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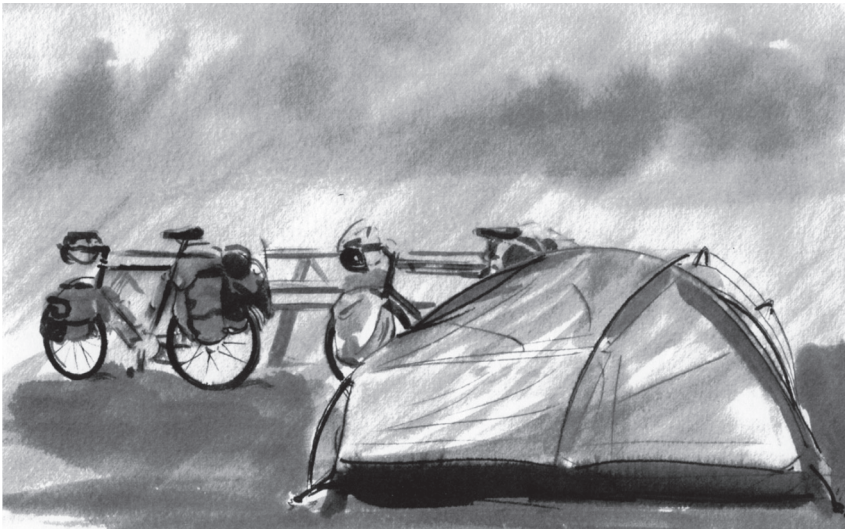
## BEGINNINGS

DAY 1, MAY 4: YORKTOWN TO JAMESTOWN, VIRGINIA

*Rain.* Why, when we are about to embark on the journey of a lifetime, why must it rain? Restless, anxious, hoping for a break, I've done my best to enjoy the soothing patter on the tent's fly over the last few hours, but now it's nearly 5 a.m. and time to get moving. The muffled words I catch from deep in David's sleeping bag are "... rain ... sleep more ... won't miss anything. ..."

Reluctantly, I accept. So much for nearly two years of my planning and imagining a Grand Beginning to this Journey, at the towering Monument with birds singing through sunrise.

From the comfort of our sleeping bags, Plan B comes all too easily, but for me sleep does not. I lie alert, thinking through the preparations for the trip



and wondering what I am doing here. Over four thousand miles of biking lie ahead, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with all kinds of challenging terrain and weather. I had better get used to Plan B, I lecture myself, for who knows what we'll encounter in the coming weeks and months.



**American robin.**

Low carols followed by a high *hisselly*. (1, 2:00)  
See p. vii for how to listen.

A robin begins to sing, 5:34 a.m. according to my watch, about half an hour before sunrise. His low, sweet carols drop from above one by one, *cheerily*, *cheer-up*, *cheerio*, *cheerily*, and I am soon silently singing with him, three to five carols over a few seconds, then a brief pause, then a few more carols, and another pause. I feel his tempo, counting the number of carols in the next package and pausing, counting and pausing, his initial measured pace calming. I try to stretch each quarter-second carol into a second or more, slowing his performance, relishing the varying patterns in pitch and rhythm, listening and watching as miniature musical scores float through my mind. He accelerates now, adding a single high screechy note, a *hisselly*, after each caroled series, but soon there will be two or more such high, exclamatory notes. I know how to listen to the patterns in his singing, how he combines sequences of different caroled and *hisselly* notes to express all that is on his mind, sometimes even singing the two contrasting notes simultaneously with a low carol from his left voice box and a high *hisselly* from his right, but for now the effort of deep listening is too much like work. Instead, I curl up in the sleeping bag, drifting along on a robin's song, floating, a broad smile creeping over my face, this robin having reminded me why I'm here.



