

WHAT'S KILLING AMERICA'S WATERS? ■ WHO'S AFRAID OF FRED BECKEY?  
CANOES FOR CAMPING ■ I WAS AN IN-LINE SKATE SLAVE

JULY 1992

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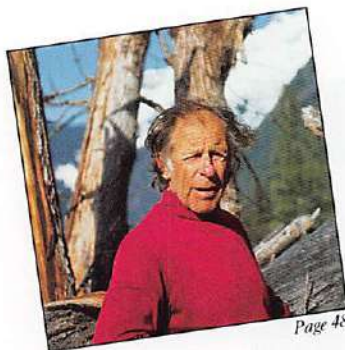




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## WARNING! FRED BECKEY IS (STILL) ON THE LOOSE

He's always lived by one simple rule: me first. That's why Fred Beckey is among the world's legendary mountaineers and why, as he approaches 70, he's having such a terrible time growing up. *By Jon Krakauer*



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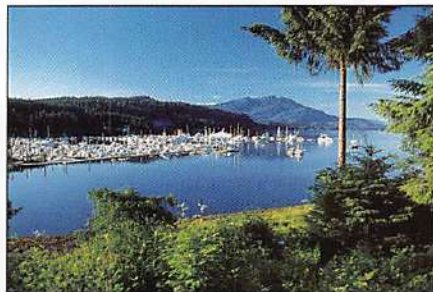
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## SPECIAL REPORT: AMERICAN WATERS

What have we done to our rivers and lakes? In a word, everything.

**54 THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMMED** The Columbia River rises and falls when we want it to, flows when and where we let it. It suffers our abuse and serves our purposes, and naturally, it's a mess. A mouth-to-source look at North America's mightiest river and how it has become a textbook example of this country's water problems.

*By Robert E. Sullivan, Jr.*



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**62 WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE...** The controversies and crises surrounding seven major water systems in the United States. All of them are threatened; some of them can still be saved.

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## YOU COULD BE LIVING HERE

Ten towns that feel right—places with strong economies, affordable housing, just enough culture, and wild beauty straight out the back door. Plus: the next generation of Elysiums. *By Mike Steere*



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## THE DETAILS: RACING ACROSS AMERICA

What does it take to bicycle 22 hours a day for eight days from the Pacific to the Atlantic? RAAM racer Paul Solon wouldn't leave home without nine devoted friends, four good bikes, two vans, a mountain of food and clothing, 20 tubes of Chaf-Eeze... *By Bob Howells*

