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INTO AFRICA, BY BIKE

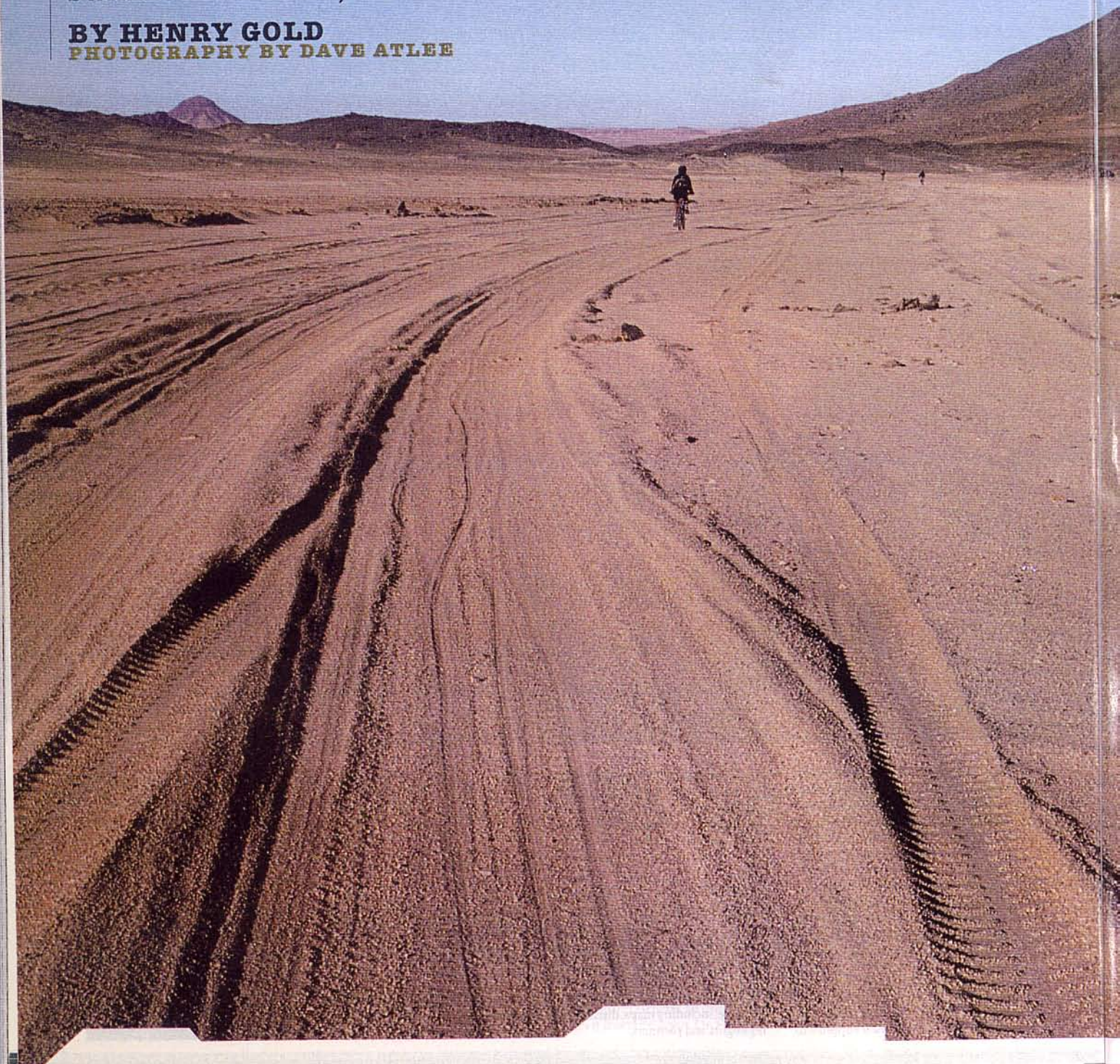
From Cairo to Cape Town in the first Tour d'Afrique