**Wood thrush.**

Five different *ee-oh-lay* phrases in the rain-songs of this Virginia maestro.  
(2, 2:02)

A wood thrush joins in. He awakes with sharp *whit whit* calls, as if a bit peeved, then gradually calms to softer *bup bup* notes, and soon he's in full song, so rich and melodious, the stuff of boundless superlatives, one of the wonders of eastern woodlands. I sing with him, too, acknowledging the soft *bup bup bup* notes at the beginning of each song, then gather in the low, rich, flute-like, *ee-oh-lay* prelude, then smile at what sounds to my human ears like a harsh and percussive terminal flourish. At first I simply dissect each song into its prelude and flourish, marking the contrast between the two, but I'm

soon sketching each prelude in my mind as he sings. Emerging are five different half-second masterpieces of rising and falling, rich, pure notes, delivered just slowly enough that I can detect the overall patterns. And the flourishes—what a pity that I cannot slow them down now and hear the pure magic in the way the thrush must hear it, with his precision breathing

through his two voice boxes producing the most extraordinary harmonies imaginable.

In my mind's eye, I see a grand evolutionary tree, the massive trunk emerging from the primordial soup, the branches and twigs sufficient to accommodate every lineage and every living creature that ever was and is. At the very tips of three twigs in this grand array are the robin, the thrush, and me. Trace each of our lineages back in recent time and we each find two parents, four grandparents, then eight great-grandparents, and so on. Climbing down this tree, some tens of millions of years back in time the robin and thrush meet at a branching point where they have the same ancestor, where they are one. The robin and thrush now travel back in time together in search of their roots, meeting up with me some hundreds of millions of years ago, when we all had the same ancestor, when we were one. We belong to an extended family, each of us an extraordinary success story, each of us with an unbroken string of successful ancestors dating back to the beginning of time. The robin, the thrush, and I are equals: "*Mitakuye oyasin*," the Sioux would say as they end a prayer, "*all my relations*."

A chickadee sings now, too, a Carolina chickadee. Song after whistled song pierces the air, each sharp and sure. He sings the common high-low-high-low pattern, *fee-bee-fee-bay*, four whistles alternating from high to low frequency. But then he's on to another pattern, this one high-low-low-high, as in *fee-bee-bee-fee*; and soon he sings *fee-bee-bay-fee-bee*, three different song patterns, now leaping excitedly among them, successive songs always different. What frenzied singing, as if he's eager to show off all that he knows, eager in this pre-sunrise chorus to challenge other males and to impress listening females that he's *the one*. How different from what I can expect in an hour or so, when he'll repeat one of his songs many times before switching to another, perhaps well after attentive females have made their mating decisions. I listen for a neighboring male chickadee, hoping to hear a dialogue between them, but hear none.

But I do hear a conversation among the tufted titmice. The nearby male sings *peter peter peter*, and two other males in the distance, each on his own territory, echo with the identical song, songs that they've learned from each other. Back and forth and around they go as they answer each other; I note the time, 5:51 a.m., knowing that this *peter peter* discussion could go on for a while, as each male can sing 500 or more



Wood thrush



**Carolina chickadee.**

Excitedly singing a variety of songs, interspersed with calls. (3, 2:02)



Tufted titmouse



**Tufted titmice.**

Neighboring males dueling with identical songs. (4, 1:21)

renditions of a particular song before they all switch, almost in unison, to a different song in their repertoires.

The robin, the wood thrush, the chickadee, the titmice . . . *Yes, I know why I'm here*, and I'm not even out of the sleeping bag on the first day. Disjointed thoughts surface with jumbled words that do no justice to the certainty of purpose . . . to celebrate life, David's and mine, and the lives of other creatures along the way . . . to hear this continent sing, not only the birds but also the people, flowers and trees, rocks and rivers, mountains and prairies, clouds and sky, all that is . . . to discover America all over again, from the seat of a bicycle . . . to embrace reality, leaving behind the insanity of a workplace gone amuck . . . to simply *be*, to strip life to its bare essentials and discover what emerges . . . and in the process, perhaps find my future . . . by listening to birds!

The rain having abated, David stirs, and we agree it's time to get going. "Best not to get up before the sun," David offers as he squeezes out of the tent. I sense something rather profound in that statement, something about awaking *after* the birds' finest hour. What opposites we are, as I cherish dawn and he dusk, our preferred waking hours a half day out of sync. We should address this issue head-on, but I choose to just smile and wonder quietly how this will play out over the coming weeks.

