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## A View of Palliative Medicine: The Third Option

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Our hero cyclist was really more of a satisfied middling. The Tour de Bastide was itself much more modest than its famous counterpart, yet it was an equal challenge to the legs and hearts of the less accomplished cyclists who embarked upon its route yearly. The course was divided into phases, each a physical test of specific design. The hills were the first stage—a strenuous symphony of uphill steeps and exhilarating downhill speeds that resonated with the tones of youthful limbs. The planes followed—a 50-mile stretch of paved flattened earth that catapulted seasoned sprinters into the womb of the adoring at the city’s finish line.

Our hero was in the truest sense the most average of riders. He was in brilliant shape physically and mentally, appearing invincible to most eyes, except those of his rivals who came from great distances to match him on every conceivable level.

On this day, in fact, he found himself in the most average of positions. Snaking through the hill portion of the course, and currently 44<sup>th</sup> out of 100

cyclists, he was squarely positioned in the midst of the race's most populous peloton—a predictable showing for an entrant who had consistently finished this race within the belly of the pack.

Sweat streamed from his forehead and poured over the pock of his temples. His heart didn't beat, it lunged forward. His muscles laboured within the paradox of tensing while stretching. It was poetic that, in the midst of this harrowing and panting, he found the quiet of his mind reflecting on the journey that had delivered him to this chosen crucible.

In the off-season, he had trained harder and longer than he had ever before. His family felt the sacrifices of his preparation as much as he did. He was often absent from gatherings, not to mention a few graduations. Mostly, he felt guilty about missing the small memories, like the day his son spilled an entire bowl of pancake batter on the floor while he was out logging miles. Rather than cleaning up the mess right away, his wife had watched as her child pushed his toy boats through the lake of batter, allowing his imagination to see something magic in that moment.

The scurry of snapping gears rustled him from his mesmerism. His eyes pinpointed onto the forms of men ahead of him as he marshalled himself back into alignment. Then, before he could fully fix his posture, fate rifled him towards a different trajectory. An impatient chump a few positions behind him decided to get aggressive and swirled past him on the right. In a moment unpredicted, uncalculated, and unaccounted for, our hero failed to acknowledge the move and did not yield. He would

later reminisce upon this pivotal moment—a mistake waxing bittersweet, born from the distracted reverence of family, not from the zeal of his competitive id. The climax was a cacophony of feet over handlebars and a hard crash into the rocks and scrub brush that lined the roadway.

Initially, he thought he would be able to dust off this disaster with the same alacrity as his toddler bobbing up from his daily tumbles. He didn't feel crushed, just bloody and sore—no reason to stop racing forward. When he untwisted his metal skeleton, he was pleased to see only a flat tire. This, too, was easily corrected using the tool kit and hand pump included with his standard gear. As he hopped upon his mount, by all accounts, he was back in the game—until he started pedalling. It was obvious after just a handful of turns that his condition was far more serious than he originally suspected. In retrospect, he realized how foolish it was for him to think he could get past this type of injury without repercussion—his bicycle, like his body, can only handle so much damage, even with all of the tools and pumps at one's disposal. In some cases, a physical limit is reached before a finish line one would have chosen.

The rim of his back wheel was slightly bent—not visible to the naked eye, but felt in the unnatural resistance, ever so subtle, that it posited against his muscles. Although it would not be obvious to casual spectators, he was no longer a peer of his fellow riders—he was set apart, damaged, inferior, and vulnerable. He could feel it, and he knew it, immediately and deeply, to be true. With each

quarter mile, the added friction pulled him further and further behind the pace of other riders, as if barbs of Velcro had grown into the very grooves of his treads. With the horizon of the planes looming ahead, his quest, even his very effort, now seemed quietly hopeless.

At this juncture, our hero perceived only two options left to his choosing. The first option would be to continue pushing forward—denying stoutly his impossible disadvantage and lumbering ahead with doubled effort like a noble Spartan faced with the fall of his crest. This was, after all, his natural instinct as a seasoned competitor, and it seemed to be the proper code for such a predicament. He would finish the race wrecked, in physical agony, with the cruel reward for his anguish the indignity of a last place finish.

His second option would allow him to eschew the burden of physical suffering but at a cost of even greater ignominy—he could quit the race. The procedure would be simple enough: he would raise his arm in defeat and pull over meekly to the side. He would then surrender his bike and body passively to the faceless crews who would load both parts into the rescue van that trolled behind the living racers like a shadow of weakness. From those lonely confines he could watch through glare and glass the tragic majesty of his stolen story play out in the motions of other actors.

He ruminated upon these two fates as he pedaled. In the sanctity of his indecision, he turned his head away from the back of his forward competitor and looked instead toward the vista of

the mountain road. Within a few minutes, he felt the knot of his quandary relaxing, and as it did, his eyes refocused like a camera accommodating its subject. He was no longer looking at the scenery he had sped past so many times before; he was seeing it for the first time.

It was beautiful. So remarkable it was that he had never noticed it. In the valley below, there was a spread of vineyards and farms, pastels of green in varying shades spotted with cherries and poppies of pink. The watercolors of this image now washed over his calculations, and he imbibed them with all the fervor he had scratched hours before from the asphalt of his mouse wheel. He was suddenly in a very different place, both in mind and in spirit.

It was at that moment that he realized he had a third option, and as soon as he acknowledged it, he chose it. He would stop racing, but continue riding. He would ride slowly. He would ride not because he had to, but because he wanted to more than anything else at this time in his life. Precious and peaceful, these moments would not, could not be snatched from him like his fast finish. His pace was different now, enlightened, and no longer threatened by those operating in other octaves. In some ways, he felt like a child again, enjoying the pendulum of warm sun and cool wind against his face—a face that was no longer furrowed, nor so sweaty.

The shadow of the rescue van also took on a different shade. Once ominous, the now welcomed protection of its wake allowed him to navigate his new course, at his new pace, and to realize his new ends in safety and in confidence.

In the miles that followed, he venerated a variety of visions—a sputtering tractor in the distance, a nest of sparrows nearby. His favourite though, was the small lake to the north where he could see a small boat pushing its way through.

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