Chasing Krabbé

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While looking out the window of my hotel room at my rented car, I eat a banana and a pear. Then I eat another banana. In a few minutes I am going to take my bike out of the car and ride the route of the Tour de Mont Aigoual, "the toughest, sweetest race of the season" according to Tim Krabbé's 1978 novel "The Rider." Krabbé's book is fiction, but it's a fictionalized account of Krabbé's experience riding the real bike race.

I'm going to ride the *route* of the Tour de Mont Aigoual, not the race itself. I'm a 44-year-old man with a knee problem, in only passable shape. Just completing the route will be the hardest ride I've ever done. For one thing, I haven't had time to train. Krabbé says "All riders say that, always. As if they're afraid to be judged by that part of their ability they can actually take credit for. 'Guys,' I said one time in the dressing room, 'I've been training my butt off.' There was a shocked, giggly moment of silence, but I was afraid they'd think I was serious."

Well, I haven't had time to train. Seriously. Two months ago, as I was starting to train for this ride, I hurt my Achilles tendon and had to back off. Recovery took a while: It's only been two weeks since I could go out on a bike and climb hills again. My longest ride in the past two months was less than a third as long as today's, and didn't have a single hill more than 300 meters high.

After finishing my second banana, I get my gear ready: A small under-seat bag with a spare inner tube and a multi-tool; a map, which I tuck into the back pocket of my jersey (where it will be sodden with sweat in an hour); and a few packets of energy gel, which go into a tiny open-topped box that I'll strap to the bike just behind the handlebars.

When I drove into town yesterday afternoon, I parked at the first convenient space that I saw. Last night, rereading the relevant parts of Krabbé's book and roaming about the town a bit, I found that I have parked at the finish line of the Tour de Mont Aigoual. That's where the fictional Krabbé parked, according to the book, and maybe the real Krabbé too for all I know. I might be in the exact same spot.

I take my bike out of the car and slot the front wheel into place, then slide in the seatpost and clamp it down. An elderly man with a cane disengages himself with a cluster of other old men and women and hobbles over. He asks me something I don't understand in rapid French. I say "Je suis desolé, mais je parle seulement un

petit peu le francaise. Parlez plus lentement, s'il vous plait." This is intended to convey that I am sorry, I only speak a little French, please speak more slowly. He smiles and repeats himself. I think he's saying that the car looks like a good size, just big enough for a bike, and asking what kind of car it is, so I tell him. He looks baffled. Who knows what he actually asked. But I get the impression he was just looking for a conversation starter anyway. He asks where I'm going today. Using ungrammatical French, I give him the basics: I read a book about a bike race here. I'm going to ride the route. It's only about 140 kilometers but I'm scared of the climbs and the wind. I have to convey this without knowing the word for "climb"…or for "ride," for that matter. He helps me out with "ride": Randonnee. Of course: in English Krabbé's book is "The Rider," and in Dutch it's "De Renner," but I remember seeing it available in French as "Le Randonneur."

The old man is quite interested in my little excursion, more even than any of my cycling friends. I show him my route on the map, and point out the climbs that I'm worried about. He's very enthusiastic, says he used to ride, he'd love to be doing the ride with me, and that he hopes I'm able to finish. At least, I think that's what he says. Maybe he really said "I used to ride, and if I could I'd love to ride today and show you how a *real* rider does it."

Finally, I'm ready to go. No ceremony, no starting line, I just push the start button on my stopwatch and pedal off slowly through town, heading down the gorge formed by the Jonte river. "Jonte," I don't know what that means, maybe it's just a name. But according to Krabbé, in French a bike wheel rim is a "jante." "A rich language, French," he thinks, "that can spare a word like jante for a meaning like rim." I mentioned this to my father, and he said "I don't think 'jante' sounds so great." Well, maybe not, but can we at least agree it sounds nicer than "rim"? And of course, Krabbé is Dutch. What's "rim" in Dutch? "Velg." I'm with Krabbé on this one. No one will ever write "A rich language, Dutch, that can spare a word like velg for a meaning like rim."