We dress for the cool, wet weather, staying dry and warm in our bright yellow rain gear. Sleeping bags are soon stuffed into their sacks, sleeping pads rolled and tied, the wet tent collapsed and stuffed into its sack. David warms water over his homemade soda-can stove, and we refuel on a breakfast of oatmeal loaded with brown sugar and raisins, mixed with powdered milk for extra protein. Continuing what will be the routine for the next two to three months, we rinse dishes and utensils, return miscellaneous items to their places in the panniers, fill the water bottles, and load the panniers onto the bikes, strapping sleeping bags and pads and tent to the bikes' racks. Somewhat mystified at this point, I stare at the loaded bikes, such a pretty sight, astonished that all of the gear we had spread out last night is now neatly tucked away, ready to ride.

"Ready?" "Yep!" After zeroing our odometers for the day, we set out through the campground and then onto an unmarked trail into the nearby woods. We do our best to follow the directions of a park attendant, but are rather uncertain in these first minutes of our journey how this path will lead us to Yorktown's Victory Monument, from where our maps will guide us to the Pacific Ocean.

Though we may be uncertain of the trails, I know what I'm hearing: It is springtime in Virginia and migrants abound, many of them probably having arrived overnight. The treetops are alive with every male bird trying his best to impress. "David, listen to all this! There are robins and Baltimore orioles and scarlet tanagers and wood thrushes and great crested flycatchers and Carolina chickadees and tufted titmice and brown-headed cowbirds and song sparrows and red-eyed vireos . . . and warblers . . . blue-winged and black-throated green and prairie and yellow and chestnut-sided warblers, northern parulas, just for starters, and many of them have plastic, wavering songs, showing that they're still learning them."

David smiles, nods. *Too much*, he seems to be saying, but maybe in the coming weeks he'll also come to love birds for all they have to say. Or perhaps he's wondering how he can turn his interest in carbon cycles and climate science into a lifetime of exploration, much as I've done with birdsong. I've heard him say "It's a chance to get to know my father better . . . but we could have chosen a more adventurous trip than one that's all mapped out from coast to coast." I relish time with him, too, but I look at the road ahead as uncharted, as fresh and unexplored, for we will be listening to the world pass by in ways that no one else ever has.

Heading generally northeast along woodland trails and secondary roads, we enter a clearing where, a sign informs us, George Washington had his headquarters during late 1781. The American army was camped just to the east, our allies the French to the north, and about three miles to the northeast were the besieged British along the York River. Two miles to the east we ride into Surrender Field, where British General Cornwallis and his thousands of troops gave up their arms on October 19, 1781, effectively ending the American Revolution.

We bike on, through the battlefields, past the earthen redoubts where the Americans and French stormed the British positions in a surprise night attack. Cannon are strategically placed throughout the landscape, and in mock battle, David dismounts his iron steed and mans one of the cannon, then scrambles up the earthen redoubt. With the visitor center still closed, we continue on through Yorktown to the Victory Monument itself, a column of Maine granite almost 100 feet high with Lady Victory herself standing tall at the top, proclaiming proudly that this nation "of the people, by the people, and for the people" stands united, strong, and *independent*. Here, amid all the symbolism commemorating the defeat of the British and the birth of a nation, here is the official beginning of the 1976 Bikecentennial route that we'll follow across the country.





*Carolina wren*



**Carolina wrens.**

An escalated singing interaction, two males countering each other with matching songs.  
(5, 4:06)

*VIC-to-ry! VIC-to-ry! VIC-to-ry!* Or perhaps it is heard as *LIB-er-ty! LIB-er-ty! LIB-er-ty!* How appropriate these mnemonics for the Carolina wren's song that explodes from the bushes at the edge of the clearing just beyond the monument. His challenges are answered almost immediately by three other males whose songs ripple into the distance. I listen intently to the pitch and rhythm of the responses; they're all different, each of the males, at least for now, choosing to sing what the others are not. But every five seconds each male chooses among several singing options, all made possible because each male has about 30 different renditions of this *VIC-to-ry!* song, with most of them learned from and therefore identical to those of his neighbors. The default choice for each male is to continue with the current version of his *VIC-to-ry!* song, and if they continue singing and relations remain peaceful, eventually each will switch to another song that none of

his neighbors is singing at the moment. I listen for tensions to escalate, when neighbors are more likely to address each other with identical songs, but for now calm prevails.

