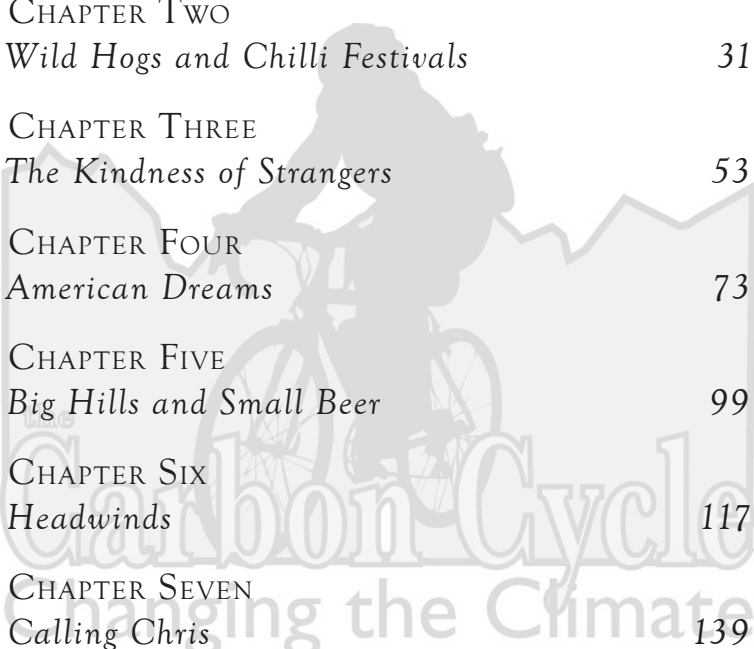


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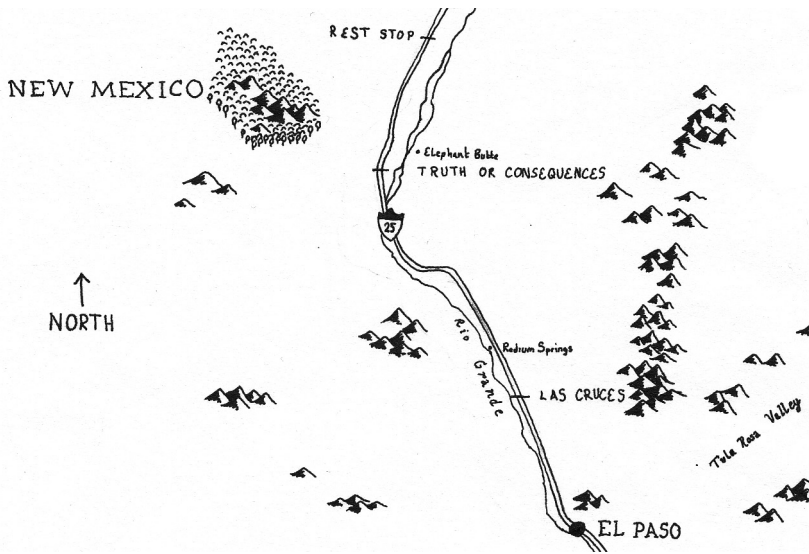
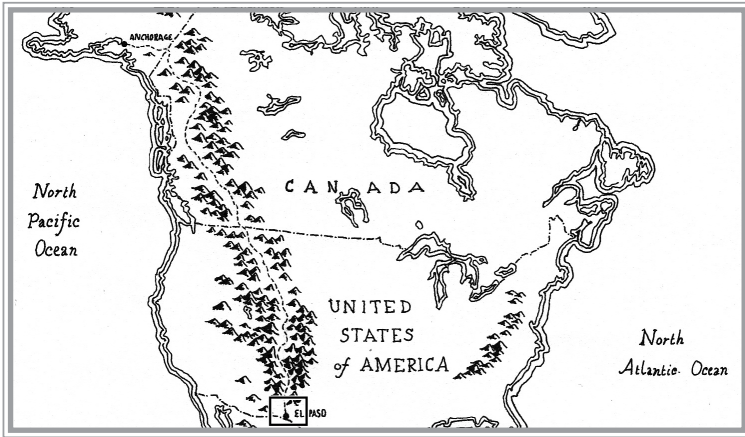
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CHAPTER ONE

Too Hot for Cacti

‘It is almost impossible to imagine how the world will avoid disastrous climate change impacts without a fundamental, and prompt, change in US policy.’

*Elizabeth Kolbert*⁵

‘Climate change? Oh no, you won’t have a problem with that until you go further north.’

US citizen in an airport queue, discussing New Mexico

I left El Paso on the 19th June 2006, at high noon. It was like riding into an oven. I was gleaming white and Rocky, fully loaded for the first time, was unnervingly heavy. Wobbling erratically around the hotel car park as a practice run, I wondered whether I could actually ride *anywhere* with this much weight. Not to mention the damage sustained to the bike on the flight over. For the first time, I suddenly had real doubts about the viability of this trip. Too far, too hot, too heavy, TOO MUCH! whimpered an internal voice. Don’t be daft, I told it, it’ll be fine. Then, mustering my courage, I headed out into the lunchtime traffic. The road out of town was uphill and infested with traffic lights, inflicting the maximum number of shaky hill starts. I wasn’t convinced I could make it the two miles to the bike shop, let alone another fifty or so that day. And I didn’t even want to think about Alaska. Drenched with sweat, I arrived at the Crazy Cat bike shop thinking I already deserved a hero’s welcome. Instead of which a polite but not all that interested young man loaned me a high-pressure foot pump, told me he didn’t think that cycling any kind of distance with four teeth missing from the front gear ring was feasible, and didn’t ask where I was going. I skulked about in the cool interior pretending I might buy something – unlikely, given an unfortunate temporary separation between me and my credit card – until the air-conditioning got my temperature down to something

⁵ Elizabeth Kolbert (2006) ‘Can America Go Green?’ *New Statesman* 19th June

functional. And then I headed off for real.

It felt amazing to be underway at all. 'Normal life' can be incredibly sticky when you try to leave it. On this occasion, it had required an immense effort to break free. Clearing the ground had somehow taken priority over training, and I hadn't been on a bike in at least a month. Weeks had flown past with no exercise more strenuous than lifting a computer mouse. On top of this less-than-ideal preparation for an endurance ride, mild asthma had turned into a stubborn, long-term cough. And, while I was undoubtedly a touch out of shape, the bike almost didn't make it at all. For many years I'd harboured the extravagant fantasy of having a bike hand-built by the exuberant Scottish bike builder, Charlie Ralph. Charlie specialises in custom-made machines for people who are, for example, very tall or, in my case, rather on the short side. My much-loved but undeniably elderly road-bike had recently been the source of considerable teasing from a group of friends on holiday in the Alps. This trip – further, harder, higher and altogether more ambitious – provided the ideal excuse.

Rocky, named for the Rockies we aimed to ride along, and painted a distinguished dark grey in keeping with the carbon-oriented nature of the mission, was due to arrive in March, for my birthday. This was postponed until April, just in time to get to know him before the Fred Whitton, a local challenge ride in May. Finally, on a windy day in June two days before I was due to leave for the States, Charlie arrived at my door in the Lake District with Rocky in the back of his car. 'There's just one small problem,' he said. 'It concerns the front wheel...' He'd put the bike in the boot of his car ready to leave when his phone rang. Running in to answer it, he'd startled the cat, who jumped on the car, slamming the boot down on the front wheel – which promptly curled into an intriguing shape, a bit like a pretzel. In view of the time constraints, Charlie had brought the bike down anyway, and had then spent hours on the phone in the kitchen, ringing around every bike shop in Cumbria to see if a wheel of the right specs could be found. In the end he had to drive to Glasgow and back to get one. So much for bikes as a low-carbon commodity.

Rocky and I, then, were not all that well acquainted by the time we came to be navigating our way through Gatwick airport towards the departure lounge. Nevertheless, I felt a huge pang as I left him in his cardboard box in a cage marked 'oversize luggage'. Would we ever

be reunited? A gentleman from San Antonio with silver hair, a yellow shirt and a large stomach, asked me what on earth I was thinking of, taking a bike to El Paso. He told me that it would be 115 degrees. He told me about 'retail kidnapping' in Mexico. (You get kidnapped; the kidnapers phone your family and ask for a DVD player/microwave/towel heater; the family take the DVD player/microwave/towel heater to the kidnapers, and receive you in exchange.) He told me under no circumstances to cross the border south into Mexico, and that, even heading north, while I might not be kidnapped, I would find little shade and should expect huge distances between the places where I could get water. Seizing the opening, I asked him whether climate change was a big concern in a place already so hot. This was not, he reassured me, a problem faced by southerners. 'Though it does,' he conceded, 'get cool in the evenings.' By the time I'd unscrambled my brain we'd been called to our separate check-in desks and I never saw him again. I decided the moral was probably to give up asking questions about climate change and use the more self-explanatory term 'global warming' instead.