The first section of the ride is very easy, a 20-kilometer gentle descent along the Jonte. My mental picture of the gradient is exactly right, conveyed somehow by Krabbé's description in the book. But listen, Krabbé, why didn't you mention how beautiful it is? The river, the cliffs, the trees.

The riders in the book were taking it almost as easy as I am along this stretch, but they were going faster. For one thing, they're real riders, so their 25% effort is a lot more than my 25% effort. But also, more importantly, they had the advantage of the peloton effect: in a mass of riders on level ground or descending, only the ones up front really have to work. Krabbé describes a race he was in: "Up front the cracks drove themselves into the ground to keep up an average of 48 kilometers an hour; at the back the gimps were engrossed in conversation." There's no conversation for me, since I have no one to talk to. But the "gimp" part is hard to argue with.

On the right: some signs and a parking area beside the road. The sign says "Vautures." Vultures. After a long absence, griffon vultures have been brought back to the area, and are thriving. If I chose, I could turn off here and visit an interpretive center: signs, a tour guide, a camera showing a live view into a vulture's nest high on a cliff. There are a couple of guys standing in the parking lot, staring up at the sky. I pull over --- I'm not racing, remember? --- and one of the men points. I look up and don't see anything for a moment. Finally I see them, tiny oblong dots way up high, much higher than I expected. Lots of them, too. Well, good, I'm always glad to see a wildlife success story. I wonder: if I lie motionless beside the road, how long before a vulture comes down to check me out? Perhaps I'll find out later today.

There's almost no traffic. In fact, I've been riding now for forty minutes, and although I've seen some cars going the other way I haven't passed a car or been passed by one going my direction. Could there really be nobody driving this way at all, not a single person on a beautiful Friday morning? Hmm. Not necessarily. In fact, the road could have lots of cars on it, as long as they're all going the same speed I am. Theorem: on the road from Meyrueis to Le Rozier, all of the cars go exactly 21.6 miles per hour.

Ahead on the left, beneath dramatic cliffs, a village. It's really pretty. In fact, I turn around and ride back up the road a few dozen yards so I can get a good photo. It's the town of Peyreleau. My guidebook talks about some challenging hiking above the town: steep hills, precipitous drop-offs, dramatic views. The town is just across the Jonte from another town, Le Rozier. That's where I'll stop descending next to the Jonte and turn right to ascend along the Tarn river.

A minute later, Le Rozier. Restaurants on the left with decks over the river. Shops on the right. A gentle climb through the town, quick with the brakes when a black cat darts across just in front of me, a very close call. A bridge across a river: the Tarn.

I cross the bridge and turn right. A very gentle ascent now, upstream beside the river. Platforms and ziplines in trees, some sort of aerial adventure park, nobody using it right now. Twelve kilometers to Les Vignes, where I'll cross the Tarn and climb out of the gorge. That's the first of the climbs I'm worried about.

Across the river: cliffs. On my side, too, but I can't see them because of the trees overhanging the road. Krabbé says "The wall we have to go up, a hard steel blue from here, waits calmly across the river. Riders start glancing to the right more often, then straight ahead, then to the right again, at that wall." Well, I do too. But I'm not worried about climbing these particular cliffs, because even at a glance I can see that there is no way to ride up them: the top hundred meters is a vertical limestone wall. Nobody can ride up an unbroken vertical face. The terrain has to look at least a little bit different up ahead.

Krabbé says "the travel books call the Gorges du Tarn the most beautiful canyon in Europe," but most of the travel books I looked at don't even mention it, not even books about bike rides in France. I only found it in two books that are specifically about this region. But whatever the travel books say or don't say, there's no question, it's beautiful.

Eventually I have Les Vignes ahead of me. There's a slight bend in the river here. Sure enough, across from Les Vignes there's a steep hill, not a cliff. How steep? I'll know in a minute.

Across the bridge I turn to the right and start to climb. Krabbé says: "The road is empty and narrow. Everything here has to do with stone. Stones on the road, overhanging rocks. Everywhere the bleached gray elephant of stone. Along the road poppies and hundred-meter markers…It's all here: height, clear water, rugged crags." As usual, Krabbé is laying it on a little thick. There's stone, yes, but there are also trees, and Krabbé's poppies. Of course, it's been 35 years since Krabbé was here…could these trees all be less than 35 years old? They could. Maybe this whole hillside was denuded when Krabbé did his race. It's entirely possible: in the 1700s and 1800s this whole once-forested area was almost completely denuded, the forests cut down for firewood. Systematic replanting didn't even start until fifty years ago.