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## URETHANE LOVE

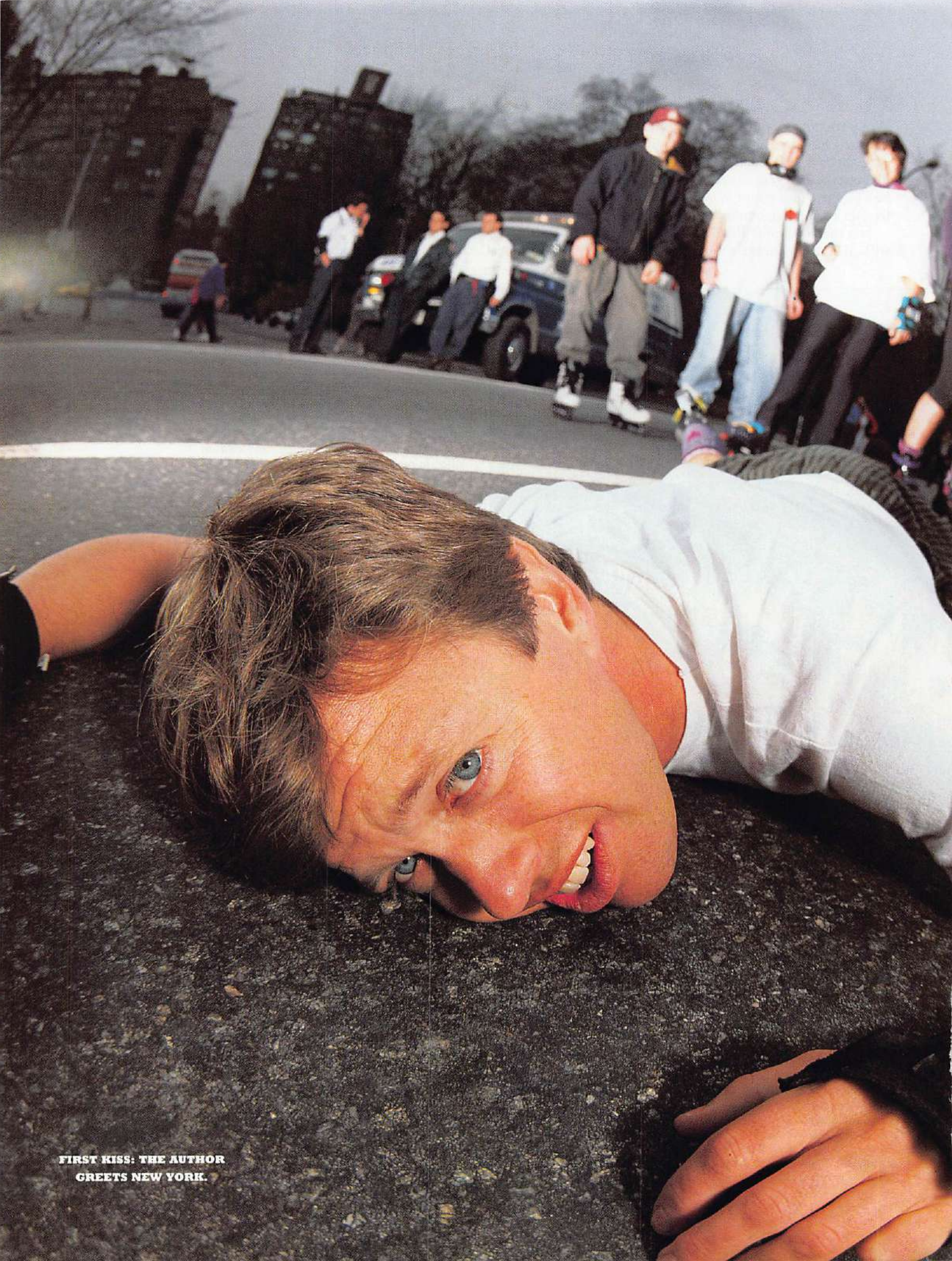
He came to Camp Rollerblade a skeptic; he left a street monster. The news from the world of in-line skating, where thrashers reign and nothing is so beautiful as champagne asphalt. *By Ted Conover*



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COVER: DOWNTOWN BOISE, IDAHO, PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEVE BLY





FIRST KISS: THE AUTHOR  
GREET'S NEW YORK.





# URETHANE LOVE

He came from the **East**. He carried no **Lycra**. He was **impervious** to the trendy allure of **in-line skating**. And then it happened.

CAMP ROLLERBLADE, DAY ONE. "BY THE time camp is over you're all gonna be street monsters," Kelly assures us. "You're gonna go out and destroy."

It is a hot day in Minneapolis, and 15 adults are lined up in the middle of a vast parking lot, facing Kelly. Like most of the instructors, Kelly is from California. He wears his long blond hair tucked up under a backward baseball cap. He is 14 years old.

Kelly's job today is to teach us how to stop. Because in-line skating sometimes seems like the sports equivalent of nuclear power—a great idea, if only someone knew how to keep it under control—this

*By TED CONOVER*



skill is important. Before he can proceed, however, Kelly knows he must enable us to ward off the mysterious force that periodically lifts random pupils off their urethane wheels and drops them on their butts. When we are street monsters, I presume, this will no longer happen.

"The wrist guards will protect your hands," Kelly explains, dropping into a push-up position to demonstrate. Next he drops onto his knee pads and tells us to fall onto ours. Nervously, we do, and it doesn't hurt.