I'm jarred from my listening by the crinkling of food wrappers beside me. What does it take to stoke a twenty-four-year-old across the country? I wonder, but I'm hungry, too. Over fig bars, a bagel, and some cheese, I explain to David how to listen to the wrens. "That's great, Pops." He seemed to be listening attentively, though judging from his tone of insincerity, he must be wondering how this will all play out over the coming weeks.

Far more unceremoniously than I had imagined, we take a last look around, check the map one more time, and mount our bikes, heading west down Yorktown's Main Street. Within 50 yards we turn right on Compton de Grasse Street, coast down about 200 yards to the York River itself at Cornwallis Cove, then take a left onto Water Street. In a flash, the entire trip unfolds before me, one road after another leading us beyond Yorktown all the way to the Pacific as we follow our Adventure Cycling maps through ten states, over four thousand miles in two to three months. For now, though, we've chosen an easy first day, a shake-down ride to test our bodies and bikes on the essentially flat coastal plain of Virginia. Within a mile we're on the Colonial National Historical Parkway, a 23-mile stretch of road that connects the battlefields of Yorktown with colonial Williamsburg and historic Jamestown.

"We cheated," announces David, more than half serious I sense, as he stops at a pull-off beside the York River. "Should have started on the Atlantic, not

a river that dumps into the ocean.” Given his rude assessment, with the word “tragedy” slipped in there somewhere, and faced with the stone wall we’d have to traverse with loaded bikes to reach the river, we forgo the usual cross-country ritual of dipping the rear tire into the water. I chuckle at the symbolism, the dipping of tires, how meaningless, but deep down a little voice nags at me that we didn’t do this quite right. The little voice swells as I imagine standing on the Atlantic shore, listening to all the birds in the saltwater marshes there. Get over it, I advise myself.

Fish crows and laughing gulls are suddenly everywhere. From the crows flying all about it’s an outright laugh, a nasal *caa-ha, caa-ha*, or often a simple *caa*. The gulls laugh from fields beside the road and from high in the trees above the river—*HA-a HA-a HA-a*, every once in a while letting rip a wild, prolonged *ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-hah-haah-haaah*. It’s an omen, I decide, the birds smiling on us and providing a hearty send-off for the journey of a lifetime. Yes, that’s what I hear, and *Thank you*, I find myself saying, *and I wish you well, too*.

The road leaves the river and we enter a forest of oaks and tulip trees and sweet gums and loblolly pines, the trees arching over the road, a tunnel inviting us deeper into a magical world at a pace befitting a cross-country bicycle trip, now escorted by songbirds all around. So many sounds, so many stories, all from family. I try to acknowledge each voice, each brown thrasher and indigo bunting and eastern towhee and prairie warbler and tufted titmouse and Baltimore oriole and scarlet tanager and great crested flycatcher and common grackle and . . . wow, listen to the blue jays here—how different their calls from the birds back home. Dialects, the oral traditions, yes, the culture of the jays here is different from the culture elsewhere. All these voices and more—it’s dizzying, my mind racing among them as I float westward, the tires barely touching the pavement.

David rides on ahead, giving me space, and I soon find myself focusing on the soothing songs of red-eyed vireos. They’re packed in here, a male singing over the road every hundred yards or so, one or two singers always within earshot. I pick out the next bird, perhaps 50 yards ahead—he sings,



**Seaside sparrow.**  
Beside the Atlantic, wheezing two subtly different songs. (6, 2:06)



**Fish crow.** Nasal, “laughing” *caa-ha, caa-ha*. (7, 1:15)

**Laughing gull.**  
*U-ah*, laughing halfheartedly. (8, 0:39)



**SO MANY VOICES!**  
**Eastern towhee.**  
Two different *drink-your-tea* songs. (9, 1:00)  
**Blue jays.** A variety of calls from the local dialect in eastern Virginia. (10, 1:40)



Blue jay



**Red-eyed vireo.**  
Distinctive songs  
occur periodically  
throughout his  
performance.  
(11, 5:38)

just a quarter second burst of energy, pauses a second, then sings again. The nearer I approach the sharper his songs, each clearly different from the one before. Beneath him I ride and then beyond, while he sings what seems a never-ending series of different songs: *Here I am . . . over here . . . vireo . . . listen now . . . believe me . . . that's right. . .*

I check my speedometer: 12 miles per hour. Too fast.