Today there are trees on both sides of the road. But the falloff beside the road is very steep, so I can often look to my right and see all the way across the valley, above the tops of the trees beside the road. At times, if I were to ride all the way on the shoulder of the road, I could reach out my hand and brush the upper branches of trees forty feet tall.

Approaching a curve, I hear a loud horn: a truck is coming down. A moment later, I see it coming around the bend, swinging wide into my lane. It's not an 18-wheeler, that would be impossible on this road, it's a medium truck with a big fuel tank on the back. It's big and ungainly for this narrow, winding road. If I ride on the extreme right side of the road, there should be plenty of room for us to pass each other. On the other hand, if I ride on the extreme right side of the road, I'll be able to reach out my hand and brush the top branches of trees forty feet tall. I pull over and stop until the truck passes.

The hill is very steep, but of course I'm not climbing straight up it, I'm angling across it. I've been worried about this climb ever since deciding to do this ride, but in fact it's not bad at all: a climb of a bit less than 600 meters in 6 kilometers, that's less than a 10% slope. Steep, sure, but most of my rides at home in the East Bay hills near San Francisco involve at least one climb this steep. Still, I can't seem to help it, I gradually shift down until I am in my lowest gear…or rather, the lowest gear I can reach without shifting onto the smallest of my three front rings. I've already decided I am not going to use that small chainring today. I'm no hero, but I have my pride.

I alternate between standing and sitting. When I stand, my heart rate shoots up to a rate I know I can't sustain, not if I am going to finish the rest of the ride today. But when I sit, I go depressingly slowly, and my knees start to ache. I alternate. Stand, sit, stand, sit. I'm getting there.

Krabbé climbed this road in a gearing of 43-19. That means 43 teeth on his front gear, 19 on the rear. For each turn of his pedals, his wheels turned 43/19 times. Krabbé thinks "How much is forty-three divided by nineteen? A blank. I become the number forty-three and stick out the leg of my four to pull the nineteen over to me, but nothing happens, we remain lying chastely side by side." And, later in the book: "Maybe a little mental arithmetic. I know one: what's forty-three divided by nineteen? Jesus Christ. The nineteen walks over to the glass of forty-three, takes two slugs, wipes its mouth, rubs its chin thoughtfully, stands there like that for a few minutes and then turns to the audience with furrowed brow, arms raised in surrender. Forty-three divided by twenty, that would be a lot easier, wouldn't it?"

Krabbé, listen: you are a better bike rider than me by miles, I admit it. But I, at least, can divide 43 by 19. You were so close! The nineteen takes two slugs out of the forty-three, that's a good start.. So how much is left after taking out the two? Two is thirty-eight nineteenths, so that leaves five nineteenths. That's nearly in the middle between five eighteenths and five twentieths. Five twentieths, that's easy, it's one fourth, 0.25. And five eighteenths, well, that's half of five ninths, and five ninths is 0.5555…, a trick any schoolkid knows for dividing by nine. So half of five ninths, that's about half of 0.56, which is 0.28. OK, I confess, it is hard to concentrate on this while climbing a steep hill on a bike. But it's better to concentrate on this than on the pain of climbing, in fact that's the whole point. Where was I? Ah, right, I was about midway between 0.25 and 0.28. That's…0.265. Five nineteenths is about 0.265. So two and five nineteenths is about 2.265. But that's just a little bit high, because five nineteenths is a bit closer to five twentieths than to five eighteenths. So the real answer is very close to 2.263. Tada! The nineteen polishes off the glass of forty-three with a final small gulp, and raises its arms in triumph.

A demoralizing thought: perhaps it is only the fictional Krabbé who has trouble with this division. Maybe the real Krabbé, in addition to being a better bike rider and a better writer and a better chess player than me, is also a mathematical genius. Perhaps he made up this weakness to avoid seeming arrogant. Krabbé, listen: Your instincts were right, nobody likes a show-off. If you can divide 43 by 19, keep it to yourself.