All around us, in different regions of the parking lot, are incentives to learn: the couples dancing in the "Streetstyle" class; the wind junkies shooting across the lot with lightweight WindSkate sails braced on their thighs; the skiers cross-training with rubber-tipped poles or actually slalom down the path where flexible slalom gates have been installed; the racers practicing laps around cones; the hockey players beseeching others to join their game. In the wind, I hear snippets of a debate over durometer rating (that's wheel hardness), whether 78A is better for freestyling, or 85A. A teenage half-piper with a T-shirt that reads PAVE THE WORLD tells a friend to pick his blisters, they'll heal faster.

Jill Schulz, camp director and former Ice Follies skater, raises her little megaphone to try to get everyone's attention. Despite the fact that we're each paying \$225 for the four-day session, this is not easy. We must always remember, she shouts, to take off our skates when we come indoors. We must be on time for the morning and afternoon classes. We must not forget the stinky knee pad contest on Sunday. Because I am standing a bit behind her, I notice that Schulz also has some green Silly String hanging from her long blond hair. Things were a little wild on her hall this morning, she confesses when I ask. I'm glad I came to Camp Rollerblade.

After Jill's speech, Kelly begins to teach us how the infamous heel brake, though counter-intuitive, can be made to work. We see that you can drag one skate behind the other sideways to achieve much the same effect (the T-stop), and the more adventuresome are even learning to change direction midcourse and skate backward. Kelly offers Rollerblade bumper stickers to those who excel, like gold stars to obedient pupils. Sometimes he just tosses a handful into the air, and the way we scramble to grab them is a marvel: They are cool, and we want them badly.

What prevents a total regression to adolescence, however, is a nearly universal fear of falling. To counteract it, Kelly has devised an exercise that involves skating slowly and then dropping to one knee. He demonstrates: Once his knee pad meets the pavement, it skids easily along next to his skate. We all try the left knee—fine. Then we try the right. I watch in a kind of horror as the passing pavement slowly tugs my right knee pad down to my calf, exposing my virgin knee to asphalt at five miles an hour.

"Uh, Kelly," I start to say.

"Oh, whoops!" says Kelly. "They've got Band-Aids up at the vans."

My knee red and oozy, I skate up to the two colorful vans staffed by Rollerblade tech reps. Two other wounded campers are already waiting for treatment; the woman in front of me has the additional challenge of embedded gravel. The sweaty tech rep has some gauze in one hand and little scissors in the other. Road rash. Blade blood. Welcome, initiates...

Be quite **still** and solitary. The world will **freely** offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice. It will roll in **ecstasy** at your feet.

—Kafka

IN-LINE SKATES WERE FIRST MANUFACTURED IN 1980 BY THE founders of Rollerblade Inc., who saw them as an off-season training aid for hockey players. Their popularity grew slowly until, a few years ago, it exploded. Specialty blade stores, most of which rent as well as sell, have spread to almost every city in the land.

Rollerblade's sales have doubled every year since 1987—it sold a million pairs in 1991. The company controls the largest share of the market and still dominates the high end but is losing ground to challengers like Bauer, Ultra-Wheels, and Riedell.

More interesting, to me at least, are the inroads the sport has made into the heart of American popular culture. Members of Team Rollerblade, for most of the year, are not camp counselors but a traveling dance troupe, blazing through acrobatic sequences in commercials for Mountain Dew, McDonald's, and Gatorade; episodes of "Beverly Hills 90210"; the Miss America Pageant; and Super Bowl XXVI. The term "Rollerblade" has been added to the fifth printing of the Random House *Webster's College Dictionary*.

In a new comic book called *Rockin' Rollin' Miner Ants*, the insect protagonists head into battle on in-lines.

Because of the quality and quantity of hard surfaces required, in-line skating seems the quintessential urban sport, the outdoor activity that makes peace with concrete. In cities, devotees find they can transport skates more easily than bicycles and in general get a workout faster, even while doing their errands. The spread of skating has, above all, provided in abundance the sort of commodity Americans seem to treasure most: a new kind of fun.