At that speed, I have only 15 to 20 seconds with each vireo, but I need more time. A minute would be good, so I slow to four miles per hour, then three for good measure, challenging my balance as I now take a full minute to pass each singing vireo. I listen intently, trying to pick out from the next male an especially distinctive song, the handle by which I can get to know him better. The third bird obliges, singing as I approach what sounds like an imitation of a goldfinch's call, a thin, rising *twweeeee*.

With his next song, I begin counting: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 songs, but none of them the goldfinch imitation, 6-7-8-9-10, 11-12-13-14-15, 16-17, and just after passing underneath him, there is the *twweeeee* again, at 18. I count again, 5 . . . 10 . . . 15, and I circle back to keep him in earshot. . . There it is again, at 20. Nice. Given that a red-eyed vireo tends to sing most of his songs before repeating himself, I can hear that he has about 19 different songs at his command.

Turning west again toward Williamsburg, I speed up to catch David. Continuing with the vireos, I listen to each in turn, but now I'm content to just identify a distinctive song from each without lingering long enough to hear him repeat it. None of these birds has the distinctive *twweeeee* of that first bird, telling me another part of the red-eye's story, that each singer is unique, the songs in his repertoire an identifiable voiceprint. How different these vireos are from the tufted titmice, the Carolina wrens, and the Carolina chickadees, neighboring males of which learn each other's songs and share nearly identical repertoires.



*Interstate 64.* How jarring. Trucks and buses and cars thunder by just overhead. Where is everyone going so fast? What's the hurry? With windows closed, the air being conditioned, the radios no doubt blaring, the real world is shut out. But just 24 hours ago we were there, too, I remind myself. I take a few deep breaths, happy with the choice that we have made for these next few months. The trees again envelop me, the roar of traffic soon replaced by the songs of birds, peace restored.

At 13 miles, Williamsburg! And there's David, stretched out on the grass beside the road, waiting for me. "Sorry—got tangled up in some birds," I confess. He looks happy, relaxed, and, more importantly, tolerant of my delay.

"Stay away from that huge, sprawling visitors' center," he advises as he points across the packed parking lot. "People everywhere. There's extra parking for \$37, according to the big flat-screen TVs hanging from the ceiling. Feels more like Disney World than a historic site."

It's Sunday, and we walk our bikes among the throngs of people in the streets of the historic area. It's big history, as here, during the 1700s, was the thriving capital of Virginia, the most influential American colony. We sit on the grass beneath a small maple tree and break out the bagels and cheese, the bananas, and the fig bars, adding a Snickers bar for dessert. Just across the pathway from us, tourists pair off and pose to have their pictures taken with heads and arms secured in the stocks. Soon we're there, too, held at the neck and wrists, heads and hands protruding, smiling, giddy even, our picture taken by a willing passerby.

All about us is authentic Williamsburg . . . *chirrup chirrup . . . chirrup chirrup . . .* except for those house sparrows—they weren't here in the 1700s. Ironically, they seem to flourish best within the restored area. They appear to thrive on the forage in the horse dung, and the abundant nesting opportunities in the nooks and crannies of the buildings suit them well. But these birds don't belong in a restored Williamsburg, because it was much later, in 1851, when the first North American *chirrup* was heard in Brooklyn, New York, where the birds were introduced from England, and our singing continent was forever changed. In 150 years, these sparrows have taken the continent by storm, their *chirrups* and *cheeps* to accompany us from coast to coast. These much-maligned birds have grown on me, I confess, as I have come to appreciate the subtle richness in their incessant calling.

It's just another 11 miles on the Colonial Parkway to Jamestown. I take the red-eyed vireos at full speed. *Drink-your-teeee*, eastern towhees encourage from roadside bushes; in the canopy



**House sparrows.**  
The ruckus from  
a Virginia flock.  
(12, 2:01)

are scarlet tanagers and Baltimore orioles, a delight to eye and ear, but now only heard, none seen. *BOB WHITE!* I melt at the sound, just off the road to the left, for what could be more Dixie than the call of the bobwhite, whose Latin name *Colinus virginianus* announces it as the “Quail of Virginia.” Closer now, I hear the full call, a striking *oh BOB WHITE!*; he begins soft and low with the *oh*, pauses a quarter second, rises to the louder *BOB*, pauses half a second, then slides up the scale with the ringing *WHITE*. Yes, this is Virginia in May! I’m smiling, beyond happy. How far my head has come in the last 24 hours.

