

## Le Velo le Plus Rapide

By Lloyd Hawes

In the neighborhood shopping district, between the grocery store and the Italian restaurant, Jeremy noticed a nook he hadn't seen before. Peering into the alcove He saw a worn door. It was an old wooden door with a large pane of glass in the middle and one of those old fashioned big curving handles from the turn of the century. The letters painted on the glass curved with the arch of the doorway "L e M a g a s i n D u M a u d i t." Through the glass, Jeremy saw bicycle wheels, handlebars, and frames. He had been looking for a new bike, so he decided to go in and peruse the shop's inventory.

Jeremy is a senior software programmer during the week. On the weekend, however, he races with the other members of his bicycle racing club. He dreams of being the fastest of his group, but he never has won a time trial, a century, or one of the amateur multi-day tours his club or other clubs have sponsored. He usually comes in second or third, behind Craig Raandersen.

Craig Raandersen is one of those people who excels at most of what he attempts. He is cordial to everyone he comes across. Every race in which he is a competitor, he is the first, or close to the first person, to shake the hands of the 2nd , third and fourth place riders and commends them on the great way in which they ran the race. Most people admit that they like to be around Craig and enjoy competing with him. Craig also is a junior software programmer in Jeremy's department. While Craig is commanding in bicycle racing, he is not so effective in the world of cyberspace.

After a couple years of helping Craig with his programming, and Craig resoundingly defeating him in the bike races, Jeremy decided to change the tables and buy the fastest bike he could afford. He started looking yesterday and today he decided to continue his search. Into Le Magasin Du Maudit Jeremy went.

The store appeared as if no one had been shopping there for decades. Dust and cobwebs all around. It was dimly lit, and although from outside it appeared to be a bike shop, once inside, Jeremy didn't see very many bikes or bike parts. What he did see was a hodge-podge of books, clothes, bottles with some kind of liquid in them, pots, pans and some kitchen utensils. Also in the store were a few old wooden toys, dolls, bicycle parts hanging here and there, and two bicycles scattered about. The musty smell reminded Jeremy of the mausoleum in which his grandmother is laid to rest. A shiver went up Jeremy's spine.

The old man behind the counter was smoking a small cigar. He was about a meter and a half in height and looked almost emaciated. The smoke slowly rose up from the cigar, to circle around the man's head on its way up to join the cloud hanging at the ceiling. There were a few strands of thin hair on his bald head, and he had deep black eyes that unnerved Jeremy. "What you want?" the old man's voiced rasped.

As he replied, Jeremy heard his voice crack nervously. "I thought this was a bike shop."

"It is! Don't let looks fool you. Lookin' for a bike, eh?" The old man stated. "Want a fast one?"

"Why yes. I race, but I don't think you have the level of bike I need."

"How would you know what kind you need?"

"Well, I need something fast so I can win. I'm tired of losing."

"Some people would be very happy to come in second. It's not like it's a career for you or anything."

"I want to win for a change. After a couple years of trying I deserve at least that!"

"Pretty presumptive aren't you. Thinking you're owed a win. Ha. Well, if that is what you want, I think I have the bike you'll need." The old man shuffled out from behind the counter and went to the red bike resting against the wall opposite the counter.

Jeremy felt unsure. He looked at the bicycle, and didn't see anything special. What was this old screwball trying to sell him? The words "Le Vélo de Diable" were painted in a rich gold on the blood red frame.

"This is the fastest bike ever made. No one can beat it. Lift it. See how light it is." The old man stated quite enthusiastically.

Jeremy walked cautiously to the bicycle. He grabbed the top bar, and lifted the bike up effortlessly. The bike weighed very little. It was the lightest bike Jeremy could recall. He turned the pedals. Smoothly and quietly the pedals moved the chain ring around. The drive train was so smooth and quiet, Jeremy had to strain to hear the click click click of the gear cluster.

"Try it." The old man whispered. "Take it out for a test spin."

Jeremy, grabbed the handlebars and lead the bike outside. He climbed on the bike and pushed off. He felt a surge of power flow through his body. The bike moved effortlessly. The speedometer showed 30 kph. Jeremy was unaware of how fast he was moving. He looked up just in time to see he was about to run through a stop sign at an intersection with a big truck in the middle of it. Jeremy applied the brakes, and the bike stopped so quickly, he almost went over the handlebars.

Back at the store, Jeremy asked the old man how much for the bike.

"Fastest bike on the planet. Told you. You'll beat Craig with this bike." The old man said. "How about two hundred dollars?"

"Are you sure?" Jeremy asked. "That's seems awfully cheap."

"It ain't cheap. That's a great bike! Two hundred bucks, take it or leave it."

"Do you take checks?" Jeremy asked.

"From you, why sure."

Lakeside boulevard runs about 100 meters off the east shoreline of the lake. Running parallel to the road about 100 meters to the east is the new freeway, sandwiching Lakeside between the freeway and the lake. Since the freeway was built, not many cars drive on the Lakeside. 40 flat and level kilometers of no stop lights and very little vehicle traffic makes Lakeside one of Jeremy's favorite roads to train on.

It was Saturday morning. The sun starting to shine through the springtime fog as it was starting to lift. Jeremy hopped on his bike, clicked into the pedals, and started riding down Lakeside boulevard. Le Vélo de Diable rode so easily, so effortlessly. Jeremy saw the speed on the bike computer quickly move up to 40 kph with only gentle pedaling. The longer he pedalled, the more he felt a drive build up in himself. He felt strong, powerful, invincible. And he started to pedal harder.

60 kph displayed on the speedometer. Jeremy had never ridden this fast without going down a steep hill. "I'll beat Craig in the next race for sure." He thought to himself.

