



Tuesday
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Sinkhole

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You're not supposed to look at your phone first thing in the morning, at least that's what an article I read recently—on my phone—told me, but I always wake up wondering what happened in the world while I was sleeping, so that's exactly what, every morning, I do. Today, I scrolled through my feed—bypassing links to articles about Trump's call to have Hillary assassinated and "Alfred Hitchcock's Literary Legacy" and all those female runners who somebody keeps murdering—I paused, and let one of those "watch from above as food is prepared" videos play, specifically a so-called "one-pot" recipe for spaghetti, a dish that, in the end, didn't look very appealing. I resolved to make spaghetti myself, and I resolved to make it in a far superior manner, using San Marzano tomatoes, garlic, basil, butter, and—for the meatballs—ground buffalo meat, panko breadcrumbs, and ricotta cheese. You may have heard that buffalo meat is lower in cholesterol and thus better for the heart than beef, but it's still a red meat, too much of which, I know, has been linked to heart attacks, and these, so I've come to understand, are more deadly in middle-aged men; often, when I'm pedaling up a very long, steeply-graded hill, I imagine my heart exploding: I know that's not what happens during a heart attack but because of how hard it's pounding it sort of feels like it might. I've often thought that if a study came out determining that cycling was bad for one's health, I would still do it, not only because it allows me to burn enough calories so that I can pretty much eat and drink as much as I want and still retain a figure that resembles a svelte pear, but because it's fun and it makes me feel afterwards—and I suppose this is true—as if both my mind and my body have been detoxified. A former student asked me recently if my bike route was dangerous and I

told him that even though it can be little unnerving to have a dual cab Ford pickup blast by you at 50 mph, my sense was that however obnoxious drivers can be—I always imagine that they are miffed when they come upon a cyclist—they would rather not murder me, even if I am wearing funny clothes. I think about crashing every time I go out—and thanks to the spectacular wreck of that female Dutch cyclist at the Olympics, I have a very particular image to summon: the back wheel rising, the body flying headfirst over handlebars—but I spend most of my time during my rides as a receptacle for awe and wonder, noting, say, a skink ribboning across the pavement, or the webbed mesh of a leaf in the road that at first tricks me into thinking it's the wing of a butterfly, or the dazzling actual wings of a butterfly as it sucks vital minerals from a pile of excrement. I might think a thought like I thought today, a thought like: If somebody told me I was going to die tomorrow, next week, or next month, I wouldn't be happy about it, but I also couldn't argue—not in the least—that I hadn't lived a full life. Halfway through today's ride, I found a children's book titled *Stanley the Farmer*, whose cover featured a cartoon hamster riding a tractor, sitting in the middle of the road, so I picked it up and—savoring the completion of an anonymous good deed—placed it on a fence post in front of a nearby house, not knowing whether anyone there had checked out the book, or if it had been shoved by tiny hands out the window of a passing car; either way, I hoped it might find its way back to the Montgomery County Library, whose name had appeared on a label stickered to its spine. Of course, I can't see the name "Stanley" and not think of Stanley the dog, a yellow lab who was supposed to die of cancer years ago, and whose owners—my very good friends—fed him a steady diet of bacon and steak, and even took him on a trip to the beach, thinking that because doctors had given him no more than three months to live, he deserved to retrieve a few tennis balls from the ocean, but that was three years ago, and Stanley's as fine a dog as ever, barking ferociously at me every time I come to the door, and patiently waiting, until I utter the word "Okay," to gobble the piece of cheese I've placed on his paw; once, when my friend Katy did this trick, she forgot to say "Okay," and so Stanley waited and waited and finally picked up the meat with his mouth and carried it into a room and placed it on the floor before his owner, who felt badly that she'd made him wait but was—as she should have been—impressed at what a very good boy he had been. Stanley would love to swim in the creek that winds alongside Dry Run Road, a narrow strip of gravel I ride to get from Catawba Road to Mt. Tabor Road; today was the first day all summer I'd seen it flush with water; in fact, the stream flowed so lavishly, so abundantly, it would've been hard to imagine that only days before it'd been a trough of dusty rocks. This phenomenon—that of a disappearing and reappearing creek—was explained to me by another cyclist—a mechanical engineer, who'd startled me when, the week before, during another ride on this same road, he'd come up behind me and said, simply, "Hi"—who surmised that the creek's

fluctuations were the result of a sinkhole, which can suck up only so much water: if there's more than it can drink, the creek keeps going; if not, it peters out. I passed the little white clapboard house where only once did I ever see a little man sitting on his porch, who waved when I waved, but I didn't wave to the little blond girl, the one who was setting a bowl of water down in the grass for two white pups, because I didn't know her and didn't want to put her in the position of having to wave to a stranger. And, on this day, I did sort of feel like an alien on an exploratory mission; it occurred to me, as I glided closer toward town, that the day was so vivid—*so real*, I caught myself thinking. Too many video games? For the first time yesterday, on my son's first day of eighth grade, I played *No Man's Sky*—a game about survival and space exploration that, thanks to a computer algorithm, creates itself as you play it, and which, according to the little guy at Game Stop, would take every person on Earth playing it continuously for 60 years to explore the game in its entirety; as soon as my son got home he laid out a series of papers the school needed me to sign, but I was too busy exploring a cave on a virtual planet, trying and failing to find enough resources to repair my spaceship. I learned too late that every time I died—thanks to a spiderlike bug that kept attacking me—I needed to return to the site of my death, since if I visited the grave of my previous self, I could recover the resources I'd left behind when I died. I chided myself for wasting so much time in a virtual world, and the thought occurred to me that I am no more magnanimous than when I am riding my bike: High on an endorphin-blast, my brain surges, and whatever sinkhole normally sucks up my gratefulness for being alive is flooded with said gratefulness, causing me to acknowledge that I've done nothing to earn a life as good as the one I have, where I can spend the entire summer—when I'm not mowing the lawn or washing dishes or cooking dinner or responding to email or walking the dog—riding my bike and reading books and writing, and that I love my house and town and family, and thereby pledge forevermore to be kinder to everyone, but then, once my ride's over and I've showered and snacked and am driving my kid to soccer practice, I'm back to my old egocentric self, exasperated by my son's inquisitive cheerfulness, because it's distracting me from the news story Audie Cornish is introducing on NPR, or annoyed by the fact that my wife—who has the metabolism of a hummingbird—is crunching another dill pickle chip while I'm trying to think, which means that I have no choice but to confess that the best version of myself—because it lives only in my imagination and is thus virtual—has yet to see the light of day.

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