

Day 6 - 110.07 miles (447.52 miles)

I slept like someone who had cycled 62 miles in the pouring rain. Annie was already up and in the kitchen. Not only did she make me a fortifying breakfast, but she also provided me with a massive lunch of chicken sandwiches, cake and muffins. I nearly gave her a big hug, but remembered I was still in England and her partner was a friend of mine. However appropriate, it would be weird. A big smile and thank you had to suffice. I hit the road at about 8:30 and was greeted by lovely warm sunshine that almost seduced me to forget the sozzlement I experienced the day before. Cycling through Cheltenham, I decided that, even though I had barely seen it, I liked the place. It was well-signed. If you wanted to head out of the north part of the town, there was a sign that helped you head out through the north part of the town. It didn't take you on a wild goose chase around the city, through catacombs and into the underworld, paying a heavy price to the ferryman along the way. The signs in Cheltenham could be trusted, much like a loyal dog could be trusted. The signs in Cirencester were more like cats. Mean, nasty cats. With fleas. I really didn't like Cirencester.

I remember my dad having a right old rant - a rarity for him - about signage one day when we were trying to find a golf course in rural Alberta. I had been waiting at home for a phone call telling me I had been offered a job, so we were already running late. The call finally came, informing me that I was to be employed, and we headed out of Edmonton and into the sticks. We were to be playing golf with my sister's new husband, Jeremy, a stressful experience for two crappy golfers who didn't much like chasing little white balls in the first place. An odd way to celebrate getting a job. Anyway, we were late for our tee time, worrying about the poor impression we'd be making, and trying in vain to find some indication of where the blessed course was. Finally, I spotted a sign and took what seemed to be the correct turn. Five minutes later we came to an abrupt halt at a dead end, facing a not a green fairway, but a field of golden canola. I looked over to my dad and saw a bead of sweat slowly descending down his brow. As he pulled a U-ee in the gravel, he began unloading on the satanic curse that was poor signage. Effing and jeffing like a trucker in a car jam, he ground the accelerator into the dirt road, generating a mushroom cloud of dust. Given that he had made his living in commercial in the age before the internet, I wasn't surprised by his passion for accurate signage, but the intensity of his barrage was a bit of a shock. He didn't stop until he had dumped a barrage of barely comprehensible vitriol on the poor clerk in the pro shop, eyebrows venomously arched and fists clenched dangerously around the handle of his golf bag. I don't know what the scores were at the end of 18, but I'm pretty sure my dad didn't win.

After all of its lovely signs, the first thing to greet me out of Cheltenham was a long, fairly gradual hill from which stupendous views of the countryside to the northwest could be seen. Buoyed by the

vistas, I powered up the hill vigorously and felt confident that it would be a much better day than the one previous. A brief sun-shower on the far side of the hill did little to dampen my mood. My plan was to head through Stratford, giving my regards to the bard, and then cycle down the straight-as-a-dye Fosse Way to Nottingham, deking around Leicester as I went. It would be a 100 mile day, but this was the first really flat day and it seemed as though I would have a southwest wind behind me the entire way. Nothing could go wrong now.

As I neared Stratford, I began to notice a strange wobble in my left crank. It was very slight, but I couldn't help but feel a chill ease its way down my spine. It went away for a moment and I tried not to think about it. Then, climbing up a small hill, it grew worse. Yep, a definite wobble. But from where? Something about it seemed very vaguely familiar but I couldn't for the life of me think why. After another mile or so, I got off my bike and took a look. The pedal itself didn't seem loose, but I thought I'd tighten it anyway. I searched through my pannier for the proper allen key. It wasn't there. Hmm. Well it didn't seem loose, so I hoped that wasn't the problem. I checked the pedal itself, which I had recently replaced. Since I had done the replacing, there was an excellent chance that that was the problem. It seemed microscopically loose, so I tightened it with my Swiss army knife. I got back on and it seemed better. Maybe that was it.

