TSR / THE SOFA RIDER

THE COLS OF A MIDLIFE CYCLIST



TRIPLE CROWN

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW – CHAPTER 1

The Inventory of Gravity

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Advance sample – this preview may differ from the final printed edition

Chapter 1: The Inventory of Gravity

In July 1987, I was a teenager glued to the television screen, watching and listening as a sports commentator named Phil Liggett lost his mind.

Through the grainy, sun-bleached footage of the French Alps, a lone rider was fighting his way through a wall of roaring spectators up the brutal ramps of La Plagne. He was chasing down the yellow jersey of Pedro Delgado. The cameras panned frantically, cutting through the mountain fog and the exhaust fumes of support motorbikes, trying to find the lone pursuer. Then, Liggett's voice cracked with pure, unfiltered disbelief through the speaker:

"Just who is that rider coming up behind – because that looks like Roche! That looks like Stephen Roche… It's Stephen Roche, has come over the line! He almost caught Pedro Delgado; I don't believe it!".

To this teenage boy, those men were not human. They were mythological figures operating in a realm of thin air, snow-capped peaks, and superhuman resilience. They belonged to the mountains. I, on the other hand, belonged to Coventry. I rode my bike around the local lanes, dreaming they were high cols, with my Grandma Wood patiently enduring my exaggerated childhood tales of conquering Stoneleigh Hill—a pimple on the Warwickshire landscape which boasted a grand total of perhaps seventy-five metres of elevation gain. I possessed youth, energy, and a future full of potential yet to be realised.

Then, life happened.

Fast forward to 2018. I was in my mid-forties, looking at photographs from a recent holiday to Thailand with my wife. Nadine and I are standing next to massive elephants at the sanctuary we visited. You could see my extra-large shirt clinging to my waist, and I have moobs! The reality sank in. Staring back at me from those pictures was definitive proof I was going rapidly in the wrong direction. It made me take a brutal physical inventory. The competitive drive was still there in my head, but physically, I was overweight and unfit.

The teenager who had been captivated by Stephen Roche and the Tour de France was buried deep beneath decades of career, compromise, and other distractions. The numbers looking back at me didn't lie, but they certainly felt like an insult.

Five-foot-nine.

Approaching fifteen stone.

A nearly forty-inch waistband.

I wasn't just "out of shape".

I'd got heavy.

Gravity, something I never even thought about when I was a boy, had turned into this constant weight, dragging me back. It made doing any bit of exercise a breathless chore. If the house caught fire, I couldn't have run to the end of the driveway, let alone up a flight of stairs.

The bicycle had become a relic of a distant past; a hiatus of over twenty years had erased the fitness and replaced it with a heavy, sedentary frame which required considerably more effort to move.

Even during all this time, I never lost sight of the Tour de France mountains. They remained in my mind and on the TV every summer. But the dream wasn't just distant. It was a mathematical impossibility. You cannot haul a hugely unfit person up a 10 per cent alpine gradient. The mountains do not negotiate with the unfit.

But as I sat there, the suffocating weight of those numbers crossed a threshold. Casual dissatisfaction had hardened into determination. I realised if I didn't change the trajectory now, the man in the mirror was all I would ever be.

I didn't need to be fit to start dreaming again. I just needed to start moving.

Lessons from the Gradient – The Doorstep Mile

When you look at a mountain's climb profile, your eyes are naturally drawn to the numbers screaming the loudest. Let's take Mont Ventoux, for example. You look at the length of the climb, 21 km. You look at the average gradient, 8 per cent. You look at the summit altitude, 1,909 m.

When you are unfit, overweight, and standing at the bottom of a transformation, those numbers can paralyse you. The sheer scale of the mountain ahead makes the entire endeavour seem pointless before you've even turned a pedal.

But the longest endurance rides in the world do not begin on the lower slopes of Mont Ventoux. They begin at your front door.

The Norwegians have a beautiful, pragmatic word for this: **Dørstokkmila**. It roughly translates to **"the doorstep mile".**

It represents the invisible, incredibly heavy psychological barrier between the inside of your house and the outside world. It is possibly the toughest mile you will ever travel in any journey. It is the mental gymnastics of putting on your kit when it is raining. It's the immense weight of walking out to the garage to look at a bicycle you are not sure you have the lungs to ride. It is the exhausting friction of getting started.

On the mountain, you quickly learn you cannot ride the final kilometre until you have ridden the first. You cannot conquer the summit from your sofa. When a goal is massive, only looking at the top can make the whole thing seem overwhelming. You must break the task down. Sure, use the peak as motivation, but work on the immediate five metres of tarmac right in front of your wheel.

I had not found the courage to cross my own doorstep mile yet. That would not happen until late September 2018.

When you cross yours is up to you. But until you do, the mountain cannot begin to move.