moved the seat, until it was in compliance. He brought it to Palermo, Sicily, to defend his world pursuit title. On the ninth lap, after two and a half kilometers, Verbruggen, wearing a blue blazer, rushed onto the track flailing his arms. He couldn't object to the bike. He was objecting to the *way* Obree was riding it.

Obree pedaled harder. "I thought, if this guy stands here, I'm gonna kill him. I'm gonna run smack into him and I'm gonna kill him. I didn't give a shit."

Verbruggen jumped out of Obree's way.

Even swerving, unnerved, Obree finished with the third fastest time. It didn't matter. He was disqualified.

"I asked for the written version of the rule," Obree says, "and they said it's unwritten. To this day, I don't know the rule I was breaking."

Shaun Wallace, silver medalist at two world championships and a former holder of the Flying Kilometer record, says, "Graeme should have been the UCI's poster child. The two main problems in cycling at the time were drugs and the escalating cost of equipment. What they did to him was arrogance, plain and simple. That an 'everyday rider,' which is how they thought of Graeme, should hold the blue riband of cycling, they just couldn't take."

Sentiments like that were common, but they wouldn't help Obree. It seemed nothing could — until, six months later, in September of 1995, when he showed up at the World Track Championships in Bogotá, Colombia, with a new bike, one with an ultra-extended handlebar that put him almost prone over the frame when he rode. He'd created another groundbreaking position. This one he called Superman.

The Ayr Man, riding Superman, took back his world pursuit title. Worse, as far as the UCI was concerned, the Superman could more easily be copied than the Praying Mantis. Before long, the design dominated velodrome races all over Europe. In 1996, Boardman used the Superman to retake the Hour Record.

The UCI banned it forever. No one could ride the Superman again.

Obree was faring little better than his invention. He'd joined a French cycling team, Le Groupement, but lasted only weeks. Team officials say they sacked him because he didn't show up to training camp on time. He claimed the team wanted him to use drugs and fired him when he refused.

He was thirty-one, poor again, with two young children now, and little in the way of marketable skills. He could design machines, but where had that gotten him? He could endure pain, but what had that produced but more pain?

He traveled to the Atlanta Olympics in 1996 to represent Great Britain. "My father said, 'Well, that's a six-day wonder; when are you getting a job?'"

Obree didn't medal, and had to be coaxed from a fifth-floor window sill by a teammate. At home over the next few years, he won a few local races, but nothing like the Hour Record or the world pursuit championship. "That," says Beer, who was trying to coach Obree at the time, "was where Graeme started to disappear."

It was injuries, newspapers said. Bad luck. A viral infection. In

1998, walking through an airport in Geneva, he entered a pharmacy, bought 112 aspirin ("that's all they would sell me"), and washed them down with water. He was hospitalized in critical condition, diagnosed with manic-depression.

Sports fans had embraced the man-child who drank yak's milk and trained by whim, the fierce and lovable idiot savant of cycling, and they even loved the idea of the champion cheated by bureaucrats in blue blazers. But could they comprehend a hero driven by shame and self-loathing, an unloved son, a frightened child? Could they understand that their hero was unskilled at anything but tinkering and racing, that he despaired of ever pleasing his parents, that the one constant in his life, his wife, forever-faithful Anne, was asking if they could please move to a small farm so she could do something *she* loved every day, which was to ride her horse, a half-Thoroughbred, half-Appaloosa named Broxy, and that even though she said it would only entail a "wee mortgage," the racing riches were gone and the notion of moving and more debt scared him, made him feel more worthless than ever, but he didn't know how to tell her, so he didn't say anything?

Biking fans had no trouble at all recalling Obree on his glorious, two-wheeled gimcrack, but could they ever envision him silent, unshaven, huddled under the covers in his bed, hour after hour, day after day?

"What Kind of Life's He Going to Have?"

In the fall of 2000, he showed up at the World Track Championships. He had been hospitalized fifteen months, on and off, since the latest suicide attempt. He was swallowing a gram of lithium a day. He told reporters he was "probably fitter than at any time in my life," and announced another impending assault on the Hour Record.

He was training again, on a conventional bike this time but in yet another new position, and at speeds he'd never obtained before. He seemed more focused. He worked with a coach. And he got faster. He added glucose polymer drinks. And he got faster. He was only half a kilometer an hour off the pace he needed for a new Hour Record, a third title that would mean no one, not even him-

self, could ever doubt him again. He just needed a little more speed. But no matter what he did, he couldn't find it. There was only one thing left to try.