It wasn't. The wobble kept wobbling and by the time I got to Stratford I had a decision to make: should I look around for a bike shop or keep going and hope for the best? I tightened everything I could think of again and, yet again, I told myself once I was back on the saddle that that had done the trick. After all, I had just had the bike in for a full, very expensive service. And even if there was a wobble, what of it? I was still pedalling, the bike was still rolling. I was still getting from A to B. But as I rolled through Stratford, the strange wobbling sensation continued. I stopped once more and looked at the map. I was near to the Fosse Way, which looked to be a great road, but was not exactly littered with towns likely to boast a cycle shop. Inertia, however, is a powerful thing when you're on a bicycle, even when there is a wobble involved. Stubbornly and stupidly, I decided to keep going.

The crank seemed tolerable while it was flat, but grew worse whenever I drew up to a hill. The extra pressure I exerted definitely created a daunting, eerie oscillation. It was as if half of my bike was drunk. And that couldn't be good. Again, I seemed to recall this happening sometime before in the hazy past. I didn't know what to do and realised that I needed help. I called Michelle.

Luckily, Michelle was home and the internet, bless it, was working. I asked her to look up some bike shops along the Fosse Way or anywhere vaguely close and then call me back as soon as she could. I kept going while I waited for her call, the crank getting wobblier and wobblier, tending even to being jiggly. Finally I stopped at an intersection to Leamington Spa, a town near Warwick, and ate one of Annie's sandwiches. I had thought seriously about doing my PhD at the University of Warwick and recalled that Leamington Spa was where many of the postgraduates lived. Ironically, one of the reasons I had opted for Exeter was that the cycling would be more challenging. The Heart of England was biting me back. A minute or two later Michelle called back. As I suspected, there were no bike shops along the Fosse way, but there were three or four in Leamington Spa. She gave me names, phone numbers, addresses and directions for all of them. She was brilliant.

I called the first one on the list and described the problem. 'It sounds like your crank is cracked', he said. Then it all flooded back to me. Of course that was the problem! It *had* happened before, probably a good 5 years before in Edmonton. The pedal had wobbled, wobbled, wobbled, jiggled, buckled and then finally snapped off like when you twist a green branch off of a tree. All at once I felt relieved and appalled. Talk about a catastrophic repair. The failure of a solid metal part at least an inch thick. 'So, what can you do?' I asked. 'We'll just find another, attach it and you'll be on your way', the cool as a cucumber bike shop guy reassured. I thanked him profusely and said I'd be there within the hour. Gingerly, I mounted my saddle and limped into Leamington Spa.

Michelle's directions had been clear but I had been overly optimistic regarding how long it would take me to get into the spa town. Plus, once I got into the centre of town, looking for High Street, which is usually in the centre of town, it was nowhere to be seen. Just as I started to wonder where else High Street might be, the crank snapped in two. Yup, that's what it was all right.

After some wandering around, I finally found High Street and a sign for the cycle shops Michelle had mentioned. The store underneath the sign, however, was of a hardware store and seemed to specialise in sewing machine parts. My mom would have liked that. I thought the entrance to the bike shop might be in the back, so I wheeled my crippled steed down the alley. Nothing. Who exactly had I called on the phone? The ghost of cycle shops past? I turned back to the street and asked a fellow wheeling his own bike down the street where it might be. 'That place? It's been shut for years.' As my face collapsed, he helpfully added, 'There's another one around the corner.'

I looked up at the sign again. It was one of the ones Michelle had mentioned, but not the one I had phoned. I tried to screw my head on a bit more securely and hustled down the street to find the next shop. Sure enough it was mere metres away, in a tiny, narrow slip of a shop. I squeezed my bike into the door, bumping my panniers into bikes on either side. The service department was at the back and I rang a bell for some (service that is). A guy young enough to be my grandson ventured out casually. 'I called about an hour ago, about a broken crank? Here it is', I added, pointing out the fracture.

His coolness disappeared as a flush enveloped his cheeks. 'Oh, we can't fix that. That's an octalink crank set. Uh, we don't have one in stock.'

A whatnow? An octopus? No wonder it wasn't in stock. I nodded knowingly, not having a clue about what he was saying. 'How long would it take you to get one of those octopus thingies?' I asked hopefully.

'Couple of weeks.'

I was too discouraged to be annoyed with him for not asking the make of my crank earlier on the phone. Then again, I probably wouldn't have known what the hell it was anyway. 'What are the chances of another shop carrying one in stock?'

'Dunno'.

I resisted the urge to dose my 'thanks anyway' with enough sarcastic venom to knock over a wildebeest, and left, banging bikes with my panniers left and right.