We soon exit the forest and cycle along the James River, another spreading estuary of brackish water just like the York River. It wasn’t always so, I remind myself. I imagine the scene here during the Pleistocene ice ages, over the last two and a half million years, when the oceans were lower because so much of the earth’s water was locked up in ice. During that time powerful rivers raged here, draining the mountains to the west and gouging out the broad valleys that are now drowned by the higher oceans.

With about thirty easy miles of biking for the day, we roll into Jamestown Beach Campground. It’s empty on this Sunday night, and we choose the best site, perched on the bank above the river. Our gourmet dinner is from cans purchased at the camp store and cooked over our camp stove. Though the sunrise this morning escaped us, the sunset does not. The thin, orange fabric of the tent is soon aglow, matching the glow of the sun setting between two cypress trees out in the river. A pileated woodpecker works the cypress for a few last morsels before going to roost, and above it an osprey settles onto its nest for the night.

“I don’t get it,” says David, looking up from his journal. “I just feel lost when you start telling me about birdsong. What’s the big deal?”

“Oh, where do I begin? . . . Thirty-five years ago, I suppose . . . in graduate school, 11 years before you were born. . . . I’ve come to know these birds, perhaps better than I know most of my human friends. Most important, I think, is that I hear each bird not as a species to be identified and listed, which is a rather limited endgame, but as an individual with something to say, much as I listen to any human individual with something to say, not just someone to be identified. And when a bird sings or calls, it tells what is on its mind, which varies from moment to moment, so that every listen is new and different and interesting. And with each bird heard, a lifetime of wonderful experiences and connections cascades through my mind, each new listen building on others, the entire soundscape richer with each passing day.”

“Yeah,” responds David, maybe understanding some. “You’ve got a few years’ head start on me. I’ll give it another try in the morning.”

Knowing that morning will come soon and that we hope to be up by 5 a.m., a good hour before sunrise, we turn in, crawling into our lightweight two-man tent, carefully chosen so that without the rain fly we will have views through the mesh in all directions. Settling in, we confirm the views, the western horizon aglow, Jupiter emerging a little west of overhead, silhouettes of cypress against the horizon and the oaks overhead. Yes, it's all good, in a setting so tranquil now that it is difficult to imagine the massive conflicts with Native Americans here, difficult to imagine the first African slaves introduced here into the future United States.

How long I sleep I am not sure, but sometime in the hour before midnight, with a quarter moon hanging above the river to the west, I hear her call: *who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-alllllll*. A barred owl! It's the vibrato in the "*alllllll*" that gives her away; it's an extended waver, typical of the female's call, as if she can't easily let go. From farther up river comes her mate's reply, *who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-all?*, the simpler "*all*" the clue that it's a male.

I doze, but down by the cypress trees before the moon has fully set, they have at it. It all begins simply enough with one of his calls, *who-who-who-who-who-all*, she immediately responding in kind with her *who who-who-who-who-alllllll*. With the two calls back-to-back, I can now hear that his call is richer and more mellow, her call higher pitched, and the vibrato in her *alllllll* contrasts sharply with his simple *all*. They exchange these calls one more time before his wailing begins, the *who* now more of a *wha*, as if his mouth were now wide open and he were baring his teeth, though he has none, of course. He continues his uncouth wailing for ten to 15 seconds, though it seems forever, she now accompanying him with a simple *who-alllllllllll*, the vibrato extended and exaggerated. What an extraordinary sound, like goblins in the night, or caterwauling cougars, or dueling demons, in reality two barred owls simply declaring "I'm yours." And just as suddenly as it began, it's over. Silence.

I smile, but out of respect for the hour and the slumbering son who slept through it all, I manage to contain myself. *Thank you, thank you*, I find myself whispering, *and a very good night*.



Barred owls



**Barred owls.**

Mates caterwauling,  
the extra vibrato  
hers. (13, 1:12)