But is it for you? Was it for me? The mature response is a flat no, or at the very least a healthy ambivalence. After all, who wants to join the throng of wannabes embracing the latest trendy amusement? Who wants to dress like a teenage refugee from Venice Beach? I went to Camp Rollerblade sober and East Coast pale. I carried no spandex, swore I'd never say "shred," and soothed my conscience by mocking the idea of the camp to my friends. I was, I told them, merely a keen observer, interested in the equipment, the innovations, the sociocultural phenomenon.

But that first night of camp, alone in my room, wiping the dust



MARK OF THE STREET MONSTER: THE CENTRAL PARK LOOK



from my beautiful new skates, I sensed that things were different. I found myself replaying the day's small achievements, recalling in particular the speed, the thrill of a fast turn. The pleasure I felt was almost guilty. Deep down, I knew my interest was more than academic. I was becoming, in the words of my 14-year-old instructor, a closet thrasher.

He's every skater's friend,  
and every skater's champion. His legs  
are legendary—and he could crack  
walnuts with his butt.

—*Inline magazine on David Cooper*

THE SKATER IN THE ROOM NEXT TO MINE AT CAMP IS FAMOUS: I'VE seen him quoted in *USA Today*, in *Time*; I've seen his picture in Rollerblade ads. His name is David R. Cooper. He's the guy you can reach on the road via the RollerPhone, the cellular phone that rings in his backpack. The guy with the skate emblem dangling from his bracelet. The former world record holder in the 10k (18:01) and the 85-mile (4 hours, 35 minutes) Athens-to-Atlanta race for in-line skaters. The athlete who scrapes the little piece of butter off his broiled fish because "it's fat." The sort of man whom new models of skates will someday be named for ("The Coop") and races will be held to honor. He is 33 years old, lives in Dearborn, Michigan, and doesn't own a car; he skates to his day job at (where else?) the Ford Motor Company, where he's a computer researcher.

"What better way for me to testify that you don't need a car?" Cooper asks me one morning. "I get into work and I feel real good—unless I've selected poor music." Which brings us to Cooper's running debate on a national computer bulletin board with those who think skating and Walkmans don't mix.

Argues Cooper, "The experience I have when I listen to a carefully mixed tape is easily 35 percent better than when I have no music. I fully understand the dangers involved when one sense is left out from the suite of survival weapons, but given the 35 percent increase in experiential quality, even if I were to get hit, I would still have a greater probability of being ahead since most injuries are not serious and I am working with an increased quality of skate."

"I think it's a great idea," cautions one James Ryan, "where the cars either ain't or where the cars are not on top of the food chain."

"By all means jam," adds Bill Dickey, "but keep the volume down to where hollering cyclists, crying babes, and journalists in pursuit of stories about breakneck Rollerbladers are audible."

Cooper knows everybody involved in in-line skating, everywhere. "You're going to San Francisco?" he asks. "Call Lee Cole at Skates on Haight. Here..." He pauses to bring up the number on the display of his cellular phone. "Australia? You gotta talk to Inze Bont, in Sydney." A founding member of the newly formed International In-line Skate Association, Cooper chairs a committee that tries to head off legislative threats to skaters' freedom. When he heard last August of a group called Mothers Against Rollerblading, he was moved to call the founder (whose daughter died when she fell backward and hit her head on the pavement) and try to explain that skating can be safe.

Here at camp, Cooper is leading the race clinic and teaching a special class called Stealth Skating. The class meets in the parking lot like all the others, but then follows Cooper down the road to a small shopping center, where he assigns missions. "You, go buy a Coke. You, get a Whopper. You, a pear." The idea is to sneak in and out of places without getting caught. The pear-seeker is

advised to get a shopping cart immediately upon entering the supermarket as camouflage, and use an up-and-down walking motion when behind it, instead of the smooth but eye-catching side-to-side. "And keep your wallets out. That way they'll think you're about to leave." Cooper himself is known to go out in black tights, black stocking cap, and blackface makeup at night just for the thrill of never being seen.