He stopped taking the lithium. "I thought, it'll be just the way it was before."

On a Monday, December 17, 2001, eight days before Christmas, he spoke with his psychiatrist in the morning and assured him he was feeling fine. He told Anne at midday he was going out for a ride. Late in the afternoon, when he hadn't returned, she worried he'd had a flat.

He'd ridden eight miles through a steady rain to the farm where Anne boarded Broxy, then parked his bike outside the horse's stall. He'd fashioned a noose from a long piece of plastic, tied one end to a rafter, and the other to his neck.

The farmer's daughter wasn't supposed to check on the horse that day, but she did. The teenaged girl's little brother usually tagged along, but that day her father accompanied her. He'd practiced forensic law, and knew about saving lives.

At the hospital, doctors told Anne that even if Obree recovered, he might be paralyzed or brain-damaged, that if his lungs hadn't held 6.5 liters of oxygen instead of the normal human capacity of 2.5, he'd already be dead. Anne asked if she should get a priest to perform last rites. The doctor said that would be a good idea. She rubbed the bald spot on Obree's head, because she knew he liked that.

Anne says Obree's mother visited the hospital one afternoon. "She took me aside," Anne says, "and she said, 'He survived and he'll likely try again. Wouldn't it better if he just went? Wouldn't it be better to let him go? What kind of life's he going to have with mental illness?'"

Glory

It is midnight in Irvine and we are sitting in the Obree kitchen, Graeme and Anne and I. The dinner went well (he chose rogan josh and the bread scheme worked) and the boys, whom both he and Anne call the "wee fellas," are in bed. But now it's pouring and Anne announces that the roof is leaking. That gets Graeme blinking and squinting and grinding his jaw.

Anne brews tea. The horizontal rain started this week. Graeme says it will last till spring.

He's writing a book about his struggles, on the advice of his psychologist, who thinks it might help. There's also the movie based on his life, which he's helping out on, a project that's been in the works since the mid-'90s. There's a canister of gas that needs to be fetched from ten miles away so he can weld frames for the two replica bikes he's building for the movie. (The original sits in the Museum of Scotland, in Edinburgh.) And because he's going to be the body double in the film, he needs to shed the lithium flab, especially in his calves, because there will be close-ups. He needs to fix the leaking roof, of course. And he wants to compete again, but he probably won't. It's too dangerous. His therapist has warned him that salvation lies now, in this moment. But this moment is not someplace he could ever easily rest — not even when people were thrusting flowers at him. Even then, he was always pedaling toward a phantasmal future of new records and a world where he was good enough. He knows he's not supposed to dwell on what was or agonize about what might be. But how can he help it? How could he ever?

One might as well ask what led him to the barn that cold December afternoon. The UCI's persecution? Cold parents? The corrosive woe of a clumsy, dyslexic boy? Or, considering where he fashioned his plastic noose, horribly misplaced anger toward Anne for her desire to move closer to her horse?

Or maybe it was just a few synapses misfiring, a molecular exchange missed here, another one made there — the same brain chemistry responsible for his blinding cognitive leaps, remarkable endurance, and high threshold of pain, all common manifestations of the manic phase of bipolar disorder. Maybe it doesn't matter how heroic or tragic your life is, how outsized your dreams and visions, as long as you take your medicine and get enough sleep and eat right and lay off booze and talk about your feelings.

He is working his jaw harder than ever and he is squinting and blinking and even though Anne just minutes ago served tea and is smiling, it is a fixed, determined grin. The interview is over. Graeme has too much on his mind to be talking to a reporter just now.

One last question, then: He brought such delight to so many

people. Was there ever a time he felt it himself — for an instant in Norway, ten years and a lifetime ago, when he broke the unbreakable Hour Record? Did he take a moment to bask in ecstasy? I ask him what joy felt like.

“There were no celebrations,” he says. “It made me feel justified. That I’d justified my existence as a person.” He is still blinking and squinting.

“As a person,” Anne says. She gathers up the tea cups, looks at her watch, then us, then back at her watch. She is not smiling anymore.

“I’d rather have died on the track than failed,” Obree says. “I’d rather have breathed blood than failed.”

“And you did,” Anne says.

“This was never about sport,” says the great hero, the noble champion, before he heads to his bedroom to rest. “This was never about glory.”