A huge block of stone towering over the road. A terrific view of the valley, filtered through trees. A switchback: the Tarn rolls over to lay on my left. To my right, a vertical face of limestone. Looking far across the valley, I see the same rock formation on the other side. That means I can see how close I am to the top. Only another 150 meters vertically to the plateau, that's less than two kilometers on the road.

A few minutes later I turn to the right, and I'm at the top: The Causse Mejean. What's a "causse"? It's a high limestone plateau. If we have a word for it in English, I don't know it. A rich language, French, that can spare a word like "causse" to mean "high limestone plateau."

Here's what it says in Krabbé's book, when he reaches this exact spot: "Causse Mejean. Wind." Even more than the climbs, the wind is what I've been worrying about. Climbing a hill, there's a certain satisfaction to it. You can *conquer* a hill or a mountain: keep going up, and eventually you reach the top. You win. The mountain doesn't care, of course – in fact, it doesn't even know you were fighting it. You win anyway. But the wind is another matter. You can never beat it. You stop riding, or you get to a turn in the road, or the wind dies, but you haven't beaten the wind, you've simply stopped fighting it, that's not the same at all. And besides, at least when you conquer a mountain, you get a view. Riding a flat road in the wind, solo…give me a mountain anytime. Sisyphus doesn't know how good he has it.

But here I am on the Causse Mejean, and there is only a gentle breeze. Behind me, the Tarn Gorge. That wasn't so bad, nothing to be afraid of. Ahead, rolling hills. I still have some climbing to do, from one "faux plat" to another, eventually taking me up another sixty meters or so to what is, technically at least, a "col" – a mountain pass – but each little climb is short and easy. Pastures, pine trees, a hawk soaring overhead. Since that fuel truck passed me going down, I haven't seen another soul. Theorem: on the climb from Les Vignes to Rieisse, everybody drives exactly 8.4 miles per hour.

I pull over and look at my map, just checking the route and gauging my progress. I've been riding about an hour and a half. There's almost no way I could go wrong, there aren't many roads up here, but I want to make sure I don't ride for miles in the wrong direction. What I see is shocking. I am in the right place, going the right direction, but according to a notation I made on the map last night I am miles and miles from where Krabbé was an hour and a half into *his* ride. It's unbelievable. There's only been one climb so far, the one I just did, and that only took me about twenty minutes. How could I already be so far behind?

I fold the sweat-drenched map back into my jersey pocket and press on. Well, at least it's not windy. At least the sun is shining. At least it's beautiful up here.

Krabbé says "It doesn't happen very often: suddenly there's a sign along the road showing that you've just climbed a col. Col de Rieisse, good." Well, it doesn't happen to at all anymore, not here: I reach what is clearly the high point, this must be the col, but there's no signpost.

Over the crest, going down, I could turn off to the left towards the little town of Rieisse, and visit a famous viewpoint over the Tarn. Is it worth it? A descent to get to the view, then a climb to get back to where I am now…no way. I'm already almost an hour behind Krabbé.

A bit farther, after descending a series of faux plats, a crossroads. "We turn right, up a broad road that runs past the blustery tourist attractions of the high plateau." More than thirty years later, here I am on the same road, looking at signs for the same tourist attractions. Not blustery today, though.

Tomorrow I'll ride back up here, up the same climb from Les Vignes and down to this spot, and I'll see a gray-haired man with broad hat and a butterfly net: An English entomologist, hunting beetles. This is a famous area for rare beetles, he tells me. Everything about him seems stereotypically English, from an England of an earlier era. He's a former college professor, an amateur entomologist with a special interest in beetles, of which he has discovered, he says sheepishly, "only" two species. Sir, there is no need to apologize: I have discovered even fewer. (There are thousands of species. When geneticist J.B.S. Haldane was asked about his conception of God, he replied: "He has an inordinate fondness for beetles.")