Despite—or perhaps because of—his penchant for roller-ninja skating, Cooper fears that if the sport keeps growing at its present rate, there will be more and more constraints. He can see it already in resort towns like Aspen, which last summer banned in-lines from the core downtown area, and Marblehead, Massachusetts, which is considering it. Perhaps the smartest thing skaters can do, he suggests, is realize how good they've got it. "These," says Coop, "are the good old days."

CAMP ROLLERBLADE, DAY FOUR. THE SCABS HAVE HARDENED. That's the good news. The bad news is that there are many more of them, the regrettable but common by-product of meetings between athlete and asphalt. There are other casualties in camp: Jev, a 16-year-old ("Look at that parking lot!" he rhapsodized the first day) who is very slick on the half-pipes, lost his balance and rubbed the skin off the front of his chin, leaving a strong visual impression. And Molly, a fitness goddess who works in a health club in Evanston, Illinois, was taking Cooper's workshop in the velodrome when she lost her footing and much of the finish on her well-tanned thigh. Coop himself has appeared at breakfast with a bright red abrasion on his right leg. "I did *not* get this skating," he responds to hopeful inquiries. He declines, however, to state how he did get it.

It kind of takes you back, a skinned knee. If I had ever skated as a kid, it might remind me of those days, too. Instead, I finally appreciate the way my parents must have felt, learning how to ski in their late twenties and watching me quickly surpass them. I envy these children.

But at the same time, skating for four days in a row, you learn a few things. Kelly's class has for the most part progressed from simple stops to power slides and back crossovers. Though the issue still arises, staying up is no longer our first concern. By the end of the day there seems to be a chance that I will make it all the way through Kelly's slalom cones one-footed. I have even learned a trick that I plan to use to impress youngsters back home: skating, with legs scissored, on just two wheels (the front wheel of the back skate and the back wheel of the front skate). Ambition now overshadows fear: A certain basic competence is good for self-esteem. And because we are clods-in-arms, some of us have become pretty good friends. On this last day of camp I take an early-morning skate with Steven, an accountant from Houston. Rounding a stadium, we see spread before us a heretofore undiscovered realm, a newly paved parking lot.

"Look!" Steven exclaims. "Champagne asphalt!"  
We stride out.

In skating... our safety is  
in our speed.

—Emerson

EDUARD OLIEMANS, THE FLYING DUTCHMAN OF ASPEN, IS BEING PATIENT with me because we used to mount mountain bike together. Otherwise, I doubt he would ever have agreed to skate with me up the road to the Maroon Bells—I am too slow. Eduard has been a leading local racer since the Rollerblade demo van came to town in 1986 and he won a pair of Zetas in a raffle. Because he grew up speed



skating in the land of Hans Brinker and is also an accomplished nordic skier, he pretty much knew how to handle his in-lines before he laced them up. He participates in and occasionally wins Aspen's troika of annual in-line races, always placing high in the infamous Maroon Bells Hill Climb, which is perhaps why I am sweating and panting while Eduard still looks like he is warming up. Fortunately, he does most of the talking.

The in-line skaters who pioneered this road, he says, used to walk around the three cattle guards encountered on the way up, afraid of getting caught in the metal bars. But experimentation proved that you can simply step across them, as he demonstrates. The road is blessedly closed to passenger cars most of the year, with only tour buses allowed, the understanding being that when a bus approaches you stop striding and let it pass (peaceful coexistence is in the skater's best interest). We spot a pack of in-liners with ski poles—poles are good for upper-body cross-training, Eduard admits, but he feels they slow you down.

Earlier, when I entered Eduard's modest apartment, he showed me the speed skate he was designing on his Macintosh. It had five wheels instead of four, each one 80 millimeters in diameter instead of 70 millimeters like most skate wheels, and fast Swiss bearings. A lightweight boot was being custom sewn, and his only concern about the prototype was how hard it would be to stop on a downhill as steep as the Maroon Bells. Like most serious racers, he didn't want to be encumbered by a brake.