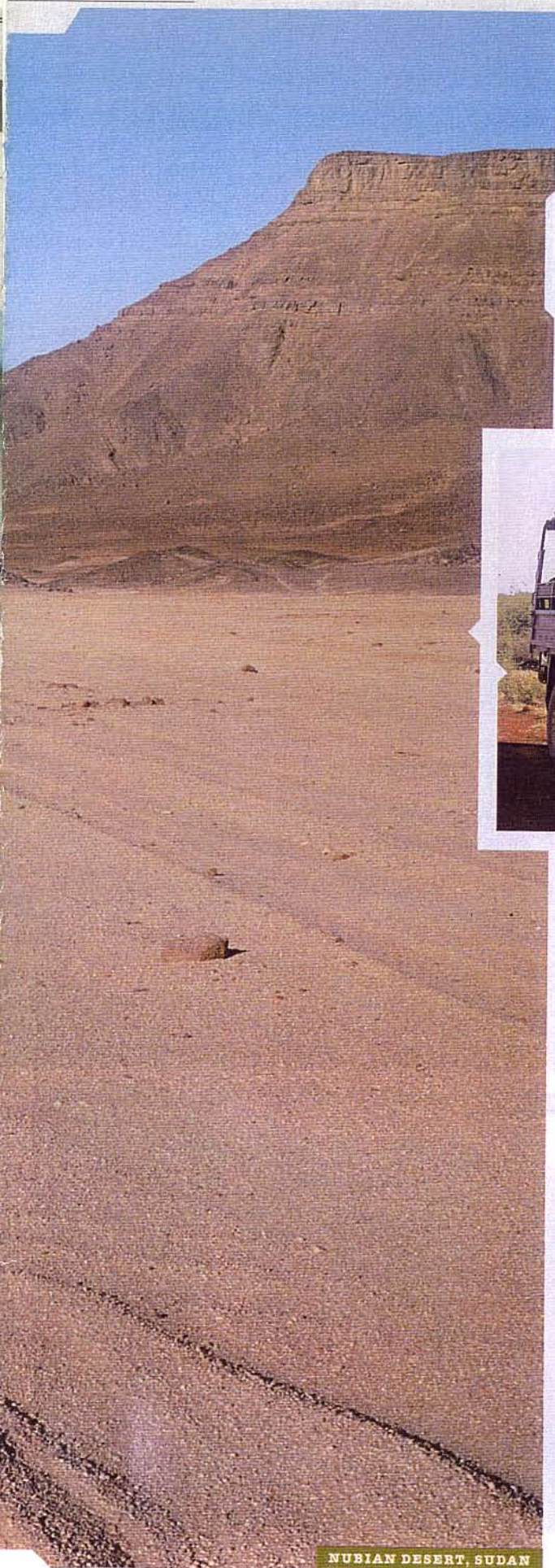
Bike, the Beloved Continent

TO THE CANADIAN ORGANIZER OF THE FIRST TOUR D'AFRIQUE, CYCLING 11,000 KILOMETRES FROM CAIRO TO CAPE TOWN SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA AT THE TIME. AND AFTER THE LAVA FIELDS, THE BANDIT TERRITORY, THE STONE-THROWING KIDS AND THE TIRE-SWALLOWING SAND, IT SEEMED LIKE AN EVEN BETTER IDEA

BY HENRY GOLD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE ATLEE

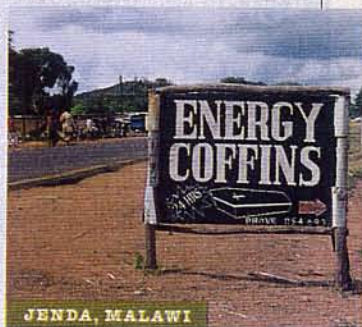




NUBIAN DESERT, SUDAN



NORTHERN ETHIOPIA



JENDA, MALAWI



MARSABIT, KENYA

JANUARY 18

Cairo, Egypt

We're off. Thirty-three cyclists, followed by two supply trucks carrying everything from spare parts to a nurse, roll away from the shadow of the Sphinx on the first leg of an 11,000-kilometre adventure. Foolish or courageous—I'm not sure which—we're planning to ride the length of Africa in 100 days of biking.

