

## Midnight Century 2018

My first mistake is sleeping at 2:00pm. I am awake again by 4:00, and more tired than I was beforehand.

So, an early dinner, and then back to bed for another attempt at 6:30. I lay there, reading and ruminating, until 9:00. Then just as I start to fall into a deep sleep, the 10:00pm alarm sounds. It's going to be a long night. Trying to keep at least some sense of pre-ride normality, I dress, eat some breakfast food, and pack the bike into the car.

My second mistake is missing the exit. I used to drive out this way every day, but they've since changed the off-ramp situation around Dinmore. Sleep-deprived and mid-conversation, I take the wrong lane and soon realise we're headed south instead of west. After a few more wrong turns through the suburban back streets of Ipswich, we finally pull into the car park at Fernvale with three minutes to spare.

As midnight ticks over, I feel the first pang in what will turn out to be an emotional night and morning. It's now November 25. A year to the day since I bought the bike that has been a big part in some significant changes in my life. I have plans to mark this and a related milestone later in the day, but I keep it to myself for now.

After a few more minutes delay while Tara deals with a deflated tyre, we roll out at around 12:10, with only Scott behind us. I wasn't expecting to see anyone again until I made it back to the checkpoint, but Scott catches and passes after around 10km. I resist the urge to chase, but seem to be catching him a few kilometres later. That turns out to be John, who I pass on a climb and don't see again.

Crossing under the railway in Wulkuraka, I notice some tail lights up ahead. I manage to catch up with two riders who will become pretty constant companions throughout the night. Although we never really ride together at any point and I never catch their names, they're either just in front of me, or I'm just in front of them, for most of the three loops. Strava Flybys tells me it was Grant and Luis.

Karrabin brings the first and only abusive car occupant of the night, leaning out the passenger window and yelling at us to get off the road. But I'd prefer to remember Karrabin for the night's first and only sighting of charismatic megafauna (it's a thing, trust me). Three riders are around 20m ahead, and a large, ghostly Eastern Grey Kangaroo hops slowly and silently across the road between them and me. It's somewhat surreal, and three weeks later I'm still not certain that I didn't actually hallucinate the whole thing.

It's been a long time since I've seen this hour of a Sunday morning, and I am really starting to struggle. When I stay up late reading or watching European sport on television, I always use the arrival of long blinks and a wandering mind as an indicator that it's time to go to bed. The long blinks have started, and my mind's wandering all over the place, but there's no bed in sight for at least another 9 hours. I'm drinking plenty of water, but I also have a terribly dry mouth. I keep drinking. I keep riding.

It's only 10km to go until the first pass back through Fernvale. Less than my commute. Easy.

The first stop in Fernvale passes by in a blur. Someone takes and signs my card. Oh, it's Vaughan. I drink. Fill my bottles. Eat some jelly snakes and delicious zucchini slice. I take a toilet stop. Wait. Where's everyone gone?

Heading out for the second loop the weather has suddenly turned very cold. I'm alone and still struggling to stay awake. I find myself wondering about the comfort of the overgrown roadside ditches and the ground under the shadowy trees. "That looks comfortable. Imagine how warm curling up in that culvert would be. Even if it did rain, you'd wake up before you drown. Take a break. You've got plenty of time. Have a nap. It's not far back to Fernvale, just turn around and go and sleep in the car." I keep riding. I'm getting better at keeping riding.

Maybe it's an attempt to drown out the internal monologue, but I suddenly become hyper-aware of my surroundings – the dogs stirring and barking behind fences (at least I hope they're behind fences); the wildlife hopping along beside me in the roadside undergrowth; the alternating cold and warm patches as I ride in and out of gullies; the faint outline of farm machinery parked up for the night in paddocks and sheds. I'm still sleepy, but I've reached a state of peace. I'm starting to love this.

I catch Tara somewhere near the turn-off to Atkinsons Dam, and we spend the rest of the second loop together, chatting and laughing as we tend to do. Our timing wasn't quite right for sunrise over Wivenhoe Dam, but the silhouetted trees and the golden pre-dawn sky as we cross the spillway are gorgeous. I stop with the intention of taking a photograph, but I'd bagged my phone earlier during a brief spot of rain, and decide I can't be bothered to get it out. It's just sunrise. Happens every day. Bah humbug.

Speaking of bugs. So. Many. Bugs. By the time I cross to the other side of the spillway, the hair on my arms and legs is full of them. There's a forest in Japan, Aokigahara, which has become known as a suicide hot spot. My limbs are Aokigahara, but for bugs.

It's only 8km to go until the second pass back through Fernvale. Less than my commute. Easy.

As we approach town and pass a sign for the bakery, we ponder the claim of 120 varieties of pie. Is it really 120 varieties, or just various iterations of, say, 12 pies – with sauce; without sauce; with peas; without peas; with peas and potato? We'll confirm later.

I'm barely off my bike before there's a sausage sandwich in my hand. Sorry Bunnings, this might be the best sausage on white bread I've ever eaten. I don't take onion, so it makes no difference to me whether it's on top or underneath. The arrival of daylight has woken me a little, so I'm much more alert this time around and can engage in conversation. As much as I ever do, anyway. I figure my wife Kylie will be awake soon, so I send a check-in message and tell her that I've made it through the night. It's not even 5:00am yet. Of course she doesn't respond.

Leaving the sun cream at home was my third mistake. Strangely, it's just not top-of-mind when you're getting ready in the middle of the night. But I did bring some sun sleeves, so I dash to the car and pull them on before heading out again.

I started to feel a bit of knee pain on the second loop, so as we roll out for the third, I decide I'm going to take it easy and I tell others not to feel like they need to wait. But the morning is spectacular, and it turns out I'm mostly feeling okay, so I manage to maintain a reasonable pace until the hill at Tallegalla. As soon as I start the climb, the knee pain returns, so I'm off the bike and pushing. As she passes, Tara asks how much I want for the bike. I tell her she can have it.

Back in the saddle for the final pinch through the village and then it's all downhill to Minden and the only close dog encounter for the ride. "Man, that's a huge Maremma. It's not behind a fence. It's getting up. No worries, it's on a chain. That's a long chain. The chain's broken. Oh shit!" These thoughts pass through my head in the space of around 3 seconds. Apparently, I barely flinch. Not outwardly at least.

Only 20km to go. Less than a River Loop. Easy.

Coming back towards Lowood, I remember seeing a steep peak on the course profile. But I've ridden back through here before, and you usually follow the sign to Fernvale and Brisbane, taking a left for a flat pass through town. But my Wahoo gives me no turn cues. And there's one final steep pinch straight ahead. Goddammit, Simon!

As I roll into Fernvale for the last time, set up for the Sunday morning markets has started. There are a few people out walking along the main street. I wonder if they assume that we've just been out for an early morning ride, and laugh to myself. My GPS says I've done 159km. By this stage, I don't care enough about my Eddington Number to do an extra kilometre. The bacon and egg roll is a perfect breakfast, and I savour every one of the eleven teaspoons of sugar in my can of Solo.

After an hour or so sitting around sharing stories of this and past rides, everyone decides it's time to get their bleary eyes and bodies home to bed. I agree. But not before I buy the last two crocodile pies to take home for lunch with Kylie. I'll try the emu next time.

Thanks very much to Simon for organising, and to Vaughan and PJ for their support back at base through the night. I was looking forward to this ride all year, even before I joined Audax, and it exceeded every expectation. I'll definitely be back next year.

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