Many hours later, I was reading my way through a stack of climate change articles, 35,000 feet above the north-eastern edge of Canada. Nothing I read was remotely reassuring, except perhaps that the 'greenhouse effect' at the heart of the issue is in itself a beneficial natural phenomenon. The average temperature of the earth would be about minus eighteen degrees and pretty uninhabitable without it. The problem, rather, is the vast quantity of extra greenhouse gases added to the atmosphere by human actions. I was fast learning that, when it comes to climate change, there are areas of rock-solid certainty, and areas of intense debate. The trick is to tell which is which - and not to fall for the age-old ploy of using the existence of the latter to cast doubt on the former. One of the certainties is that carbon dioxide molecules retain heat. We have released more of them into the atmosphere. Therefore the atmosphere is retaining more heat. If you can dispute any of those claims you should, as George Monbiot puts it in his book, *Heat*,⁶ put yourself forward for a Nobel Prize in science. What exactly this warming atmosphere will mean for

⁶George Monbiot (2006) *Heat* Allen Lane, Penguin Books

particular climates around the world is one of the uncertainties. Some are getting hotter, some drier, some wetter, some may even get colder. Overall, though, atmospheric warming – aka global warming – has been likened to turning the heat up under a saucepan of water. The extra energy has to go somewhere. So as well as changing climates, it's expected to increase incidents of 'severe weather'. Storms, floods, droughts, hurricanes ...



I arrived in El Paso, via Houston, at one in the morning western United States time – or eight in the morning British time – walking down the long corridor to the baggage claim with the accompaniment of the oddly incongruous sound of Vivaldi's 'The Four Seasons'. With a touch of bleary self-pity, I calculated that I'd been travelling for twenty-four hours and, apart from a snooze over Greenland, hadn't slept for – well, several days. Rocky didn't show up until after the last suitcase was wending its way soulfully round and round the baggage carousel and I was in the queue for lost luggage. A man walked through a hidden doorway carrying the battered bike box and everything else seemed suddenly irrelevant. We were here! Here in El Paso, Texas at one in the morning with the airport barometer reading eighty-five degrees! The friendly driver who squeezed the box into the back seat of his taxi asked me what I was up to and then told me I was crazy.

I woke to brilliant sunshine. The Holiday Inn Express, El Paso, is a tower block in a car park just off the interstate. My room looked across to a traffic junction and a vast advertisement for 'Amigos Bail Bonds' (available twenty-four hours). I'd decided to indulge in a hotel base camp for a day or so to sort things out before I set off. This proved to be a smart move, as there was a fair amount of sorting to do. All those articles to post back, for starters. And the fact that my wallet, complete with credit cards and driver's licence (ubiquitously required for identification in the States) had somehow stayed on the plane. Never believe those claims that replacement credit cards can be 'immediately expedited' to wherever you are in the world. It was going to take weeks. By great good fortune I'd bought \$1000 at Gatwick Airport and this money had never made it into my wallet but was stuffed into a back pocket. I could survive for a good while on cash.

Meanwhile, Chris, already proving his worth back in Britain, arranged for new credit cards to be sent to friends in Colorado. I would pick them up en route, less than a thousand miles away...

Finally, all that remained to sort out was Rocky. I rescued the large cardboard box from the hotel office and took it up to my room in the elevator. The moment of truth! Would he be in one piece? A couple of deep chunks out of the sleek grey paintwork, despite the padding. Oh well. But wait, OH NO! Four teeth completely missing from the largest cog of the triple front chain wheel. Given how much foam and padding I'd crammed around the bike I could only imagine that the 'FRAGILE, DO NOT DROP' signs on the box had inspired the baggage handlers to hurl it with great force across the airport floor. Tool kit spread out across the eiderdown, I put the rest of the bike together and figured I could go past a bike shop on the way out of town. Though without a credit card I wouldn't be replacing large bits of kit. I would probably just have to cope until Colorado. At least it was the large ring - high gears - definitely easier to manage without than low gears. Later, to my astonishment, adjusting the saddle and handlebars in the hotel car park, all the gears seemed to work anyway. I spent the rest of the evening trying to fit all my stuff into panniers and writing a card to Chris while drinking his parting gift of a half bottle of champagne. Rocky, propped up against the bed, looked sleek and beautiful and ready to go.



I'd just crossed the Interstate not long after the Crazy Cat bike shop and was stopped at the side of the road figuring out my next move, when a man pulled up alongside in a large black truck. 'I'm a cyclist,' he said (from which I understood, 'I'm not dangerous') 'and you are looking at a map...' I grinned, recalled the travel guide author's advice, and told him where I was going. 'Take this road,' he said, pointing on the map. 'It's only slightly out of your way but much prettier.' So I headed north out of Texas and into New Mexico on Highway 28.

The outskirts of El Paso turn into heavily irrigated farmland. Pecan orchards, a polo pitch (yes, a polo pitch), a field of alpacas, clipped out like bizarre, long-legged poodles. Beautiful horses: quarter horses, thoroughbreds and a few Arabs. Chattering sparrow sounds and lots of birds I didn't know the names of. Tiny, delicate doves; birds like

wagtails only with fatter tails; a vivid white egret, and later three humming birds in a row, hovering right above the road. The heat stayed intense. I have cycled in heat before and relished it, but either this was hotter (it was about 110 degrees when I left El Paso) or I was losing my tolerance. (Getting older? Nothing to do with it!) Occasionally I crossed the road to stand in the shadow of a tree or a stationary truck for a couple of minutes. When I stopped I could really hear the bird song. A couple of squirrels watched me from a hole in a house wall. The water in my bottles was hot in minutes. And more or less gone by the time I reached the tiny town of La Mesa, twenty-something miles later.

La Mesa did not have the cool café I'd been fantasizing about. But at least it was there. Previous towns marked on the map had barely existed beyond a couple of houses. And it did have a store. I bought tortillas, Monterey Jack cheese and an unripe tomato and stood outside in a strip of shadow pouring water down my throat and occasionally over my head. Various folk coming and going said hello. One asked me if I was married and why I was travelling by bike. I was beginning to wonder this myself. Despite occasional godsend - I never thought I'd be so happy to see a cloud go across the sun - I was struggling by the time I reached Las Cruces, and seriously tempted by the Comfort Inn and the thought of air-conditioning. Unfortunately I'd recently seen the figures for carbon offsetting motel rooms - much higher than I'd imagined. Motel rooms needed to be seriously rationed. And I had still only done about forty miles on a day when I needed to do at least sixty. On the far side of Las Cruces my reward for carrying on was several miles of pecan plantations, tall enough to throw shade across the whole road. As the day wore on it became slightly, almost imperceptibly, cooler. Then a road sign told me that Radium Springs, my goal for that night, was closer than I'd thought. Only ten miles left! I celebrated with a rest on a bridge over the Rio Grande, sitting on the railings watching hundreds and hundreds of swallows hunting above the coffee-coloured water. A sweet tailwind swept me along the last few miles.

Radium Springs seemed to consist pretty much entirely of the Blue Moon Restaurant and Bar. There was one truck outside. I went in. A lone man and woman sat at the bar. The woman took one look at me and stood up. 'Heck, sweetheart, y'all okay? What can we do for you?'

The friendliness soaked like water into my dry, tired self. I wanted

to stay and soak up some more – and a beer or two – but she said the campsite was a few miles back down the road, so I figured I'd better go and find it first. Heading back, the tailwind was now a headwind, and the campsite was extremely elusive. I finally tracked it down beyond signs for the Leasburg Dam State Park. Two women with chihuahuas on leads assured me that yes, this was it, and yes, there were showers. I cycled in a squiggly sort of way along gravelled roads looking for somewhere I might be able to pitch a tent rather than park an RV. Finally, finding a sandy spot beyond the main camping area, I was struggling to keep hold of the unfurled tent in the rising wind when a woman approached bearing a large pile of leaflets. Elaine, the campsite host, tucked a leaflet detailing the campsite facilities under my arm and shooed me off to an official spot complete with shelter, bench and electric hook-up. It was even harder to pitch the tent there due to the rocklike ground which was interspersed with concrete. But Elaine was insistent. Maybe she had human male-related concerns in mind rather than the wind. Either way, I was too tired to argue.

Elaine chatted while I pecked at the ground with my tent pegs. She and her husband lived in the park all summer, she said, pointing to an enormous RV. (Not that theirs was larger than any of the other immense houses-on-wheels that squatted in clusters on the concrete landing pads.) Then they drove to Arizona for the winter. She said the park was famous for its cacti, but that the cacti were dying. 110 degrees was unusual even here, and it hadn't rained for nearly a year. So hot and dry that *cacti* were dying? No wonder I was feeling it.

'Do you think it's global warming?' I asked.

'Probably...' Elaine shrugged, and changed the subject before I had a chance to continue.

Finally, the tent more or less up, I headed for the shower. Bliss! In years of cycling I'd never reacted like this. My whole body felt overheated and yearning for water. Usually sun-proof, I now had blotches of vibrant red sunburn on the back of my left leg, ankle and both shoulders. My entire skin was dried up and my lips were cracked. After a single day. Back at the tent, I struggled to eat another tortilla, sent Chris a text message and crawled into the windy, flapping, hot tent. Lying naked on top of my Karrimat, I woke in the night and had to put some clothes on. What bliss to

feel cool! Through the open tent door I could see hundreds and hundreds of hazy stars in the huge, dark sky.



We don't know for sure whether particular hot spells – like the one I'd inadvertently arranged to be cycling through – are due to global warming. But they are completely in line with the predictions. As these hot spells become more common, it seems increasingly likely that they are related to climate change. Twenty of the twenty-one hottest years since records began in 1860 occurred in the last twenty-five years. And hot places, in general, are predicted to get hotter. Deserts are predicted to spread. Not great news for New Mexico. Nor for those who depend on neighbouring 'bread-basket' states for wheat and other essential crops. Not great news for large parts of the African continent, either. In what's been described as a horrible accident of geography, the worst-hit parts of the world in terms of desertification, and all that means for failing agriculture, water supplies and conflict, will be (initially at least) places that already have disproportionate poverty. And which have done least to cause the problem.