But meeting the entomologist is for tomorrow; today I ride, putting in a good effort. I've made up my mind, I'm going to get to the town of Aumieres within two and a half hours of the start of my ride. That will put me a little less than an hour behind Krabbé. I have to push myself a bit to do it. Before Aumieres, a herd of cows grazes behind a fence next to the road. Except that one cow has somehow contrived to get outside the fence, and is on the shoulder of the road. There's a slight uphill, so I'm not going very fast. The cow turns and faces me...it seems silly, but I'm a bit worried: the cow outweighs me by a thousand pounds. Suddenly, she turns and runs, panic-stricken, just ahead of me. The wire fence next to the road seems to go on for miles. I can't see how this is going to end. But I don't see how it will get any better if I stop, since if I stop and she stops, we'll be at an impasse. I move to the opposite side of the road, riding against traffic (which is purely notional anyway, I've only seen one car in the past twenty minutes), but I'm not sure the cow even notices. But then, good lord, this is unexpected: the cow makes a quick right turn and jumps over the fence. Well, it doesn't jump over the fence, exactly, but it jumps enough to get both front legs, and about half of its body, over the fence; the rear half is flailing up in the air. But the flailing is effective enough, and in a few seconds the cow is trotting up the hill away from me, looking back indignantly. Funny, I never knew a cow can jump a four-foot-high fence. I guess cows don't know it either: if they did, these fences wouldn't be much use, would they?

Finally, Aumieres. I pull over and take a photo: the "Aumieres" sign, with my stopwatch in the foreground reading 2:28:30, reaching my goal by just a minute and a half. Krabbé was here at about 1:45 into his ride. Hmm. Think of it in 15-minute segments: it's taken me 10 segments to get here; it took Krabbé 7. I am averaging 7/10 as fast as he was. That makes sense: I'm about 7/10 of a good athlete.

Just before the descent back to Meyruis, Krabbé writes, "A hundred and fifty meters away is a big, square house. It looks like I could reach out and grab it, with its big, melancholy shutters closed tight, but between us lies a few million years of erosion.

One wall of the house rises up as an extension of a chasm too deep to grasp." That's nicely written, isn't it? But now I'm at the spot, and I can see that Krabbé is up to his old tricks. There's a big, square house with giant shutters, alright, but it's not a hundred and fifty meters away across the Jonte gorge, more like three hundred. And the house is close to the cliff, yes, but its wall doesn't actually form an extension of the chasm, it's set back about twenty meters from the edge. I have to give Krabbé some credit: I wouldn't even have noticed the house if I weren't looking for it, but he turned it into something interesting and poetic. Surely that's worth a little exaggeration.

And now, the descent from Causse Mejean, back to the starting town of Meyruis. Krabbé's description of the descent is full of melodrama: "Rock wall to the left, abyss to the right, far too little in between." I admit it, having a chasm on my right is a bit disconcerting. But there's not really a cliff, it's just a very steep slope. And the road doesn't have many sharp bends or blind curves. I fly down, more than forty miles an hour in a few spots. This is one of only two places on the whole course where I have a chance to go faster than Krabbé did. Well, the fictional Krabbé, anyway: the real Krabbé can't be anything near as bad a descender as the fictional Krabbé. Listen, Krabbé, if you can actually descend like a champion, keep it to yourself.

Near the bottom, a sharp turn to the right, then a sweeping curve to the left, a quick chicane, and I'm back on the road with my hotel. Thirty-three years ago, the riders raced along this road, past my hotel and the place I've parked my car, and attacked the climb to the Causse Noir. Me, I stop my stopwatch, pull over to the side of the road, and lean my bike against a tree. I sit in a plastic chair behind a checkered tablecloth, on a patio next to the Jonte. The sun is shining; it's a beautiful day. I order a Coke, a pitcher of water, and a large pizza. Krabbé, I can feel your contempt raining down on me. You want to know what it feels like? Like water off a duck's back. The pizza is delicious.