80 kph. Now he was breathing a little harder, but felt that he could push even harder. He felt obsessed with going faster. An internal drive to crush Craig. He laughed as he thought of Craig being dumbfounded by Jeremy's new found speed.

90 kph. The trees and houses along Lakeside were speeding by in a blur. Jeremy could only see the yellow line on the road and his speedometer. He was breathing harder now. Perspiration was running down his brow. But he felt indestructible. The faster the bike went, the more power Jeremy felt fill his body. He felt like a maniac. "I am going to crush him!" Jeremy howled.

Lakeside boulevard followed the shoreline Southward, where it dead ends with a big wall made of railroad ties. Jeremy saw the railroad tie wall coming up and tried to stop pedaling. His legs didn't stop. They continued to pump on the pedals. Jeremy's chest was heaving, struggling to get enough oxygen into his lungs. Every breath in had him over expanding his lungs and he felt the fibers in his chest muscles and lung sacs begin to painfully tear.

100 kph. But, he couldn't stop and the wall was getting closer. "Stop!" Jeremy yelled, to no avail. He could feel his leg muscles start to tighten up. He was gasping deeply for more air. His body needed more oxygen. The wall was filling his vision. He was going too fast to turn. And where would he dump the bike anyway. On the freeway? into the lake? But to run right into the wall. Not any of these options looked very good.

Jeremy envisioned himself in the hospital, he could only imagine the extent of the injuries. Can't win a race from a hospital bed. All sense of supremacy had left him. Now he just wish he could stop pedaling. Gasping for air. Pain in his legs. Head dizzy. Wall straight ahead.

"Jesus Christ! Stop." Jeremy yelled in a terror and closed his eyes as he prepared to crash head-on into the wall. His legs stopped pedaling; his hands squeezed the brake levers so hard he swore blood was coming out of his fingernails. The bike stopped one foot from the wall. Jeremy, lost his balance on the stopped bike and fell over.

Laying there, under the bike, gasping for breath like a goldfish taken out of its fish bowl, Jeremy was confused as to what happened. Bike go fast, legs don't stop pedaling. Quick stop. Fall over.

And then it dawned on Jeremy, that he was going to crush Craig at the next race. Stopping wasn't as important as going fast. "I've got to talk to that crazy old man though. Maybe he has an answer." Jeremy told himself.

He swore he was in the right place. Jeremy told himself, "I'm sure the door to the shop was in the alcove between the grocery store and the Italian restaurant." There was no alcove. No store. No old guy. Just a wall.

Jeremy went to a phone booth and grabbed the phone book. What was the name of the store. Magazine Maldrot? No it was a foreign language. Spanish, Algerien, French? He searched under bicycle shops, then general stores. Then he went through the whole store section in the phone book. Nothing looked familiar. "I must have the wrong location," he told himself.

After a couple days of unsuccessfully trying to find the store, Jeremy gave up looking for it. He simply must of mentally spaced on the exact location. Besides, he needed to start training for the next race. It was the Breast Cancer 300 kilometer one day fundraiser race. Craig has won it three years in a row. "Not this time." Jeremy thought to himself. As far as Jeremy could tell, he simply needed to learn how to control the speed of the bike and not push very hard until the end of the race. He would figure out how to stop after he won the race.

The days up to the race were excruciating to Jeremy. He so wanted to gloat about how fast his new bike was, but he kept silent even when Craig needed his help solving a programming problem. Then race day had arrived.

During the first half of the race, Jeremy easily kept pace with the lead pack. Craig, of course, was in the lead pack. Jeremy felt his legs pushing to pedal faster. It was a strange feeling. Jeremy wasn't ready to go extremely fast yet. He wanted to lay in wait, and then pounce at the last kilometer there were 100 kilometers still to go. He felt the power fill up his body. It was harder forcing his body to not sprint away from the lead group than to ride with it. He knew if he took off now, he'd self destruct before the finish. He needed to wait.

Jeremy saw the sign. Finally, kilometer 299. The moment had come for him to make his move. He had been suffering for the last 100 kilometers or so. He felt his legs getting jumpy and he mentally had to keep telling himself to not take off just yet. But now, GO!

Jeremy raised his butt off of the seat, and started pumping his legs as hard as he could. The other riders in the lead pack did the same. But Jeremy took off way ahead of the group, Craig a distant second.

Jeremy's legs were burning from lactic acid buildup, he was gasping desperately for air, and he saw 98 on his bike computer. A quick glance behind, and there was Craig a half a kilometer back, trying to catch him. The finish line was 100 meters ahead. The crowd cheering. It felt as he imagined. Perfect. "Jesus Christ, I'm going to win!" he yelled.

The chain jumped off the chain ring of Le Vélo de Diable. Somehow the brake pads squeezed the bikes rims. And the bike

came to a stop. Jeremy cried "NO!" Unable to unclip his cycling shoes from the pedals, he lost his balance on the stopped bike and fell over. Gasping for air and crying. Craig Raandersen went sailing past him and broke the winners tape at the finish line.

Jeremy was devastated. What happened? He had it in the bag. Craig came and helped Jeremy up. "Dude, I thought you had me. Bummer you didn't win. What happened?" Craig sincerely asked.

Quietly Jeremy said, "I don't know. Maybe I wanted it too badly. Congrats on winning again."

"Thanks dude. Good race."

A couple days later, Jeremy was at work. He walked by Craig's cubicle, and Craig wasn't there. It looked as if Craig hadn't been in yet. He asked the guy in the next cube, "Where's Craig?"

"Didn't you hear. The US Cycling team picked him up. He's going to the tour. Y'know, the Tour de France. I guess you'll be the number one rider around here, now that Craig's gone."

"Yeah, I guess so." Jeremy walk away with a dry little smile.