We *do* know for certain that the average temperature on earth has increased by over half a degree. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – an extraordinary body that represents the consensus and expertise of over two thousand scientists from across the international scientific community – predicts rises of between 1.8 and 6.4 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. To put this in perspective, the difference in average global temperature between now and the last ice age, when vast tracts of Europe and North America were buried under ice about a mile thick, was at most about five degrees. Five degrees colder and we're covered in ice. Five degrees *hotter* would alter our climates almost beyond recognition. Even changes at the lower end of the spectrum will dramatically alter current weather patterns.

But – and here's the good news – catastrophic climate change may not yet be inevitable. Where we end up on that spectrum almost certainly still depends on us and on what we do. It especially depends on what we do over the next ten to fifteen years. The changes required are immense and urgent – we definitely need to get a move on. But we surely have to try. If we assume it is too late and simply do nothing (and no-one can know this for certain) then it's game over for sure.



I woke just after six. For me, this was almost inconceivably early. It was beautiful. Rabbits, birds, wide landscape, distant dun-coloured hills, scattered with almost-green scrub. And cacti everywhere, in amazing, twisted, fingery shapes. A text from Chris. We had been together a little over a year. He had been unwaveringly supportive of this trip. Had helped research it. Had accepted the separation without question. Had joined in on my terms. It felt good to know he was out there. And it also felt good to be here alone, coping, enjoying the solitude, reconnecting with my old, independent self.

Back onto the Radium Springs road, the temperature was initially much gentler. Chris had asked, What does the desert *feel* like? I was just thinking, well, here it feels calm, peaceful ... when I passed a sign saying 'Peaceful Valley.' The Rio Grande flowed steadily alongside for a while, wide, almost khaki-coloured, a narrow strip of green on each side soon fading into the huge, scrubby spaces beyond. More beautiful horses. Fewer pecan orchards. Wilder ... A drugs control checkpoint. I was waved on. Scattered houses. A large sign reading, *You got rocks?* followed by a phone number. After a while the road opened out into desert proper. Huge vistas of sandy, gravelly moguls. Immense flats, dried creeks, distant hills, everywhere dotted with khaki-coloured scrub.

The next few days fell into a pattern of sorts. I would get up uncharacteristically early. The mornings were beautiful: sometimes hazy, sometimes brilliant-blue-clear, always cool, and alive with wonderful birds. I'd get on the road as soon as I could but it was never long before the heat returned. After day two I realised I'd had it easy when the heat was joined by headwinds. Strong, hot headwinds. My speed would drop lower and lower until I'd be straining along at seven miles an hour, inwardly wincing when I failed to prevent my head from calculating how long it was going to take to get to that night's campsite.

Back in 1989 I'd spent two years as a postgraduate student in Colorado, and one summer had ridden south a thousand miles or so along the Rockies, ending just north of where I was now. That trip had been tight on time and I'd constructed it around a ninety miles a day average. After the Rhone ride, and some years before the

Andes, it was one of the first big rides I'd done. It had been utterly exhilarating to be out there alone and I'd revelled in the heat and the mountains. It was also exhausting. It had taken me all day and well into the evenings to keep the miles up and I was distinctly flattened at the end of it. For this trip, with a smug sense of learning from past over-exuberance, I'd revised my daily mileage ambitions down to a mere seventy-five. Seventy-five miles, I'd figured, would take me about three quarters of the day. I could then spend the rest of the day talking to people, doing some research and taking it easy. That first week, I'd planned to emphasise the taking it easy bit. I'd envisaged finishing my miles by mid-afternoon, setting up camp and spending leisurely evenings reading novels and recovering from the pre-departure frenzy.

But things were not going entirely as intended. Each day, something conspired to keep me cycling well into the evening. Sometimes it was the headwinds; sometimes my distance estimates would randomly revise themselves upwards. Sometimes it was punctures. One afternoon, fixing a tiny sidewall puncture by the side of the road in the blasting heat with absolutely no shade, a vivid memory returned of an evening in New Mexico all those years before. It must have been a few days north of where I was now, the only time on that previous trip I'd ever felt really vulnerable - fixing a back wheel puncture on a long, isolated road, vulnerability magnified a thousand times by having the bike upside down by the roadside. I remembered tensing as a solitary car approached. It drove on by. Absolutely nothing happened. The only danger was in my head and I'd never worked out why that lone patch of fear had suddenly disrupted my peace.

Now I just couldn't seem to keep a decent pace up. It was exasperating, and a little mysterious. A partial explanation was simple - fitness. But this didn't seem to fully account for it. Distance cycling is as much about stubbornness as strength and I didn't think my stubbornness had waned. That I'd been eighteen years younger on the previous Rockies ride hadn't even crossed my mind when Chris and I sat with the atlas in the comfort of our sitting room planning this trip. On the road in those first, long, slow hot days, the thought that my age - surely not! - might have something to do with my slowness sneaked into my head and niggled away at my confidence.

My head was one of the two main things I daily did battle with

during that long first week. It kept informing me it was time to stop when most of that day's seventy-five miles lay ahead. My body hadn't settled into distance mode yet either. I couldn't quite get comfortable on the handlebars and, for some weird reason, the sole of my left foot really ached. And I was still coughing. I did, however, have one powerful weapon. Fourteen songs on a tiny recorder heroically copied there very late the night before I left by my wonderful, gadget-literate friend Jacqui. I would make myself wait until I was slowing almost to stand-still in the mid-afternoon heat and then takeout my precious black credit card-sized gadget, put in the minute ear-plugs, and switch on. I'd pull away to the unmistakable opening upbeat rhythm of Gnarl Barkley's 'Crazy' - fast becoming the trip's theme tune - gaze at the desert to the beautiful, wistful sound of Shooglenifty's 'Carboni's Farewell', and pound the pedals to KT Tunstall's wonderful lyrics. *You're or, or, or, or, orrrrr, the other side of the worrrrrrld....* Somewhere in the middle of the sequence Jacqui had inserted the James Bond theme tune, which infallibly lent an aura of adventure to the most mundane stretch of road, instantly converting a hot, tedious slog into an urgent and thrilling mission - and restoring my sense of humour. I'd end with a rerun of 'Crazy' - *I remember when, when I lost my mind ... I must be crAAAAAAzy...* and then make myself put the little machine away so I didn't weary of the songs too soon. They always added several miles per hour to my speed.

It was typically around seven or eight o'clock by the time I crawled into a campsite, dead beat. One evening, on a day that had included vast straight stretches of road past the tiny town of Truth and Consequences, the last five miles to Elephant Butte (where do these names come from?) nearly reduced me to tears. It was the longest five miles I could remember. I could see nowhere to wild camp without dragging the loaded bike miles across rough ground, so I just kept going. The campsite, when it finally appeared, overlooked a huge, dammed lake glistening grey in the desert and buzzing with speedboats and jet-skis. I flopped for a few minutes and then steeled myself for the day's second main battle - with my tent. This time I managed to get it more or less erected near a tree, away from the official camping area, where the ground was fractionally less concrete. The light was fading by the time I hit the shower. Afterwards I sat by the tent eating an apple, and watching distant lightening race across the slate-grey

sky. I left the core for a rabbit foraging nearby. A huge pickup truck towing a jet ski pulled up in one of the camping areas. Its all-male occupants were there to roar about on the water and I was trying to feed a rabbit! In my tired state I had an odd sense of different worlds colliding, and also a touch of hostility, almost certainly imagined. Their world was the one in which massively carbon-polluting forms of recreation were simply the norm – and critics were killjoys or tree-hugging environmental lunatics. And mine? Mine was the world of a person at odds with this ‘normality’; appalled by its consequences; deeply critical and yet inevitably part of it too.

In bed by nine, I recalled the words of a friend who works in an outdoor shop. Dave is something of a camping-gear specialist. ‘The Lazer,’ he’d said carefully, when I told him what I’d just bought, ‘is wonderfully light. But a little hard to put up single-handed in wind. And not ideal if the wind is high...’ Just as I was drifting off, a high wind put in an appearance. You could hear it roaring in from the distance. It arrived with sudden ferocity, slamming into the tent. The tail-end collapsed onto my feet. At the same time, a posse of trucks roared up, their drivers yelling across the wind as they slammed doors and went to use the toilets. Getting out in my underpants to fix the tent seemed like a good way to attract the wrong kind of help. I lay still until the last set of truck lights arched across the canvas and revved off into the dark. Then I crawled out, tethered the tent to Rocky at one end (it was already tied to a tree at the other), pinned down the rest with rocks, and settled in for a windy night.