After eating my pizza, drinking my Coke and a pitcher of water, refilling my water bottles, and buying a package of nuts in the grocery store, I set off again, climbing to the Causse Noire. I already know this road: I climbed it yesterday to stretch my legs after driving into town. Even after my long lunch break I'm still a bit weary, so I'm climbing a bit slower than yesterday. Somewhere along this stretch, the fictional (and real?) Krabbé was irritated by a fictional (and real?) spectator who was yelling encouragement from the side of the road, in a passage that included one of only two phrases in the entire book that tipped me off that I was reading a translation: "And if she has a milkman, then he wears a sweater saying University of Ohio." A milkman? We don't have that slang for boyfriend. And what would a girl in the boonies of south-central France be doing with a boyfriend from the University of Ohio? The translator must be doing his best to deal with the name of a French university that conveys…hmm, well, perhaps a very modest level of academic emphasis coupled to a strong sports emphasis, I'm not sure.

Good translators don't get enough credit. I didn't even notice the quality of the translation of The Rider until I got to this point in the book, page 60, and realized that this was the first false note. I looked up the translator, Sam Garrett, and found that he has won several prizes, including one for his translation of The Rider. Even though he's the one with the talent and the prize, discovering this made me proud of myself: at least I can tell a great translation when I read one.

After the short climb through the forest to the Causse Noire, the road undulates through farmland and pastures. I pass two signposts, both pointing up the same road; one says "Le Marjoab," the other "La Marjoab." If even the French can't keep the gender straight, I give up.

Only 45 minutes after lunch I'm already descending into Treves, a much scarier descent than the one from the Causse Mejean into Meyruis. In the book a rider crashes here. In real life, it's easy to imagine. But I love leaning into the curves on a fast descent…thrilling.

It's only been an hour since lunch, but I stop anyway at the only business that seems to be open in this strange town of stone houses, and have another Coke, and refill my water bottles again. Hard to believe, but they were empty already. If I believe Krabbé's book he rode his entire race with a single bottle of water. I do not believe Krabbé's book.

Before heading out again I take a quick spin through the town, which extends all of 200 meters. There's a monument for men lost in the wars. The list from World War I has two dozen names on it. Two dozen losses, from this tiny town…even if this includes names from all of the surrounding farms, the percentage must have been horrific. And then the World War II list has only two names. Seeing all those names on the first list, it's hard to blame the French for not putting more names on the second one.

From Treves it's just over 15 kilometers to Camprieu, but it's uphill all the way. As I pull out of Treves, my speedometer reads 17. Seventeen miles per hour, that's a very respectable pace for a climb this steep…but I've switched my readout to show kilometers instead of miles. Seventeen *kilometers* per hour, that's a lot slower, a factor of 0.62. That makes sense, I am about 0.62 of a good athlete.

The only thing this road has in common with the climb out of the Tarn gorge is the asphalt of the road itself. Here, the trees are different, the terrain is different, even the soil is different. Across a stream and up the hill, there's a three-story house made of stone. The top story has small windows, for the silkworms. Silkworms? Oh, yes, didn't you know, this used to be one of the prime silk areas of Europe: mulberry bushes in the yard, silkworms in the attic. Eventually, more than a hundred years ago, they were undercut by cheaper silk from the Far East. There's nothing new under the sun.

I can hold my speed at 17 kilometers per hour as long as I remember to concentrate on doing it. It doesn't seem to take any extra effort from my legs or my lungs to maintain the speed, the extra effort is all in my mind. Stroke, stroke, stroke, stroke, 17, 17, 17, 17, all I have to do is make myself do it. But after a minute or two my mind wanders, and I look down and the readout says 16, or 15, or even 14. I pass a kilometer stone, freshly painted: 14 kilometers to Camprieu. I'm going 14 kilometers an hour. At this rate, one hour to Camprieu.

A few minutes later, another kilometer stone, 13. I'm slogging along at 13 kilometers per hour. At this rate, one hour to Camprieu. Krabbé is right: this ride is never going to end.

Ahead of me: an old man on a very strange-looking bike. The bike appears to be made entirely of bronze, the spokes are as fat as sausages, and the struggling, sweating rider is wearing a toga. I gradually catch up, then slow to match his pace. He gives me a grin, sweat making a sheen on his bald pate, which is surrounded by an arc white hair. He turns his head to look at me. "My name's Zeno," he says. "Have you heard of my paradox?"

