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THE SELECTION //

The Fool

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You had to be there. We were frolicking up yet one more long, gentle grade under a soft sun, the six or seven of us. We were laughing now and then, or sometimes talking for a few earnest minutes about our families or some memory sparked by the landscape, or going on in a companionable silence punctuated with smiles and shakes of our heads and even sighs at our great good luck of being cyclists. We were sweating a sheen onto our arms and legs without dampening our jerseys or socks. In a few miles, we would be at the top of one more small mountain in a day full of them, and we would stop at a café or a bar or a market and sit and sip at Cokes in tiny bottles, or ristrettos in tinier cups, or a different vintage of the local Chianti wine than we'd sampled last time. Then we would do it all again, just like we'd done it all before.

What more could a cyclist ask for than a day like that? I suppose there is always more that could be requested or desired, no matter what. But right then, on that hill under that sun, none of us even cared to ask, let alone try to give an answer. Until Raul started hitching his tow-rope to us.

Our inGamba tour group's Portugese soigneur would pedal stealthily up to someone's rear

wheel, slip a string around the horn of the unwitting rider's rear brake, then ease backward until the line was taut and he was getting a free ride. It was a ludicrous and brilliant enhancement of the old trick of surreptitiously grabbing someone's saddle rail. When the rider felt the increased effort and glanced backward, there was nobody right there to betray the ruse—Raul was four or five feet away, and the string was hard to see.

A few of us had happened to be at the back of the group when Raul started playing around. We worked hard to keep our expressions neutral as we watched his victims one by one check to see if their tires were leaking air, shift gears for relief, examine the road in puzzlement over how the slope had steepened without changing appearance, and, astonished at their sudden collapse, gape at the rest of us spinning easily along. Meanwhile, Raul would be surfing the road from side to side like a waterskier, whipping the string like a wagon boss hectoring his horses, holding the line in his teeth and snapping his head like a hooked fish. Then, with impeccable comic timing he'd accelerate while winding in his string, unloop it from the brake and, tapping his index finger to his lips to indicate secrecy, reveal the trick to the tricked then move on to snare another rider.

He was a clown loose in a church, a harebrained guru with a silly and senseless sense of play set on reminding us that a stupid guffaw can be sharper than euphoria, and no less valuable even when the joke is cheap.

Eventually, Raul got what he deserved. While retrieving the string after a particularly long and hilarious snaring, he got it tangled in his cassette. His rear wheel locked up. The whole ride stopped. The string was wound and bound and meshed and snarled and twisted a hundred ways through teeth and cogs and chain and pulleys. We were going to be here a long time. And we were all smiling like fools.

You had to be there. You ought to be there. Get there if you can.