As we start to skate, Eduard explains that to make a climb like the Bells, you have to speed-skate up and then "ski" down. When he bends over and puts both hands behind his back to demonstrate proper speed-skating technique, it's like a turbocharger kicks in: Eduard rockets up the hill, his receding form bearing more than a passing resemblance to Eric Heiden's. I try it myself but realize I don't yet have the balance to forsake even one of my arms. Kindly, Eduard says it will come with practice.

At the top we stretch out briefly in the parking lot while buses disgorge passengers who've come to admire the view. They corner us briefly until Eduard gets sick of the questions ("How did you guys get up here?"), and then we head down. It is one of the most thrilling descents I've ever had, on anything. The skates are such minimal equipment that, more than biking or skiing, you really feel you may be flying. Eduard makes slalom turns where it's steep but falls into a cannonball tuck, arms between his knees, wherever he can get away with it. He even passes bicycles, something that makes him particularly happy. From my vantage point far behind him I see that he is not slowing down for the first cattle guard, and my heart skips—he forgot! But then, momentarily crouched so low that he's practically kissing the pavement, he springs up and lifts into the air, shooting over the bars. The sight of it breaks my concentration, and when I reach the guard I swerve somewhat crazily to a stop and make my unsteady, crab-like step across.

Eduard has stopped to wait for me on a flat stretch a half-mile or so farther down the road. I'm wearing full battle regalia—helmet, knee pads, elbow pads, wrist guards, gloves—but he has on only helmet and gloves. Wiping the wind-tears from my eyes, I have just one question. "Do you ever fall?"

Eduard cleans some bugs off his Wayfarers. "No," he says simply, without the usual smile. "You can't fall."

### Rule 6: Avoid skating at night.

—Rollerblade Rules of the Road

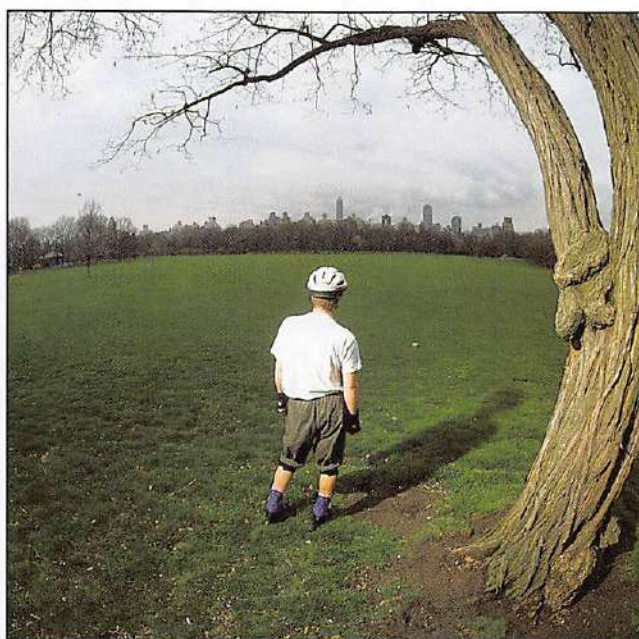
YOU CAN GET A \$100 FINE FOR SKATING IN THE SUBWAY, SO I JAM MY skates into a daypack and don them once I've exited the station at 72d Street and Central Park West. Then I rush down to Malachys Pub, next to a shop called Blades West, and join a score of others milling outside on fast shoes like mine. It's a few months after Camp Rollerblade, a few weeks after Aspen, and finally I feel ready for the acid test: the streets of New York City, my home.

The organizer asks someone to count—27 skaters. From the weekend slalom crowd in Central Park, I think I recognize the skater known as Leg Beater, as well as Young Blood and Crash. There's a guy who loves to launch himself into the air, over manhole covers and air grates, who goes by the name Frequent Flier—or was that Air Know! Our leader, Mike Jensen, aka Blade, tells me of a speedster known as Blur, and of a guy who's trying to be just like him but is so far only fuzzy. (Blur had an accident during one Tuesday Night Skate and went directly to bed; in the morning he had to carry his sheets into the shower with him to separate them from his skin.) At 8:15 P.M. the cry goes up: "Roll 'em!"