The good thing about low spots is that they make the high spots higher, and on bike trips the high spots are frequent. All sorts of ordinary events which are normally taken for granted soon begin to cause disproportionate joy. Like *not* cycling, even for a few minutes. Or drinking water. Or eating. Definitely eating. The tortillas and cheese I’d bought on day one were my main food all week, bungied on top of the panniers for ease of access. The cheese constantly melted and re-solidified, becoming puddle-shaped. I supplemented it where possible with a daily café stop, combining a bit of a rest, temperature restoration, water replenishment and food with an erratic injection of random extracts from United States culture. In

the Pepper Pot café, a long room with ceiling fans and all the blinds down, I had a huge plate of huevos rancheros. The café walls were covered in ornate silver crosses, old LPs, photographs of tractors, and a 1963 newspaper headlining 'Johnson Sworn in as President'. The toilet walls specialised in pictures of lighthouses, carefully painted on pieces of wood. By the door stood a Christmas tree, covered in red, white and blue stars – all alight. The Buckhorn Bar, by comparison, featured benches with inset metal moose designs, reindeer antlers festooned with baseball caps, a piano with a stuffed mountain lion crouched on top of it, and a television playing continuous country and western videos. On each table, a photocopied GQ magazine front page inserted into the menu stand read, '20 hamburgers to eat before you die. Buckhorn burger voted #7 in America ...' Huevos rancheros was my mainstay in cafés throughout New Mexico. It has to be up there with the best vegetarian biking meals ever. Beans, potatoes, eggs, tortillas, cheese and chilli (green or red). Vast portions, of course; I would begin the meal with great relish and then about halfway through a feeling close to despair would creep in as I realised there was no way I could eat it all. Usually I'd get a doggy bag and keep it for later, strapped on my panniers on top of the cheese.

Drinking was also a major source of good feeling, perhaps even more than eating. In 110 degrees, this was not exactly an indulgence. Charlie had made space on the bike to fit three water bottles and I usually carried an additional couple of litres in old plastic bottles. It wasn't always enough. One morning when the hot headwinds were particularly relentless my minor road petered out. I'd heard bicycles weren't allowed on the interstate highways, and anyway they didn't sound too enticing. Now I didn't have a choice. I wheeled down towards Interstate 25, figuring that if it really were illegal to cycle there I'd be picked up by the police and with luck deposited a bit further north. But the sign at the junction, while banning pedestrians and motorbikes, declared bicycles to be legal so long as they kept to the hard shoulder. Happy to oblige, I crept cautiously onto the vast stretch of tarmac. Revelation! Not only was there little traffic, but the interstate ironed out most of the minor ups and downs, a benefit lost on its motorised constituents but of immense significance to tired cyclists. (I learned later that the interstates were built in this way so that fighter planes could land on them during the Cold War.) And

by some logic that was beyond my grasp the headwind was much less fierce on the interstate than it was on the minor road, even though both roads went in exactly the same direction.

Miles later my glee at these discoveries began to fade as I realised I was not going to make it to the next town without more water. It wasn't exactly life-threatening; I could always flag down a truck. But the thought of doing that brought out an emphatic British reserve I didn't know I had. I became fixated with two large 'R's' on the map. Even in a semi-dehydrated state, I couldn't make 'R' stand for 'service station'. What else could it stand for that might have water? The last drip in the last bottle had gone miles back, and then I arrived at the best Rest Stop in the world. Pulling off the road, I was greeted by two men and a woman travelling to Las Vegas. With typical, if slightly scatty generosity, they handed me a bag of ice (first), then water and a doughnut. The Rest Stop had a water tap, toilets, a vending machine and a shaded area with tables. It even had a barbeque grill. A sign at one end read 'Dog Toilet', though various dogs came and went as they chose, and at the other, 'Beware of Rattlesnakes'. I settled at a table and made a cheese tortilla. The recent relief of my own immediate personal water shortage gave particularly vivid meaning to the predicated impacts of climate change on fresh water. About a third of the entire population of China, for example, depends on glacial meltwater for their drinking water. And if that source simply disappears? What will people do when water, something we literally cannot live without, is threatened? Perhaps luckily for my peace of mind, a truck driver wearing a white cowboy hat, immaculate white sleeveless vest, ironed cream jeans and cowboy boots climbed down from his cavernous cab and joined me. We chatted about the heat. I felt shyer than I'd anticipated, trying to bring up the subject of climate change in these brief exchanges. But when I did, I was quickly finding the weather to be the fastest route in. Like most people I'd talked to so far, the immaculate trucker said it was hotter than normal. And drier. And windier. He said there were big fires in Arizona, where the air was acrid with smoke.

'Do you think it's global warming?' I asked.

'Heck honey,' he said, 'I sure think it's Mother Nature.'

Mother Nature, natural cycles, sunspots ... I'd already encountered numerous people who held roughly this view. Presumably, the

consequences remain just as threatening whether global warming is caused by us or whether Mother Nature carries the can. But the Mother Nature view has one great advantage. If global warming is a natural phenomenon then we probably don't need to take on the responsibility of trying to prevent it. It's often held alongside the view that we're too small to make a difference anyway. Looking around at the vast gasoline guzzling trucks I could see how such a position might have an appeal. And at least the Mother Nature advocates had some conception of what global warming *was*.

I was just leaving when my mobile rang. Only two people had the number - Chris and the Office of the Mayor of Albuquerque. It was the latter.

'Dr Rawles!' said a strongly accented (to my ears) female voice, introducing herself as Rene. 'We are so glad you are well.' Thank goodness for phones that are not video-enabled, I thought, having just seen my blotched face and staring, still-dehydrated eyes in the restroom mirror. 'The Mayor will be delighted to meet you at nine am on Friday as arranged. Does that still work for you? He has no other slot.' My date with the Mayor was the reason I'd been straining to keep up the mileage all week. Getting to Albuquerque by Thursday evening in order to be in a fit state to meet the Mayor on Friday morning was still going to be, well, a challenge.

'Of course,' I heard myself say, 'no problem at all. Is there anywhere to stay near the Mayor's office?'

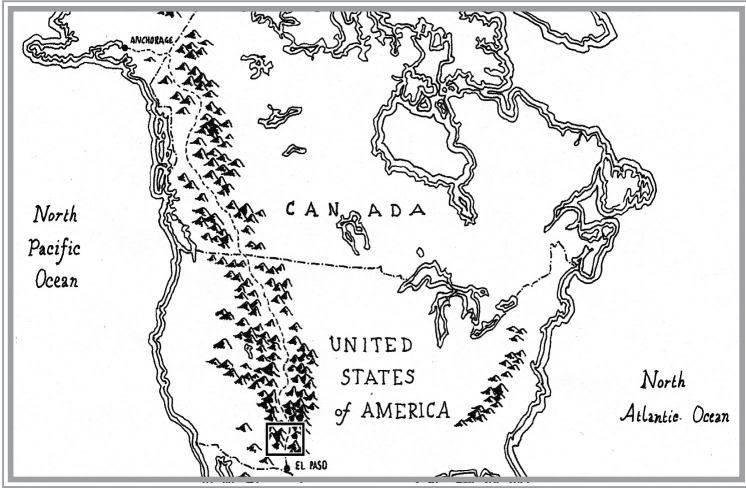
'Oh yes,' said Rene, 'the Hyatt is very close. And there's also a Hilton.'

I collected Rocky, who was resting against the rattlesnake sign, and prepared to set off. 'HmMMMM,' I said to Rocky and the hot blue sky, 'the Hyatt with no credit card. That should be interesting.' Clearly the Mayor's office was not in Motel Six belt. And I knew there were no campsites within miles.

As I left, a vast RV towing a Hummer pulled into the rest area, returning my attention to higher things and reminding me why I was cycling through this minor inferno in the first place. RVs do about five miles per gallon and the Hummer, basically a civilian tank, does about three miles per gallon - on a good day. 'Haven't you heard of global warming?' I wanted to shout at the short bearded man strolling towards the barbeque area. 'Wake up, you oil-addicted fool!'

Fortunately my British reserve kicked in again and I cycled silently away. The drivers of oversized vehicles were perhaps not best placed to see the issue with clarity. But one thing really did surprise me. An awful lot of people genuinely didn't seem to know there was an issue at all. How could it be, I wondered, that so many folk seemed barely to have heard of something that might fundamentally alter human society, if not remove us from the planet altogether - and that had been plastered for months if not years all over the European news? Here, I'd fast become accustomed to people changing the subject when I edged conversations towards global warming. When I dug a bit further the reason was evident. Despite all the concern about heat waves, in many cases they had, quite simply, never heard of it.





CHAPTER TWO

Wild Hogs and Chilli Festivals

‘It isn’t pollution that’s harming the environment. It’s the impurities in our air and water that’s doing it.’

Governor George W. Bush

‘They underestimated me ...’

President George W. Bush

I set off from the Best Rest Station in the World in a much better mood, despite the Hummer. I cycled faster, for at least an hour. Off to my right was a huge area marked on the map as ‘Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness’. I wanted to be inside it, with the wildlife, but there didn’t seem to be any roads leading there from the interstate. When one finally appeared I turned onto it, only to have it transform from tarmac to thick gravel within a mile. Back on Interstate 25, the hard shoulder became rough. I crossed over the bumpy rumble-strip – designed to wake up snoozing truckers – to a smooth strip of road just on the traffic side. Seconds later a vast truck hurtled past without pulling out even a millimetre and swept me straight back again. Point taken! I forgot the roughness in a glorious sweep down into San Antonio, past a mile long freight train with a mournful, evocative siren and a flock of tiny brown birds with white heads. And a road-runner. I’d never seen a road-runner before, but anyone who saw one, with that jaunty head and long legs, would somehow know that’s what it was. When I left San Antonio, standing outside the café in the hot sun, looking back up the road to distant hills with cowboy music drifting out into the huge sky, I felt at peace with the trip for the first time.