Zeno's paradox. Shoot an arrow at a tree. First it has to go half the distance, then half the remaining distance, then half of what is left, and so on. It always has half of some distance to go. It can never reach the tree.

"Sure," I say, "I've heard of it. But it's not really a paradox, it's more of a semantic trick."

Zeno looks offended. "A semantic trick! What do you mean?"

"You phrase the problem as one of distance: the arrow has half the *distance* remaining, and after it goes that far, it has half of the remaining *distance* still to go. But at the end, you switch to the language of *time*: the arrow will *never* reach the tree, there is *always* half of some distance to go. Stick with either distance *or* time, and there's no paradox: if the arrow has to go twenty meters, you can slice up the distance any way you like --- the first ten meters, then five more, then two and a half more --- and as long as they all add up to twenty meters, you've accounted for the whole flight of the arrow. Or, if the arrow's flight will take two seconds, of course it has to fly for the first second, then the next half second, then the next quarter second…a child can see that as long as the time adds up to two seconds, it doesn't matter how many pieces you divide the time into, or how small the pieces are." There's no paradox."

Zeno grins ruefully. "You're right, of course," he says. "But you wouldn't believe how much that little 'semantic trick' puzzles people. Used to bug the hell out of Aristotle."

While we've been talking, Zeno has been tiring, laboring harder and harder but still going slower and slower. Sweat is dripping from his forehead. We pass the 12-kilometer marker at 12 kilometers per hour. At this rate, one hour to Camprieu. Jesus.

Twelve kilometers per hour, that's too slow even for me. Zeno recognizes my impatience. "You go on ahead," he pants. He winks. "I'll be along in about an hour."

I stand and build up some speed, then sit and maintain it. I pass the eleven-kilometer marker at 17 kilometers per hour. How long at this pace? A seemingly Krabbé-proof 11/17 of an hour. Seemingly Price-proof, too: 11/17, that's a hard one, isn't it? But wait…11/17, that's very close to 12/18. Two thirds of an hour. Forty minutes. This climb is never going to end.

Seventeen kilometers an hour, it's kind of embarrassing but that's my goal now, to maintain that speed. And I do. It's not even hard, it's just that for some reason I can't go any faster.

Eventually I climb out of the forest and into the outskirts of a town called Camprieu. The fictional Krabbé and Kléber won intermediate sprint prizes somewhere along here. Ahead to the left I hear voices, and then see a group of middle-aged hikers walking along a trail, approaching the road. Two of them are very chubby and red-faced, and I assume they're German until I'm close enough to hear that they're speaking French. When did they start making florid, chubby Frenchmen?

Camprieu. Here's the stretch Krabbé mentioned, a few hundred meters of descent and flat road before the climb up Mont Aigoual. I turn off the route and ride into town a little bit, and even park my bike and walk around a little, looking for water again. In an hour of climbing I've already gone through both bottles that I filled up in Treves. After hunting around for a while, I resign myself to climbing without water for a while. Unless I want to start knocking on the doors of houses, I'm out of luck.

Outside Camprieu, the road is bigger and there's some traffic. I'm climbing through forest again, but the slope is much easier. In Krabbé's book it was raining when they climbed this stretch, and in a couple of days it will be raining for real on the two cyclists I'll see when I drive along here on my way back to Avignon, but for me the weather is beautiful. No wind on the Causse Mejean, no rain on the slopes of Mont Aigoual, I'm having a lucky day.

Sooner than I expect, I'm at a split in the road: The Col de la Sereyrede. There's a gift shop and a small museum here…thank god, water. As I climb off my bike, a woman gets out of a car and fills up a jug of water from a decorative fountain pouring out of the wall. Is that how they do it here? That's fine with me. I fill up one of my bottles, drink the whole thing down, then fill up both bottles and get back on my bike. Two days from now I'll drive back up here and visit the museum, where I'll

learn about the silkworms, and the chestnuts that this area is famous for, and the deforestation and re-forestation of the hills. But today I get back on the bike. My time in the saddle is over four and a half hours now, and I still have a little climbing ahead of me. After that amount of time, the fictional Krabbé was just getting ready to lose the final sprint in Meyruis, but I have an hour and a half to go before I pedal that same stretch.