The skaters hit the street, some sporting strobes on their belts, some with helmets, many, like me now, in spandex. We occupy half of westbound 72d Street. Skaters in city traffic always feel terribly vulnerable; it's gratifying to be part of a pack. Cars give us wide berth. We move out fast.

The Tuesday Night Skate has become something of a Manhattan tradition. Most nights the safari heads downtown, via Lincoln Center, Grand Central Station, Union Square, Washington Square Park, Battery Park City, and the World Trade Center. Tonight, though, we're uptown-bound. New York is so intensely lit at night that, for the most part, the road surface is easily seen. I catch up with Margo Su San, whom I recognize from camp. She's just back from the famous Athens-to-Atlanta races, she says, 40 miles in about three hours. (The 85-mile option is for the seriously addicted.) Three other women in tonight's crowd were in the race, too, and they greet one another as they pass, one of them confiding to me later that Margo won the women's division in the 40-mile. Margo says she's taken to doing almost all her city travel on skates, including banking, grocery shopping, and commuting to work, where she leaves a pair of shoes so she won't have to carry them.

Soon we've glided up Riverside Drive to the Soldiers' and




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Sailors' Memorial, where under a full moon a group of diehards skate down the steps and whoop it up. Their skates clatter as they go, occasionally giving off a spark when the frame hits marble. Kirk, who has rolled down the mountain at Stowe, Vermont, explains that wilderness skating will improve as soon as the ground starts to freeze up. Other skaters complain about the new 15-mile-per-hour speed limit in Central Park (which has since been rescinded) and the high price of replacement wheels.

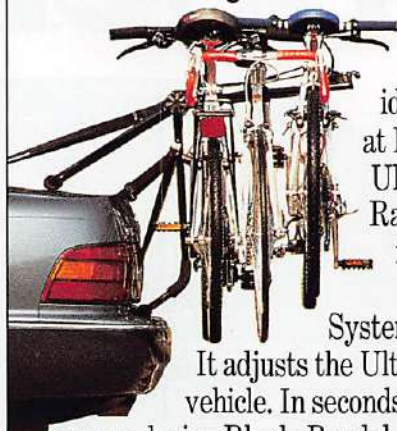
The last stop is Columbia University, whose library has perhaps the best steps in the city. The guard at the gate looks at us kind of helplessly as we buzz past. There's quite a show as two guys demonstrate how the steps can be negotiated backward. I don't try this: Soft bodies bumping down hard marble slabs reminds me of a local bass player I once saw interviewed on TV after he had gotten into a skating accident. His wrist and forearm bones were held together by rods joined to a large metal superstructure outside his arm. "Was he wearing wrist guards?" Blade asks me when I tell him about this man. Not to wear them, he believes, "is almost asking for it."

That makes me feel better. Everyone on the Tuesday Night Skate wears wrist guards, and many wear knee pads or elbow pads or both. Skating at night is scarier because of the danger of invisible things—the unseen twig or bottle cap or patch of oil. But at the same time the empty streets and the urethane wheels whirring quietly in the darkness somehow focus the senses and heighten the feeling of flight, of stealth, of an odd omnipotence over the cement and brick of the city that should probably not be experienced by any well-adjusted person past the age of 15.

A group of us breaks off and skates back downtown. It's nearly 11 P.M., the traffic is light, and the road, as skaters say, is "greased," extra smooth from being driven on so much. Some of the pavement twinkles in the streetlights—tiny bits of glass in the asphalt; it's just a little bit like the twinkle of powder snow through polarized lenses. With all the traffic moving steadily in one direction, and the even movements of skaters striding in unison, the words of James Taylor come to mind: "Broadway's a river to me, / Fat fish in a big city sea..." Certainly there are monsters out there, but now I'm one, too. 

*Ted Conover is the author of Rolling Nowhere, Coyotes, and most recently White-out: Lost in Aspen (Random House).*

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