The next morning, Chris and I managed to co-ordinate a phone call. I suddenly found myself pouring out a stream of doubts – about my fitness, about the heat, about my reserve around talking to people about climate change, about whether my slowness at this end of the trip would create too much pressure later on. About whether, for

all my grand aims, I could actually make the trip mean something more than a personal challenge, which had, in the run up to leaving, begun to feel self-indulgent and, right now, wasn't even feeling like any kind of indulgence at all. Chris was endlessly reassuring. The trip will evolve. Its meaning will evolve. You have lots of time. You will get fitter and find ways of talking to people. You *are* talking to people! He told me that Carole at work had put up a big map of North America in the office and that the pin representing me was already a discernable distance north of El Paso. He told me he was sending various things to my friend Susan in Colorado and that he would try to sort out a hotel near the Mayor's office in Albuquerque. The conversation was just great. It put a whole load of things back into perspective which had been blown out of proportion as they endlessly ran and re-ran around my hot head. It also raised some big personal questions. I'd always done previous trips either alone or with a friend. Never with a partner. And certainly never with a partner at home acting as base camp manager, hunting down broken bike bits, posting replacement credit cards, phoning my Dad with updates, and sorting out hotels when I needed one. Was this *cheating*?? Worse, was it a threat to my treasured, lifelong, carefully guarded independence? The answer seemed likely to be, yes, in both cases. But right then, it sure as hell felt good.

The first gopher of the trip screeched at me as I cycled off for a short stretch on Interstate 25. Then I joined a quiet and beautiful side road. Farms, horses and, in this part of New Mexico, an increasing sense of people living on the edge. Lots of trailer houses, some in pretty battered shape. Scrapped cars. Once, a yard full of broken bicycles. A sign on a trailer-house fence read, *Please don't dump any more animals here. Mrs Olsen is ill and cannot look after them.* How, I wondered, would an increasingly disturbed, chaotic climate impact on these people? Would they cope better or worse for being on the edge already?

After a while I lost my small road and was deposited back on the interstate. Another wildlife refuge – the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge – was marked on both sides of me but again, I couldn't see how to get to it. One of the things I love about cycling is the way you are really *in* the landscape rather than isolated from it in the sound-proof tin box of a car. But so far I'd only really felt in the landscape

when I *wasn't* cycling. Even in brief breaks, stopped in a sliver of shade somewhere, the birdsong would become vivid and half-noticed rustles would suddenly emerge as lizards. Now I wanted to be off the huge highway and immersed in this wilder country, hearing the birds, learning how to see all the animals that lived there. A fantasy grew in my mind. I would come across a park ranger who would say to me, Ma'am, can you ride a horse? Sure, I'd reply, and we'd saddle up two bay quarter horses and ride into the desert where he'd show me animal tracks and teach me the names of the birds and the plants....

Somewhere along the road I had another flat and some time later I went by a store on a corner with benches outside in the shade. I swooped by, thinking, I don't deserve to stop yet - and then spent the next half an hour thinking, You idiot! Two hours in the sun in a hundred plus degrees, and you can't stop for a lemonade? In my mind, the store became populated with friendly, interesting people, and had soon become a symbol of everything I needed to make time for on this trip. Conversation. Contact. Maybe it was a related intuition that prompted me, coming into Los Lunas for a late lunch, to cross to a café on the other side of the road - though I thought was also drawn by the sign advertising 'Deli and Salads'. The salad bar consisted primarily of grated cheese and shrivelled lettuce so I had *huevos rancheros* as usual.

As I was finishing, one of the three women who constituted the café's entire population came over. 'So, where are you biking to?' We got chatting. Her name was Thereze, and the café was hers, though she had a degree in Outdoor Recreation, and still coached softball. Before the café, she'd travelled in Europe, and liked Italy especially. Global warming? 'Sure, it's an issue,' she said. 'It's a *huge* issue. But people don't care. They're idiots. Our *President* is an idiot, straight up...'

Wondering how many people in New Mexico shared this view, I filled my water bottles at a tap in the washroom under a poster explaining how to deal with domestic violence. When I went to pay, the young girl behind the counter said, 'No, T's got it.'

T was not going to argue. She didn't even want to be thanked, turning away with a 'Have a good trip and be safe,' and leaving me with a treasured sense of connection and undemanding exchange.



The end of that first, long, hot week saw me cycling into Albuquerque. Outskirts and road works and busy traffic for miles and miles and then, with a bit of map-puzzling and a sanity stop on a bridge to watch the swallows, I suddenly arrived. Downtown! Some cities in the States don't really seem to have a downtown area, but Albuquerque certainly did. Swanky high-rise hotels and offices, huge pedestrian plazas and funky restaurants abruptly replaced the straggling outskirts. It had seemed judicious to clean up a bit before meeting the Mayor and I didn't want to be miles away in the morning. But the downtown hotels were not an option on my cash budget. Chris had somehow persuaded a hotel to let him pay for a room over the phone from the UK. Since they normally insist on seeing the relevant credit card, this was quite an achievement. Now, courtesy of Google maps, he guided me in with text messages, saying later it felt a bit like watching the little red dot move along the streets of Shang Hai in *Mission Impossible*. 'You're coming to a junction. Take the next left!'

On the other side of the Atlantic I closed in, inexorably, on the target... The Doubletree Hotel. A zillion stories high and exceedingly plush. And just across the plaza from the Mayor's office. Leaving Rocky at the entrance I tentatively crossed the vast lobby, suddenly aware of my own griminess. Would they really let me in?

The response was impeccable. 'Certainly ma'am, your room is on the ninth floor.'

'Er, and my bike?'

'Oh, just take it with you.'

So Rocky and I rode upwards in an elevator, joined by various others who seemed equally unperturbed despite having to squeeze past the dusty panniers to get in. I laughed out loud when I saw the room. Number 916 was an absolute haven. Huge, lightly scented, discrete colours, immense bed: in short, altogether luxurious. I had one of the best showers ever, fixed a punctured inner tube while reclining on a lounge chair and then read about United States mayors propped up in the vast bed. Rocky leant against an immaculately papered wall and looked really quite at home.

The next morning, after a sumptuous eggs benedict breakfast, I walked across the sunny plaza to the Mayor's office. Eleven floors up, it was actually a whole suite of offices, open plan and scattered with sofas and enormous Chinese vases. Spectacular views across

Albuquerque and beyond beckoned from every sparkling window. I was greeted by the friendly Rene – slim, early thirties, dark hair – introduced to various people as ‘The Doctor’ or ‘Doctor KR’, given coffee and waved to a deep sofa to await the Mayor. I would have been willing to wait for some time. The Mayor of Albuquerque was, at that point, one of two hundred and forty-three ‘Cool City’ Mayors⁷ across the United States who had basically said, the heck with Bush and the federal government; if they are not going to do anything about climate change, we will. They had simply bypassed Bush, and got on with the job of committing their cities to big reductions in climate change emissions, using the Kyoto Protocol as guidelines but often going well beyond them. From what I’d managed to find out so far, I was impressed. They were dynamic, they had clout and they were getting things done. They were focused on solutions. And they had some very clear ideas about what those solutions were.

I’d just figured out how to use the digital recorder (the same tiny machine that played host to my fourteen songs) and had rather nervously prepared a ton of questions. But Mayor Martin Chavez – short grey hair, very calm, focused, casual dress (‘I’m going fishing later’) – started by asking me about my trip. Then Barry – ‘my energy man’ – joined us. Then one of the Mayor’s aides put her head around the door to say that someone from *The Albuquerque Tribune* was here. Before I knew it, I was being simultaneously interviewed by Cary from the *Tribune*, various unidentified people on the conference call system, and someone from the local radio station. The aide was mouthing, ‘Tell them how important the issue is’; a dog barked in the background, and a photographer was snapping all of us. So my first recording of the trip was mostly of myself.

Finally, I got to ask the Mayor some questions. His vision was passionately held, (sort of) top-down, and focused on technology. Cleaner energy, greener fleets, energy efficiency. The Mayors were in a position to make it happen in their cities. They didn’t need to wait for grass roots change from below and they didn’t need permission from above. ‘Leadership from the middle,’ I thought, as Chavez talked. He was clearly having an impact on Albuquerque’s carbon footprint. I asked him whether he thought his impact went beyond his

⁷ More information about Cool City Mayors at <http://coolcities.us/>

city, whether the Mayors had influence at the federal level. His reply was beyond positive. It gave a glimpse of the world as an altogether different, saner place.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘the Mayors are certainly having an affect higher up. Environmental issues in general are going to be a major factor in the next presidential election. The USA will finally come fully on board in relation to global warming – and then it will lead the world. Then it will be a force to be reckoned with...’

The United States as a world leader in tackling climate change! That was really quite a thought, especially since the Bush administration was, at the time, still largely denying climate change even existed. But if it were, somehow, to become reality ... on the spot it was hard to think of any other single change of political position that could have a greater, more positive impact.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, I asked Mayor Chavez whether he thought that the gains in efficiency and other kinds of ‘technofixes’ he was harnessing would be sufficient. ‘They’re clearly crucial,’ I said, ‘but, well, do you think they will be enough? Do we need changes in our lifestyle as well?’

Chavez paused. ‘Lifestyle changes?’ Then he smiled. ‘Yes, of course. But we don’t need to go back to the caves.’

