



## SEASON'S END BREAKING THE CYCLE

BY **DOUG WALSH**

→ BOUNDLESS fields of sunflowers stood before me, sulking, their lowered heads averting my gaze. They looked as I felt. The golden shimmer and sway of their summertime vigor was gone, their joyous radiance blown away, dried on the chilly October wind. I never before considered the death of these brown, desiccated stalks, just as I never before anticipated the effect these changing seasons would take on me. Or our trip. The tractor approached, blades unsheathed, ready to cut the pitiful plants down at the knees. Were our plans, too, in the thresher's path?

Setting off from Seattle was easy. We bid goodbye to friends, careers, and possessions on an unseasonably warm March morning and joined the throngs of cyclists in a lap around Lake Washington. The moment we had planned and saved for had come. Movement, at last! With our debts cleared and no forwarding address left, we were free to move about the world encumbered only by the 10 panniers and duffel bags we strapped to our two bicycles. To the east we went!

Spring had come and its coiled energy, now unleashed, propelled us into the heart of the Cascade Mountains, two months early by most accounts. But my heart sang as I post-holed through the snow atop Stevens Pass in effort to refill our water bottles at the ski resort. "You should have seen the looks the snowboarders were giving me," I said to my wife, laughing, when I returned to the eight-foot wall

of snow our bikes were leaned against. We greeted our first rainstorm with smiles and optimism on the slopes of Wauconda Pass. The ice on the western flank of Sherman Pass brought concern; I told my nervous wife it was to be expected, as it hadn't received the morning sun yet. "The downhill on the other side will be ice-free!" I shouted over the wind. And it was, except for the driving sleet and snow that pelted our faces as we descended, making me wish we had packed ski goggles. It was still March, after all.

The excitement of finally being out on the road, knowing that winter's icy grip was gradually melting made even the worst of the weather easy to handle. We shook off every punch the road threw at us: a snowstorm outside of Cut Bank, Montana, a week of sub-freezing temperatures on the high plains, and days of howling headwinds in North Dakota. None of it could dampen our spirit, for we had the promise of spring on our side fueling our legs and helping us turn the pedals.

Warmer temperatures finally greeted us after a curtain-call snowstorm along Ontario's northern shore of Lake Superior and then, in the blink of a downhill mile, it was summer. The scent of honeysuckle and lilac floated on every breeze, fishermen lined the riverbanks, volleyballs and frisbees dotted the parks, and short summer dresses turned sidewalks into runways. But it wasn't just the treats to the senses that made us smile. Every mile we rode

since leaving the shores of Puget Sound brought us a little closer to our friends and family in New Jersey. Every day delivered us closer to Québec, the coast of Maine, and ultimately a winding path through New England to our family and hometown friends.

For the entire month of July we laughed, ate, and relished in the company of those closest to us until it was time to board a ship for Europe. Standing on the aft deck, we watched that familiar New York City skyline disappear and a thought both invigorating and terrifying overwhelmed me: I didn't know when I'd be back in my home country.

Ten days later, in Inverness, Scotland, we finally threw legs over bikes and got going again. It was harder than we remembered, this bike touring thing, but the Scottish Highlands returned to us the muscles we left in the Appalachians and we were soon pointed south along the North Sea coast. Life, as the T-shirt says, continued to be good even as the remnants of Hurricane Bertha caught up to us in Stonehaven. We gamely smiled it off, opened a beer, and played another game of cards as the ferocious gale italicized the shape of our tent. We couldn't imagine anything ever souring the fruit of our dreams.

August turned to September and our travels continued to Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and down through Belgium to France: every week a different major city, every week another

foreign tongue. The calendar flipped again and the rains and cold that we outpaced in Scotland had caught up to us in France. We began to wilt.

Our rain jackets did a yeoman's effort keeping the soaking chill from reaching our skin, but couldn't hold the encroaching sickness at bay. Fall, my favorite season, was on its way and every mile brought us further from the known. Further from the mountain bike trails I loved. Further from the couch Kristin and I would lay on in our favorite jeans and sweaters. Further from our beloved Sundays spent watching the NFL. Further from the grocery store I knew inside out, with products in a language I could read. We were far, far from everything we loved about calling the Pacific Northwest home. Sick of being out in the rain all day, we rode on in search of an inn, trying not to think about home.

We rode on in silence through the French countryside, fighting the prevailing winds on a loop through Normandy to Brittany, until I squeezed my brakes alongside a windswept field of brown, depleted sunflowers. My eyes glistened with tears as I stood there staring at this wretched land of mirrors. I didn't want them to look so sad, so dead. I wanted to see their brilliant yellows and oranges dancing in the breeze just as I wanted to see myself as I felt in the spring, in the comforting familiarity of the northwest.

I had never thought of this phase of the sunflower's life, something far too ugly for the photographer's lens, but a part of their life that comes every season. There's no escape for them. The farmer will slash and plow for as long as there are fields to sow. The cycle of planting and reaping will continue without interruption.

Just like my own life, I thought.

The sight of this annual decay sent a spark ricocheting through my mind until it triggered a memory I had seemingly forgotten: the reason we took this trip. We pedaled away from everything we knew because, like an agricultural calendar, our lives had fallen into a series of scheduled events

and tasks. Every year was becoming the same; the same mountain biking getaways every summer, the same professional responsibilities every season, the same office parties every holiday, and even the same meals, chores, and conversations. We chose to do this trip because every year was getting to not only be predictable, but identical. We chose to do this trip because all of those things that comprise the concept of home, that notion which had us straddling an emotional ridge for weeks, will still be there when we return. I had forgotten. This trip was our escape from our own unique harvest cycle.

Summer greeted us in the Pyrenees for one final embrace that replenished the tanned skin we had lost, but the winds of change soon returned, shouldering the scent of distant fireplaces as they blew, showering us in tiny crumbled leaves and knocking acorns and chestnuts into our path. Fall will always be my favorite time of year, but it needn't be spent worrying about

pumpkin-flavored everything and whether or not the Seahawks will win another Super Bowl. It is to be spent, this year at least, heading south across France and Spain to Morocco in effort to make it last as long as possible. For winter's bite will be here before we know it and then, somewhere to the east — in Turkey perhaps — spring will again return to us the joy and promise we felt when leaving Seattle. And every mile, next year and beyond, will once again bring us closer to family, friends, and everything else we love about home. **AC**

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*An avid mountain biker and long-time author of video game strategy guides from the Pacific Northwest, Doug Walsh is currently in the second year of a round-the-world bicycle journey with his wife Kristin. They are currently en route to Turkey and points beyond. Follow their journey at [twofargone.com](http://twofargone.com).*

