

Faith, Hope and Fiction

Out of the Universe Endlessly Calling

By Tom Sheehan

Far ahead of him Knock Craften could see the last of the lead-pack bike riders sprinting around a slow bend in the road. The Pan Mass Challenge 200-mile bike ride across the state to raise funds for cancer was in full bore; 3,600 riders on the move for two days, Sturbridge to Provincetown on the tip of Cape Cod. Then the yellow shirt of that rider disappeared, roadside greenery swallowing it up. Behind Knock the 27 riders of his team spread out in a long line, their purple shirts making them look like a hive of bees on the move, the cluster lengthened by their arduous travel. Eighty-five miles had flown under their wheels since their early morning start in Sturbridge. Now, again as it had all morning, the impulse was coming on strong, from its unknown and obviously ethereal source, but this time it had a major resonance to it, an uninterrupted resonance. And it was pulling at him, having an oblique reference for him, coming out of trees and brush on his right. It was irrefutable, that calling, that pulling, the impulse of the gods he sometimes thought.

Then he saw the break in the trees and the side road slamming off to the southeast, sidelined by trees, fence lines, stones of an old stonewall marker. That limitless and endless call was entirely for him and he knew he was going down that side road. He jerked up on the seat,

jammed down on the pedals, sprinted ahead of his team, and went down the side road. Almost to a man the team twisted like a whisper into that turn and swung in behind him. He appeared to be the captain of a ship, or the queen bee switching hive locations.

One man of his team, though, the last in line, did not make that turn.

That rider, looking ahead to where the last yellow jersey had gone out of sight, where the road to the lay-over stop in Bourne lay waiting, cursed vehemently. Spitting in the gutter, he said loudly, “Cocky son of a bitch is going the wrong way. Wait’ll they get him in front of the cameras, his mighty ass will be mud.” Paris Gallber could almost see the whole scenario. His mouth watered at the image he had created.

Gallber, of course, had no idea that for just about Knock Craften’s whole life, all twenty-seven years of it, Knock had heard the music endlessly calling him out of the spread of the universe, coming on him at odd times like a homing intelligence, but one without a language. Never once had he told anybody about it, not his parents, not his gracious and confiding grandfather, not his siblings. And it was only in his start into adolescence that he realized not everybody heard what he heard. If asked to explain it, he would not have said it was music, but more an awareness of the limitless reach of something far beyond the capability of his mind to understand, yet hearken to. Out of a void it came, probably down the crook of the centuries, or on an uncurved line from the vast unknown.

But it came directly to him.

Now here he was, on his bicycle, a \$2,400 beauty, leading his team in this 200-mile ride to get funds for cancer research. The first 80 or 85 or so miles were behind them. The hills of western Massachusetts had been steep at times, the traffic heavy. The humidity was becoming a

factor for some of the older riders, he could see, and the constant beat and hammer of the August noon sun had its own rhythm on all of them. The frequent water stops were a gift, and though they were not in a race, he could feel the energy trying to bust loose in his frame. But, as promised, they were going to ride as a team, to finish as a team.

Yet Knock Craften knew that he was being summoned. This too was irrefutable. It had always promised to come down to something like this, no longer his being alone with the secret resonance, no longer hidden and entirely personal with him. Soon, he was suddenly sure, it would demand explanations, revelations, an opening. For a long time he knew explanations would be impractical to make.

How could he possibly explain this last move of his, this offhand spurt down a strange road?

Paris Gallber was trying to do just that at the curve at the lake, stopping at a news van, pointing back over his shoulder. "I don't know what's wrong with the captain of my team, but he just took the whole damn crew down a wrong road! Can you imagine such idiocy, such lack of planning? Thinks he's the big-time honcho on this ride. I'll bet the other news hounds will be all over his case before this day is over!" Sweat was pouring off his face, a twist of one corner of his mouth catching pellets of that perspiration as if they were his sole sustenance of ride.

Yet down a long grade of that strange road, his wheels spinning and catching sunlight like the blades of a fan, like the magic of a spinning semaphore giving off the flashes of a hidden message, code be broken code be damned, Knock Craften sped. A sense of shadow came on him as trees leaned in over his right side, and he expected, in the shade, to find a breath of cooler air, expected it to wash like a beach breeze over his face. *Nahant at night, Kings Beach where Lynn curves toward Swampscott, off the wide Rumney Marsh touching Revere and Saugus and Lynn*

with its tidal spread. Surprise came quickly to him; there was no sense at all of cooler air. The whole bank of shadow he was in promised the same burning glare of heat that had come to him on open ground, free of shadow or shade. This, he knew, was doubt, doubt and non-acceptance rearing its head. Many times, with the resonance, the calling, at him, he had felt the same way, as if suddenly inadequate, suddenly unworthy of what was always coming toward him.