I was keen to get to the bottom of this enigmatic response. What lay behind the equation of ‘lifestyle changes’ with a return to stone-age living, even in jest? I suspected it might mean, ‘Lifestyle changes? Not really.’ Or even, ‘Lifestyle changes? Sigh. You’ve just revealed yourself as an old-fashioned, unrealistic, back-to-the-ark, hippy environmentalist’ – though this speculation was completely unfounded. I was just on the verge of formulating the single, laser-sharp question that would instantly uncover the truth when the Mayor was asked what he thought about my trip.

‘Well, I think the Doctor is a ripple on a lake. A ripple that will turn into a tsunami ...’ I wasn’t quite sure how to take this but before I could question his metaphor the Mayor indicated with a polite but emphatic, ‘Is there anything else I can help you with?’ that the interview was over. I was led away by the energy man to meet the exuberant hound, who turned out to be the Mayor’s dog, Dukes.

I warmed to the Mayor even more after meeting his dog. Dukes – a delightful, sane, happy, black, grey and spotty retriever cross – was

a rescue mutt who had gone on to star in the publicity for a spaying and neutering campaign, one of the Mayor's pet projects. Dukes brought a ball and dropped it at my feet. Throwing it seemed less than wise, but Barry grinned and said, 'Oh, just chuck it. If we break a vase we'll get the Chinese to send us another.' I assumed he didn't mean it. But I wasn't entirely convinced he was joking, either. Barry described himself as 'a Republican, but the greenest person in the building.' We went to his office and chatted about all sorts of things, including his reservations about biofuel - 'It releases huge amounts of carbon in the harvesting. It's not like we do it with a man and an ox. And it takes up habitat and agricultural land.' In relation to cars, he favoured hydrogen. And the energy for the reaction? 'Solar,' he said. 'We're not exactly short on sunshine here -' he threw a glance at my patchy arms - 'as you've probably noticed.' It was Barry who told me about the interstates and fighter planes, moving seamlessly from there to a discussion about his wife's gun (had she ever used it? 'Well, the time a burglar came through the bathroom window she would've') to his views about education, child-rearing and how ornery kids get if they watch TV while eating sugar.



It was almost lunchtime by the time I left the Mayor's office, packed up and left the Doubletree. I was waved off by the hotel staff, who had given me strict instructions about which roads to avoid at all costs. Back out in the Albuquerque lunchtime traffic, attempting to follow their directions with the words, 'I *live* here, and I wouldn't cycle on that,' ringing in my ears, I wasted at least an hour before realising that 'Cut through University,' meant, 'Take the road called "University"' rather than 'Take a shortcut through the campus.' I'd tried the latter and repeatedly come to a dead-end at the library. I finally ended up on the road I'd been warned off, only to find that it was the one I'd cycled in on. I had no wish to provoke fate by ignoring the advice of cycling locals but I guess they typically hadn't just come off the interstate. In between grappling with urban navigation, I thought about what Mayor Chavez had said. The Cool City Mayors were definitely on the case in terms of thinking about solutions. Their willingness to bypass Bush and just get on with it was inspiring. Leadership from the middle. An important bit of the jigsaw? How often do we

feel too small as individuals to do anything – and yet how difficult it must be at the very top, too, as a president or a prime minister who is trying to deal with a climate crisis while also compelled to heed the short-term concerns of next term's electorate. The city or town, somewhere between the individual and the state, seemed to be a good size unit for change, for positive action, for putting solutions into immediate practice.

But what about the *kind* of solutions the Mayors were advocating? Of that I wasn't so sure. 'Technology' was, in sum, Chavez' answer to my question, 'How do we make ourselves and our ways of life climate friendly?' and I was troubled by his answer to my question about technofixes. No-one could doubt that gains in energy efficiency and other technological advances were crucial in the fight to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Motor vehicles alone – an example high in my mind for obvious reasons – accounted for about forty percent of the USA's entire oil consumption. If cars across the US increased their efficiency by only one mile per gallon, the United States would save as much oil as the *total* it could possibly extract if it drilled (as it was proposing to do) in the wild and beautiful Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Meanwhile, millions of cars across the States were chucking out vastly more CO₂ than they needed to – even to make the same journeys in the same cars! Improvements in energy efficiency were part of the solution, no question.

But Chavez' approach, and that of the Cool City Mayors generally, seemed to be focused on technological changes alone. I thought of the bearded Hummer-man who I'd so nearly verbally abused. A technofix approach could reduce his emissions by running his 'car' on a more carbon-efficient fuel. Such a move had already been made by Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger had taken up the environmental mantle, his campaigning earning him the nickname 'Germinator'. Shwarzenegger, the proud owner of five Hummers, had converted two of them: one to run on hydrogen and the other on biofuels. Maybe a Hummer could be made a bit more streamlined, too. But even a biofuelled, shape-shifted Hummer would still account for an awful lot of carbon. And then there was the sheer unnecessary-ness of the thing. Surely, even the Governor of California didn't really need to run around town in a tank?

In sum, Chavez' approach was inspiring; but it also left me

wondering. Could we simply keep our current lifestyle essentially intact, using clever technology to render it climate-friendly? Was it feasible as a solution to techno-fix not just Hummers, but the carbon consequences of our high levels of consumption in general – the carbon consequences of our throwaway, fast-fix consumer values? Energy consumption went up 80% in the thirty years from 1970 to the end of the century. Most analysts agree that, across the industrialised world, it needs to *come down* 80% by 2050. Could technology alone really take us all the way across that particular Great Divide – from where we are now to where we need to get to? If it couldn't, a deeper rethink was in order. Sacrilegious thought, but I couldn't help wondering whether we might even need to *give up* Hummers. And if we did, how much would we really lose?



The way out of town was lined with potential distractions. My eggy breakfast had been used up long since and there were numerous, tempting, university city-type places to eat. But I had it my head that I didn't deserve lunch until I was on the other side of town. Once I was thoroughly in the outskirts I stopped at a Taco Bell and, without great hope, asked what they had that was vegetarian. 'Would a seven-layer burrito be OK?' asked the young girl behind the counter. The seven layers turned out to include beans, guacamole, tomato and cheese, cost a little over two dollars and was absolutely delicious. Just as I was leaving, my mobile rang. It was an old friend, Tom Buffalo, who'd got the number from Chris. I'd tried to contact Tom before leaving the UK but had apparently used an out-of-date number for an office in Alaska and he'd only just picked up the call. He was just about to give me his home number in Colorado when my phone packed in. There was nothing I could do. I cycled away, hoping Tom wasn't thinking I'd just been mugged.

The first few miles on the interstate were grim. It was vastly busier than further south and a real slog into the wind. I strained into the pedals while trying to avoid broken glass and tyre debris on the hard shoulder, or annihilation off the hard shoulder as huge trucks hurtled by, buffeting me with tail wind and noise. At last, I turned off onto Highway 14 – the 'Turquoise Trail' – and a big pull-up to another San Antonio. The Turquoise Trail National Scenic Byway

is a gorgeous section of road between Albuquerque and Santa Fe – with a very dark past. Visitors are invited to ‘drive back into history through the mining towns of Golden, Madrid and Cerrillos’. Drive a little further back and they might also witness Colonel Kit Carson marching Navajo people along the trail during their ‘Long Walk’ to incarceration at Fort Sumner. Carson had been sent to subdue the Navajo and move them to Fort Sumner on the Bosque Redondo Reservation. When they declined, he began a brutal campaign, destroying villages, livestock, crops and people until moving to the reservation was their only chance of survival. Eight or nine thousand people walked the three hundred miles to Fort Sumner. Hundreds died of cold and hunger. Less than a hundred and fifty years later, I struggled to think myself into Carson’s mindset – into the worldview that would have made this seem like legitimate behaviour. How could that possibly have seemed like a normal, acceptable thing to do?

It wasn’t only the march that killed people. Many more were to die later. The United States government decreed that the Navajo should engage in agriculture on the barren reservation. Some argue that this land was unsuitable for raising crops and that the Navajo did not have the right kind of farming experience. Others that, left to their own devices, the First Nations would have coped perfectly well; but that they were forced to change their farming methods by the new, white Americans – who scarcely knew the land – leading to failed harvests and damaged ecosystems. Either way, hunger followed.

From a modern perspective, the treatment of the First Nations seems astonishingly stupid and brutal. Yet the writer and farmer Wendell Berry, in his classic book *The Unsettling of America*,⁸ argues that however brutal, these events were just the beginning of a new and potentially catastrophic trend: a series of more or less forced displacements of people who knew and understood the land – and could support themselves sustainably from it – by people who didn’t. The people who drove off and exploited the Navajo were, he points out, driven off and exploited in their turn, albeit by economic forces rather than military ones. And the same pattern can be seen across the world: small farms being displaced by immense, high-technology farming – by ‘agribusiness’. It’s done in the name of ‘efficiency’, of

⁸ Wendell Berry (1977) *The Unsettling of America* Avon Books

course, but at what cost? Millions of people, often farming in a way that is actually more resilient and less damaging, displaced against their will. And immense problems in relation to food safety. ('It is one of the miracles of science and hygiene,' as Berry dryly summarises, 'that the germs that used to be in our food have been replaced by poisons.') Immense problems in relation to environmental pollution and soil erosion. ('How can it be "efficient" to damage, destroy, even lose, vast quantities of the soil that is the very thing that makes agriculture possible?' Berry asks).

