

The Accidental Pilgrim

by David Moore

Chapter 1

So I'm sitting in a tiny café in a place called Splügen. It's a Saturday towards the end of September, and the weather is cloudy, with mist draped over the views outside. I'm finishing off my lunchtime soup (not sure exactly what's in it – my German is terrible). I'm shaking a little and feel light-headed, and I'm watching the other diners with a gently fevered intensity.

A young Italian couple are relaxing over their beers, keeping an indulgent eye on their daughter, who's fascinated by the old jukebox in the corner. A well turned-out Swiss couple are sitting in the corner with their dog obediently curled up at their feet. The proprietor and his wife are at another table just about to start their own late lunch.

It's been well over a month since I left Dublin, and I've travelled over two thousand kilometres clear across France and Switzerland. But today's the day I pedal my bike over the Alps.

My pasta arrives and I launch into it, hoping the starch will keep me grounded and give me the fuel I need. I've already been riding uphill for twenty-six kilometres today, but there's another nine kilometres of steep climbing to get to the top of the Splügen Pass, before the long descent on the Italian side of the border. Laden down with panniers, the bike handles like an oil tanker, and stopping is gradual at best. In the battle between gravity and cantilever brakes, gravity would definitely win, especially in the rain. So there's nothing for it, I just have to get on the bike and combine two days' riding into one while it's still dry.

After the food and a coffee I feel better, but I remount and head out of town with a knot of tension at the base of my spine. There's snow on the tops of the mountains, which is where I'm going. Poring over maps at home, I'd never even considered that there'd still be snow up here at this time of year. A sign tells me the pass is open except to large vehicles, and then the hairpins begin. Eight or ten loops up the hillside in the bottom gear and I'm looking back down over the town nestling in its high valley, then round the corner the road straightens. My

legs are burning and my heart's racing, but I can just about keep going like this for now. A few cars pass me, and I look for some reaction from them, but the sensible Swiss-registered Audi estates slide by mutely until a young Italian in his sporty two-seater Mercedes comes towards me and honks his horn, waving. Dude.

The road is heading up into a snowy bowl, with no obvious exit. The altimeter on my watch shows me gaining elevation in five metre blocks – 1845m, 1850m. It's colder now, and my top is zipped up to the neck, despite all the heat my effort's generating. Ahead is another set of hairpins as the road zigzags up into the mist.

I can't believe I'm doing this. A surge of excitement jolts me. The legs are feeling surprisingly good now, and a rhythm comes easily as I'm out of the saddle round the bends, and sitting down again for the straights. I'm at 1900 metres now, and the top of the pass is at 2115. The highest mountain in Ireland is half that height. There's snow on the side of the road, and I stop on the outside of a bend and reach down to run my fingers through it.

The mist is closing in, but it doesn't matter that I can't see the higher peaks around me. I'm just looking for the next corner, as each one comes to represent one day of the all the riding it took to get here. This one is the day I rode to Chateaugiron, this one is the slog into Besançon. This one is that morning coming out of Avallon, and this one the off-road excursion on the way to Baden. I grab a quick look around and out loud say, 'Thank you.' to the mountains, to the days I've put in to get me here, to the bike (especially to the bike). I'm going to make it to the top.

After the next fold in the ribbon of road, it heads round a corner to a building, the first since Splügen. It's a restaurant, but up still further is another structure. With melted snow running down the road and visibility down to ten metres, I pass the customs post. Inside three guys in uniform are watching television. They glance out the window at this Englishman who's ridden up the mountain on

a bike, and wave me through without bothering to come out and get cold. I'm in Italy.

It's a shame I can't see any of it. I stop for a self-timed photo in front of a sign with an Italian flag on it, and put on my jacket for the descent. As mountain climbers will tell you, getting to the top seems like the big achievement, but getting down is often the hardest part. The first few kilometres are not so bad; past a lake of smooth silver water, with a father and son fishing in silhouette on the shore, and down through a tiny collection of houses.

But then ahead of me looms a narrow tunnel. I have a faint recollection of seeing some pictures on the Internet of the Italian side of the Splügen Pass, with tunnels and galleries stacked above each other in the cliff face, joined by hairpin bends so that the road you were just driving over becomes the roof of the next loop. But there's no time to recall much detail before I'm launched into complete darkness. My bike lights are useless – I can't see the road ahead at all. Or the walls. Or the ceiling. Or my hands on the handlebars. I've got a vague sense of being in the middle of the road, and I know I'm still going downhill pretty fast, but I'm blind. I hit a pothole and the bike bucks me. The tyres swish through some water that's dripped from the roof. I'm half standing over the saddle with the pedals level, trying to stay light on the bike, to let it ride itself, because that's all I can do. Then there's a smudge of white in the distance off to the left a little and it widens quickly: the light at the end of the tunnel. I'm living a cliché.

I'm through it and back out into the world. Holy living fuck. I brake and lean into a hairpin and see another tunnel ahead. This time two cars are coming in the opposite direction, their lights illuminating the narrow road and the cratered wet surface. I can see more but the roaring cars fill my ears, the noise echoing around the enclosed space. With the sound bouncing around it's impossible to tell if there are any vehicles behind me. I hold on and fight the disorientation. Next comes a gallery with a couple of openings in the side wall for illumination, but it drops more steeply than the previous two, and there's a sign announcing eight more hairpins ahead.

I concentrate intently round the steep bends – ones to the left are easier, as you're on the outside and the camber allows you to feed the bike into them while still moving quickly. Right hand ones are much harder, as you scrub off speed coming into them, and turn sharply as the road drops away on the inside of the bend. Run wide and you're into cars being gunned into the corners on the way

up. At the back of my mind there's a voice saying 'This is very dangerous. I'm not happy. I shouldn't be here', but there's no choice, and I take a deep breath and try to focus on the next tunnel. There's no light in this one either and I have a vision of me slapping the bike down on the tarmac as a car comes round the corner. I can't tell where I am on the road, but at least I'm going fast enough that I'm not in there too long.

Then the kinks unwind for a time and I shoot through the first real settlement on the way down, with the road still dropping insanely. The speed on the trip computer keeps rising: 45km/h, 50, 55. And cars are still streaking past me on the narrow road. More hairpins and my body is tight from being in the same stretched position for so long, but the air is warmer and the mist has cleared, revealing wooded slopes and narrow gorges.

And suddenly I'm coming to a halt at a cross-roads in terracotta Chiavenna. There are crowds wandering around, little mopeds zipping between the cars, and there's the chatter of Saturday afternoon shopping. I'm quivering, my head's buzzing, and I feel emptied – I've left it all on the mountain. I shake my head and swear quietly to myself. The scene is so ordinary and so far removed from my last few hours I might as well have been teleported into this town. I've ridden my bike up nearly a mile in the sky from where I started that morning. And then descended madly for 30 kilometres in what felt like ten minutes.

But the man I had followed from Ireland had made the same journey in his sixties wearing sandals, so I wasn't so hot.