A crunching sound came to him, not from the distant resonance, but earthly, road-like, so mundane. It was John Wellborn, old and loyal friend, who had come up alongside him, head crouched, on his run, legs still ramming their piston power. Beside him, John was merely making a bodily announcement, saying nothing, no gestures or wildness, but broadcasting a sense of alertness, as if he were saying, “Knock, do you know what you’re up to?” There had been long nights for them when they had no need of talk, the stars the best company or the wind in the pines on a fishing trip, or the quiet summation the way some fantastic days find their end.

With a clarity that could have knocked him off his seat, Knock recalled how he had almost told John one night about the sounds in his ears, the ringing, the music, the endless call from an unknown place. He remembered, too well, and with an absolute accuracy, how feeble and hysterical and unbelievable it would have sounded. On John’s face there had been some kind of expectation, awaiting an explanation as to what had controlled much of Knock’s attention and thinking all through their bonding years. John knew, without a doubt, that Knock Craften was pushed or pulled by some other power. But he had no idea of its impact or its source.

And here was his longtime friend dragging twenty-five people down a wrong stretch of road. John Wellborn neither yelled a warning nor a declaration, staying slightly abreast of his pal.

He would have been amazed at Paris Gallber's now near-hysterical tirade to reporters and cameramen from three news vans gathered alongside the road. He was still astride his bike and leaning on a guardrail, his hands flinging in the air and pointing back down the road as if some person was drowning and nobody was looking at the right spot. "Oh, I'll finish my ride, that's for sure, but I am not taking any shortcut, nor leading my teammates on a wild goose chase down any lonely and forgotten road. You can bet on that! I don't know what happened to the team captain. Like that," and he snapped his fingers, "he plunged down that side road and they all followed him, like he was the Pied Piper for god's sake. The Pied Piper! Can you imagine that! Can you?" And then, the way one might seem to be adjusting his anger, the subtle invasion of an ironic stiletto came into play. "I really don't know what you guys are going to do with all of this."

At that precise moment, at the moment of the stiletto slipping under the attention of the reporters, the endless, lifelong calling from elsewhere in the universe came with unerring energy and clarity to Knock Craften as his life-long pal John Wellborn slipped back into the pack of riders, his own announcement passed on and played out.

Knock's eyes swept out in front of him, down the long grade of that unknown road, the shade and shadows suddenly cooler, the trees thicker on one side and a corral fence of split rails leaping away on his left side, their stringers gnarled and crude in a neat manner. They lead perhaps a hundred yards downhill to the simple whiteness of the corner of a small house. On a short piece of lawn he saw a child on a tricycle, a sort of cowboy hat atop his or her head. Knock assumed it to be a boy, a future rider in the race he was now in, and he hoped that the deadly wounds of cancer would not touch this child. Too many had he seen, too few could he help, and

this ride that he now might have screwed up, was the only way he could help. He wondered if this youngster was sent to him as a sign, a very special Pedal Partner from out of the blue.

Then, Knock Craften, doubt coming to him with its endless push, its heartbeat, its blankness in the mind, saw the dark automobile pull up beside the child. A man got out of the car, his body language coming with utmost clarity and precision to Knock Craften who saw the sense of urgency and suspicion about the man, how he looked about warily, craftily, slyly. In a whisper the man was beside the child, whipped him off his tricycle and raced back to his car.

On a side road, a forgotten road, leading his team away from their sworn and vouchsafed objective, Knock Craften was immediately in possession of that which had been coming to him all his life. He screamed, "John!" and pointed down the road. The tussling child in the man's arms was clearly visible, now a mere 40 yards away, legs and arms waving and kicking, and the terror of screams filling the shade and the shadows of the roadway. John Wellborn screamed out in alarm and anger. An ugly "Arrggh!" leaped from his throat, and Knock Craften and John Wellborn and twenty-five more teammates, legs pumping wildly, anger loose and free, the rigors of the long ride from Sturbridge lost in a fraction of a second, zipped down the road and before that dreaded man could get the child into the car, even as the child's mother raced across the short span of lawn, Team Vanish was all over him.

They held him in place for the police who came in minutes from a traffic spot on the main road, John Wellborn astride his chest the whole while, a few times threatening the man that he'd thoroughly pummel him again. Once, when John looked at Knock talking to the little girl and her mother, he figured his old pal was not long from telling him some old secret.

And Paris Gallber, back out there on the main route, *really had no idea* of what the newsmen were going to do with the story of Knock Craften, bike rider, and his teammates of Team Vanish, soon to start back down the road that ultimately took them to Provincetown.

Tom Sheehan's books are Epic Cures and Brief Cases, Short Spans, from Press 53; A Collection of Friends and From the Quickening, from Pocol Press. He has published 4 collections of poetry, has 18 Pushcart nominations, a Georges Simenon Award for Fiction, a story in the Dzanc Best of the Web Anthology for 2009. He has 260 stories in Rope and Wire Magazine, and work in/coming in Canary, Nashwaak Review, Ocean Magazine, Frontier Tales, Subtle Tea, Red Dirt Review, Loch Raven Review, and Stone Hobo. His newest book is Korean Echoes, issued September 2011, from Milspeak Publishers, with at least 8 more collections on hand. He served with the 31st Infantry Regiment in Korea, 1951.