And of course, modern agribusiness is fantastically energy-hungry. It depends on oil for its machinery, for its fertilizers and pesticides, for its packaging, and for the long-distance transportation of its produce. This was evident even to Berry in the 1970s: 'That we should have an agriculture based as much on petroleum as on the soil – that we need petroleum exactly as much as we need food and must have it *before* we can eat – may seem absurd. It is absurd. It is nevertheless true.' It makes modern agriculture – the source of the vast majority of our food – deeply vulnerable to changes in oil supply and cost. And it means that the systems by which we produce one of our most basic needs are contributing massively in terms of energy use, and hence CO₂ emissions, to climate change. The ultimate irony is that climate change presents a profound threat to these very same systems.

Not an easy train of thought. And one that raises that most fundamental of questions: how *should* we meet our needs? In particular, how should we relate to the land we rely on to do this? It's a question both deeply ethical and profoundly practical. Of course we need to eat and to do this we need to use 'nature'. But how do we distinguish between *use* of the land, of ecological systems, of people, of other species and other living beings – and *abuse*? How do we use the land in ways that are both sustainable and fair?

Far easier to be drawn back into the present, where the Turquoise Trail was turning into the best day's cycling so far. Big desert vistas, big blue sky. Hot, but not oven-like. Little traffic. At the top of a hill a car was pulled over on the hard shoulder and a couple were photographing cacti. I stopped. 'Hi!' they said, 'would you like a drink?' They handed me a huge glass of orange juice, introduced themselves as Luc and Denise from Vancouver, and told me that the flowering of the cacti, happening all around, was in fact a rare

occurrence. They took a photo of me, Rocky and a huge spiky plant festooned with rather straggly pink flowers and left me their number in case I should ever need help in Vancouver. Ravens flew alongside as I cycled off, cranking gently and occasionally tumbling in the hot sky.

Not long after, the road began an absolutely glorious, speedy descent. Rocky's top gears had not been in action for several days and, for the first time, I missed them. I pulled over and dug out my tool-kit, adjusting the limit screws that control the front gear mechanism. It made absolutely no difference. Ditto with adjusting the tension on the cable. I wasn't in the mood for indefinite fiddling to no effect. So we took off again, for miles of wonderful, long, swooping descents, the occasional tiny climbs quickly followed by more descent. Even with my legs spinning furiously it was fantastic.



The town of Golden hosted the first gold rush west of the Mississippi, in 1825, well before the gold rushes in California and Colorado. Now, in 2006, it barely existed. The town of Madrid, however, most certainly did. I cycled slowly down a long main street of decidedly funky-looking houses, many sporting anti-Iraq war posters, not something I had seen until then. A feisty atmosphere hung in the air. And the town was absolutely packed with people. Cafés and bars and sidewalks all spilled people onto the street, which was hung with banners proclaiming the 'Madrid Chilli Festival'. This was no quaint folk festival, though. There was the occasional chilli in evidence, but mostly there were rows and rows of machinery parts lined up on the sidewalk. At the far end of town was a huge open space, packed with trucks and an immense sound system, clearly gearing up for later with occasional fragments of music blasting into the hot air. I cycled slowly through, absolutely intrigued. What on earth was happening here? But I didn't stop. Friends of friends had offered a bed for the night and were expecting me in Santa Fe by eight. Given the late start, I was going to be hard-pushed to get there at any kind of civilised hour. But it was more than that. There's a sort of resistance to stopping I can get into when travelling. Partly a kind of shyness, partly a kind of laziness. It can be easier to keep moving - to skim across the surface of places and people - than to stop and engage. Leaving aside that this can make for an empty experience, finding ways to connect enough to

chat about climate change was the very core of what I was trying to do.

On the other hand, engaging takes time and there wasn't a lot of extra time at my disposal. In this respect, one of several dilemmas at the heart of this trip was rapidly emerging and Madrid was a particularly acute example. Should I just *take* the time to stop off at unexpected chilli festivals and, if necessary, let Anchorage go? Or should I keep my focus on the final destination and keep moving, keep the miles up? At that point, I was feeling pretty stubborn about reaching Anchorage. I couldn't give up on it. Not yet. And so Madrid remained an intriguing opportunity – music, feisty people, what appeared to be a chunk of United States counter-culture at a big outdoor party – that I didn't take up.

On the far side of Madrid, the road kept dropping. It was already gone six in the evening. If the road goes up at the end of this descent as much as I've just come down, I thought, there is no way I am going to get to Santa Fe by anything like eight. Miraculously and mysteriously, given that Santa Fe is nearly two thousand feet higher than Albuquerque, it didn't. The road just levelled out around seven thousand feet. I'm not sure why, but I've always liked being at about that altitude – with all that heavy oxygen thinned out a bit, breathing becomes somehow easier. And I was feeling stronger than I had felt all week. It was a fabulous last couple of hours, racing to my fourteen songs, swooping downhill, standing in the pedals for the uphill, blasting the miles and getting closer and closer to arriving reasonably close to the hour I was actually expected. For the first time, I felt the exhilaration of being hot, sweaty and powerful, and dared to believe that my old, fit body might come back. The sun was setting as I raced (relatively speaking) into Santa Fe on Rodeo Road – which actually had a rodeo in full swing – and I would have made it for eight-thirty if I hadn't got lost. I spent an hour wandering around the suburbs of Santa Fe in the dusk with a mobile that wasn't working, increasingly aware of the late hour – and that my rear bike light had fallen off some time previously.

When I finally reached Jonathan and Mela, they had given up trying to phone me and were just going to bed. They waved away my apologies, gave me a plate of vegetable curry, showed me a luxurious bathroom and a fabulous bed under a wooden, wall-free roof-on-legs in the yard, surrounded by fairy lights. The bed was soft and delicious

and I lay in it watching distant lightning and listening to the wind and the conversation of the neighbours next door.

Next morning, realising that the phone worked when it was plugged in, I commandeered the fairy lights' socket and turned it into a temporary office. I rang Tom and left a message to say I hadn't been kidnapped in Albuquerque. I left a message for a friend in Canada and sent Chris a text. Then I had a crumpet with *Marmite* (oh, what bliss!) and chatted. Jonathan was a builder – preferably with straw bales, though there wasn't, he said, much call for that – and they were doing up the house. The kitchen looked normal but everywhere else was a complete shell, except for the sumptuous bathroom. I asked them about the Madrid Chilli Festival.

'Madrid? That's a place that's a law unto itself,' said Jonathan. 'But I've never heard of the Chilli Festival.'

'Me neither,' said Mela.

I had said my goodbyes and was just about to unplug the phone and head off when Tom rang back. 'Let's meet up! How about today!' Tom was an old friend who I hadn't seen in twelve years. But he lived in Southern Colorado, about three hundred and fifty miles off my route. I didn't have time to bike it and there was no public transport. How would I get there? Tom, an aeroplane leaser by trade, was unperturbed. 'Easy, I'll pick you up in a plane,' he said.

'Tom,' I said, carefully, 'I'm on a climate change awareness journey. I can't take a lift in a plane!'

'No worries,' he said cheerfully, 'I'll bring a smaller one.'

Needless to say, this left me with another dilemma. I really wanted to see Tom and to meet his new wife, Rosalind. But I knew flying was hugely problematic from a climate change point of view. On a return journey from London to Manchester, roughly equivalent to the flight Tom was proposing, a three-quarters-full train would chuck about 30kg of CO₂ per person into the skies – whereas a similarly loaded plane would account for a whopping 96.5kg⁹ per passenger. I wasn't sure how this compared to a small plane (the figures were for a Boeing 747) but I was pretty sure it wouldn't be good. Of course, the whole trip was underpinned by an even bigger dilemma as I'd just flown across the Atlantic to do it. And having just crossed the

⁹ Comparison based on UK Department of Transport figures. See www.transportdirect.info 'Find CO2 emissions' under 'Tips and Tools'

Atlantic it seemed perverse to refuse Tom's lift. But for some reason, the prospect of it unsettled me. Up until now, I'd assumed I could justify my long flight. It wasn't as if I was going away for a weekend; I'd be away for three months. And the purpose of the ride made the flight worthwhile, surely. Now, faced with a much shorter flight, I was suddenly not so sure. My transatlantic flight would have emitted about a tonne of CO₂ per passenger. That's roughly what we should be aiming at per person *per year*. Hard, then, to make long-haul flights part of a personal, climate-friendly lifestyle. Yet assuming it's okay to fly, that it's necessary for whatever reason, is the norm. Flying is normal. I'd been assuming my own flight was somehow different, special, more important. But wasn't that precisely the problem? It was not a comfortable thought.



The airport was only three miles away, which left me time to visit the bike shop.

'I can't get the front derailleur to shift into top gear,' I explained. The shop was stuffed with bikes needing attention but I was on the road with big panniers. There seemed to be an unspoken ethic - I encountered it time and time again - that tourers who are actually touring get priority treatment in bike shops. Rocky was relieved of his panniers, lifted onto a stand and Luke, clearly the chief mechanic, carefully reset the limit screws, tightened the cable, tweaked the angle of the back derailleur ...

'You got a whole host of minor things adding up here, ma'am,' he said, and then, as I asked for a ton of inner tubes and the use of a high-pressure pump, he introduced me to *slime*. Slime is ... well, a slimy substance that, if injected into the inner tube, magically renders punctures self-sealing. Fantastic! Luke administered the slime, a shade of putrid lime green; I pumped up the tyres, and a well-adjusted Rocky and I cycled off in perfect time to meet Tom at eleven.