And now, finally, the last climb, to the top of Mont Aigoual. I'm not setting any records, but it's not killing me either. In fact, considering I've already ridden much farther and done much more climbing than on any of my short series of training rides, I'm feeling surprisingly chipper. There are some views that stretch for miles off to my right, a steep forested hill to my left, and a modest gradient ahead of me, up which I slowly churn. Soon I am climbing through young forest, happy to have the shade and happy to finally have water to drink. Later I will hardly remember this part of the ride: my brain turned off and let my body do the work. I churn on up in a fairly easy gear, and see the first other cyclist going my way. My god, he's going slow: I'm going at least twice as fast as he is. Hmm, a fork in the road, I'm not really sure which way to go, Krabbé didn't mention this. Both ways go up, which means neither way can be wrong, really. I go left. Somewhere here --- before the fork? After it? Was the fork even there when Krabbé rode here? --- Krabbé and Kléber attacked to try to shed their two remaining rivals. It doesn't really seem steep enough for a decisive attack. And, in the book, it wasn't. Fair enough.

The left turn was the right choice: soon, here's the building Krabbé mentioned, and the wide expanse of asphalt parking lot for the ski area. The trees are thin and scrawny: from the cold and wind in winter, I assume, although maybe they're just young. And finally, here's the summit. A guy is walking along the road with his son; I hand him my camera, ride back a few dozen meters, then ride towards him while he takes a photo. I pass the right turn into the Mont Aigoual observatory and weather station with hardly a glance. In a couple of days I'll come up here and take a look, and be surprised at how many cars are in the parking lot considering how few there are on the road, but right now I am more than an hour and a half behind Krabbé and anxious not to lose any more, so I press on.

And then the descent, fast and fun on good roads with just enough winding to keep it interesting. Forest at first, then farmland, then more patchy trees. There are some flat sections, and one tiny climb…in the book Kléber tried one final attack somewhere here, but I honestly can't see where that's plausible. Maybe this very short uphill section?

And then, hey, here's the marker for Cabrillac! For two months, when I first conceived of coming and doing this ride, the only town name from the book that I could consistently remember was "Cabrillac." It seemed somehow magical to me. And here it is, a nothing of a town: a stone wall and a few farm buildings. There can't be a dozen people who live here.

Now, along a lightly forested ridge, here's the Col de Perjuret. Somewhere to the right, as Krabbé tells us, is the spot where Roger Riviere lost control of his bike while descending during the Tour de France, and went sailing over a wall and broke his back, partially paralyzing him. What Krabbé doesn't tell us is that, like all riders of his day, Riviere was stuffed with painkillers and amphetamines, and he later admitted that he might have been so addled that he didn't try to brake, or perhaps he thought he was squeezing the brakes but was uselessly squeezing his handlebars. Sometimes the stories are better if you don't know the facts.

And what about you, Krabbé, were you fueled by amphetamines when you rode your race? It's OK, you can tell me.

And then, finally, the steep descent back towards Meyruis. A bare slope, lots of switchbacks. This is the stretch where the fictional Krabbé caught the fictional Reilhan, to set up their final sprint. And now some easy riding, angling down across contour lines, with farm fields on the left and a steep upslope leading to bare limestone rocks on the right. Past the tiny village of Salvinsac – "filthy wine in a bag" - around a roundabout, and here I am, heading back into Meyruis along the same route I took the first time through, a few hours ago. A sharp turn to the right, immediately another to the left across a little bridge, and I'm on the finishing straight of the Tour de Mont Aigoual. Krabbé says it's 250 meters to the line, but it's not, it's more like 150. Not that I know *exactly* where the finishing line was, but it can't be past the bend in the road where I parked my car. So I ride the final 150 meters – no sprint for me – pull up next to my car, push the stop button on my watch (6 hours 20 minutes of actual riding time), and climb off the bike. It's an anticlimax, but I'm done. I've ridden the route of the Tour de Mont Aigoual. Six hours and twenty minutes, how does that compare to Krabbé's four hours and forty minutes? I went at almost exactly 2/3 the speed. I am 2/3 of a good athlete.

And so this description of the ride ends much like the ride itself: anticlimactically.