At the tiny Santa Fe airport we passed a building marked 'Million Aires', a couple of hangers, a very small reception area for routine flights - and arrived at the beautiful buff adobe building reserved for the occupants of private planes. It was a different world.

'Er, can I bring my bike in?'

'Of course, madam,' said the immaculate receptionist, handing

me a glass of iced water. So Rocky and I waited in cool luxury, he leaning against the gift counter while I perched on a leather chair at a table next to plush sofas and a wood-burning stove (not burning) and wrote my diary until Tom arrived, grinning, hugging, and god-damning. Tom, pretty much the same despite the intervening years, put Rocky in the office, borrowed the staff car and drove me downtown for lunch.

Back at the airport, we squeezed Rocky into the tiny Cessna and took off over Santa Fe. Flying low, Tom insisted on following the road I'd be cycling on later. Since I rapidly get airsick in small planes - carbon payback! - I would have been quite happy to go by the most direct possible route. But it *was* amazing to see this part of New Mexico from the air. Cycling along I'd thought, yep, this is pretty desert-y, but I'd had no real sense of the scale. From above, I could see hundreds and hundreds of miles of dry land, scrub, empty watercourses. Wow! I really had been cycling through a desert! A regular scattering of tiny square patches were, Tom said, gas wells. By this time, the afternoon storms were building up into lurch-making bumpy clouds. Tom let me take the controls and only by focusing fiercely on the horizon and on keeping the wings straight did I avoid using the bin-liners we'd scrounged from reception. Much longer and they would have been critical, especially as the plane turned out to belong to a neighbour. In the nick of time we landed on a grass strip to be met by the beautiful Rosalind - tall, slim, big eyes, short grey hair, very striking and very welcoming. Tom and Rosalind had recently moved to this quiet part of Southern Colorado, bought a hundred acres, and were building a house. Meanwhile, they were living in a 'trailer', which turned out to be a beautiful, spacious white-painted house with a wooden deck and patio, under tall shady trees, looking out across hayfields to distant mountains. It was a lovely, lovely place.

I felt strongly inclined to spend the evening sitting on the deck under the trees, enjoying the view and the peace. But Tom and Rosalind were keen for me to meet their neighbours for dinner. When we arrived at John and Anne's, a few minutes away, it was just them and us. For some reason I had been imagining a formal, sit-down affair. Then a couple joined us, and then another. Then a group of kids piled out of a truck. Cars kept arriving. Soon the house was full of three generations of people wandering inside and out, drinking beers, cokes

and margaritas. I chatted with a geologist specialising in hazardous waste who was retraining as a nurse specialising in anaesthesia. (An anaesthetist with a geological time-frame, what a thought! 'Let me put you to sleep for a hundred thousand years...') His view on global warming was that climates have always been in flux and that this was just another flux. Even if it were happening, he added, talking about global warming isn't a good way to get people to act differently. 'It's too big and distant,' he said. 'Focus on the geopolitical situation and the desirability of energy independence. That'll get people's attention. That'll be much more effective.'

I chatted with a solar astrophysicist who'd been studying the sun's output since 1970. He promptly kicked Mother Nature into touch. 'We can't blame the sun's output for global warming any more,' he said. 'It is now *certain* that the output has been constant for the last thirty-odd years. And yes, I most definitely do believe that global warming is happening.'

Best of all, I chatted with Heidi. Small and slender, skin-tight jeans, beautiful boots, pink and white shirt and white cowboy hat above a long pale-blonde plait. Her large blue eyes had a calm, grounded sort of look. Wise, yes, but it was still extremely hard to believe that she was well past bus-pass age – or the Colorado equivalent. Heidi had a very large ranch in Utah – so beautiful, apparently, that more than one film star had offered to buy it. In the summer she rode the ranch checking on cattle and fences, sleeping out for five or six nights at a time and only coming back for the occasional bath. What an inspiration. Being a cowgirl was a long-standing fantasy of mine, though it had never sat entirely easily with being vegetarian.

That night in the 'trailer' I had a wonderful long sleep, disturbed only by the sound of something galloping along the deck outside. 'Darn!' said Rosalind when I mentioned it, 'That must be the racoon back.'

I was spoiled all weekend. Delicious food! Company! A bathroom! Rosalind and I sat on the deck and chatted and she shared some astonishing life stories that left me wondering how it is that some people seem to be dealt relentless challenges, and yet remain not just sane, but generous and apparently serene. Later, Tom and I visited Mesa Verde and the remains of a twelfth-century settlement. Tiny stone dwellings built into overhanging cliffs, curved and striped in

beautiful pinks and oranges and buffs. We cut off the path and sat on a rock looking back across to the cliff-houses. The site felt deeply peaceful, though it must have been an intense way of living – such small spaces and lots of climbing to get in and out. Tom told me that it had taken eighty years to build, but was only inhabited for about a hundred years. Nobody really knew why they left, though Tom said he had heard a theory that the children got rebellious and took to cannibalism. Jared Diamond, in his book *Collapse*,¹⁰ argues that the people of Mesa Verde, and other Anasazi in the south-west, had been brought down by a complex interaction of social and environmental factors; and that the environmental factors almost certainly included climate change. It had become drier, and their water source virtually disappeared. Their climate-change event would have been natural. Almost certainly nothing they could have done would have prevented it. Their catastrophe, however bad for them, had been small and local, I thought, looking at the silent, empty cliff-houses. Ours affects the whole earth. But they were gone, while we still had the option of turning things around.

Tom and I had been talking nonstop since Santa Fe, catching up on the last twelve years. Friends, work, travel, family. We talked about Hilary Clinton's chances of presidency and, of course, about climate change. Tom's view was that changes in the cost of energy would drive huge shifts in lifestyles in the next decade or so.

'Oil will peak,' he said, 'and become vastly more expensive, with all that entails.'

'Such as?'

'Such as jobs increasingly being outsourced internationally, leaving fewer jobs in the USA. Such as China becoming ever more powerful...'

He thought that the standard of living in the United States would drop, and that people would live more efficiently as a result. This would clearly have climate change benefits. But no way, in his view, would this be driven by individuals taking the initiative and acting on ethical and environmental concerns. 'It's economics, not ethics, that will change things,' he insisted. 'Economics is probably the *only* thing that will move us in the right direction, however inadvertently.'

I was not so sure. 'Once people know, once they really understand

¹⁰ Jared Diamond (2006) *Collapse* Penguin Books

what climate change is and quite how bad its consequences will be, then they will care. How could people not care?’

‘Kate, you’re naïve,’ Tom said, grinning, ‘but I think you’re great anyway.’

‘Gee thanks,’ I said. I hoped he was wrong. But Al Gore had said something very similar of himself: that in his early days as a climate change campaigner he’d been convinced that simply presenting the science would bring fellow politicians to his side. That he’d come to realise how naïve that was. How shocking he’d initially found it, hitting up against vested interests, barely disguised, the sheer power of oil and money. Economics driving hard in the wrong direction.



Back at the trailer, I asked Tom and Rosalind about the Madrid Chilli Festival.

‘Madrid? That place is a law unto itself,’ said Tom. ‘But I’ve never heard of the Chilli Festival.’

‘Me neither,’ said Rosalind. ‘Heck, lets go look it up.’

We Googled it. ‘God damn!’ said Tom, as we clicked on the first listing. Madrid, it transpired, had just been taken over for the film *Wild Hogs*, a motor-biking road movie starring John Travolta as one of four guys on bikes whose midlife crisis adventures included an encounter with the Del Fuegos, a mean New Mexican biker gang. The chilli festival I’d cycled through had not been a real festival at all, but part of a movie stage set.

We flew back to Santa Fe in Tom’s plane rather than the neighbour’s: a beautiful twin-prop turbo. Not so small. Rocky sat in the aisle quite comfortably, with seat belts gently constraining his panniers. The flight back was fabulous. Huge desert vistas, smooth and nausea-free. Somewhere near Ship Rock at the meeting of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Arizona, flying at twenty-one thousand feet, Tom took the plane off autopilot and let me fly (well, OK – steer). It was easy enough to keep on the compass bearing but of course you had to think about up and down as well... A plane like that climbs a thousand feet a minute, so it’s unnervingly easy to drop or climb into somebody else’s airspace. Tom even let me do the runway approach before taking over to the sound of air traffic asking if we’d seen the coyote on the runway. We could just see a tiny buff

figure against the long asphalt strip, standing quite still in the sunlight until we were almost ruffling his hot, red fur.

I loved it. I loved the responsiveness of the machine and the subtle feel of the power it was taking just to stay in the air. I loved it as I also love driving – however much I try not to. This positive response to carbon-hungry machinery really didn't help with the unsettling realisation that the plane had already triggered. My own relationship with carbon emissions was a microcosm of the bigger problem. I had my own overly large carbon footprint, my own reasons for not wanting to cut it back, my own addiction to oil. And I'd scarcely thought about that at all.

I said my goodbyes to Tom on the runway. 'Keep in touch,' he said. 'Don't wanna fuss you, but, heck, let us know how you're doing. And hey,' he finished with a grin, 'if you ever really get stuck, I'll come get ya.'

I set off again from exactly where I'd left off, back past reception and Million Aires into the familiar world of hot New Mexican roads and headwinds. We were headed north, for Colorado, and I was now a climate change campaigner with a private plane backup for emergencies.