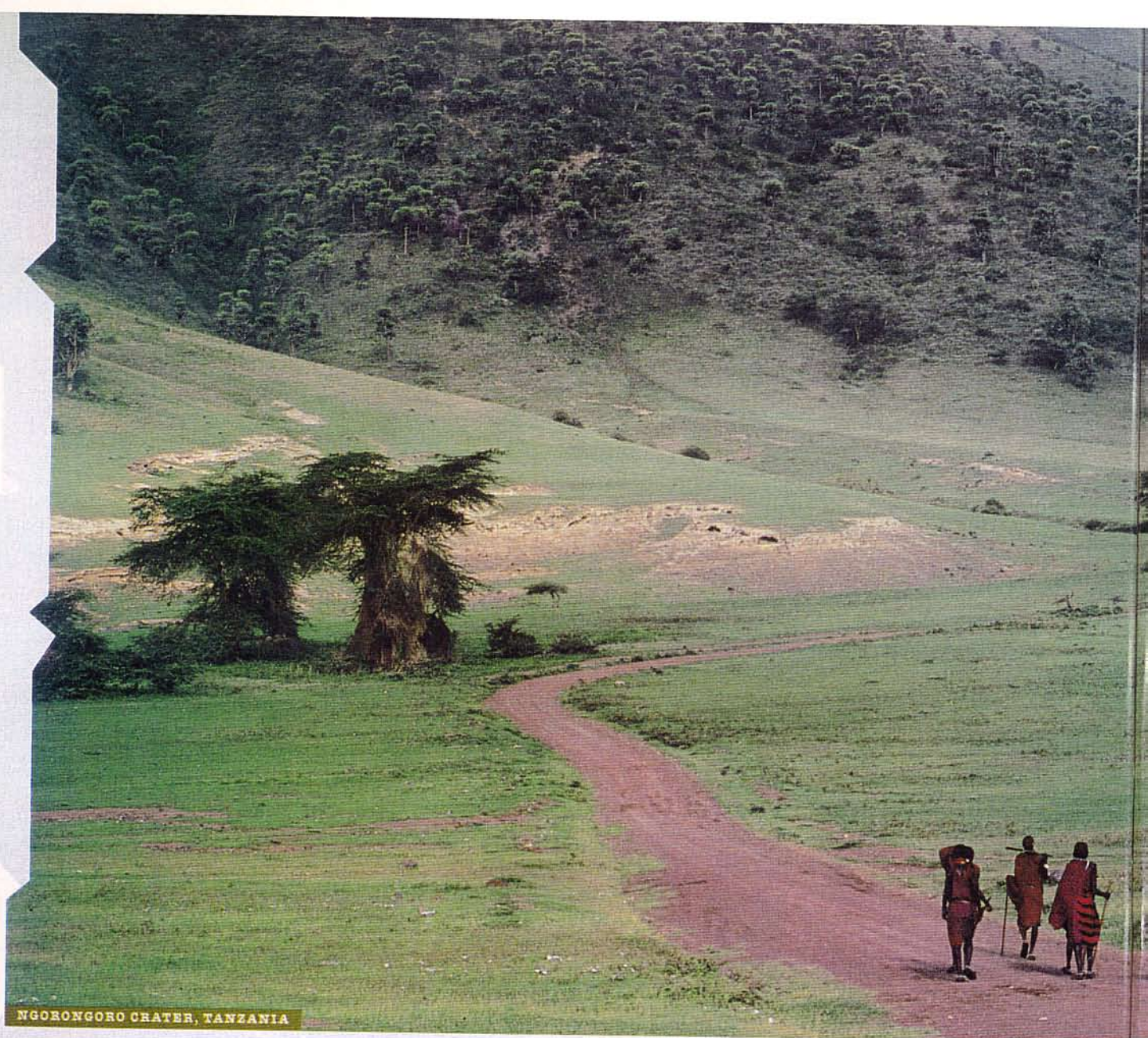
It's taken nine months of intricate planning and negotiation to put this motley crew on the road—well, where there is one—to Cape Town. The concept of the Tour d'Afrique, which has been bubbling in the back of my mind for over a decade, came out of my own many years of work and travel on the continent. I knew it well enough to believe that, if we put our faith in providence and in the traditions of the explorers of the past, we could make it.

So I assembled an international group of adventurers who ranged from superb athletes to risk-seeking millionaires to a retired Manchester cop to a middle-aged mother of five from PEI who didn't even own a bicycle before she applied to join us. They've each paid \$5,000 to \$7,000 US to see if they have the stuff to make history. Now, they're finally on the way to finding out.

JANUARY 24

Desert Camp, Egypt

On the sixth day of our journey, we arrive at the Million Stars Hotel, our term for a desert campsite about 40 kilometres east of Qena, the cradle of the Moslem Brotherhood in central Egypt.



NGORONGORO CRATER, TANZANIA

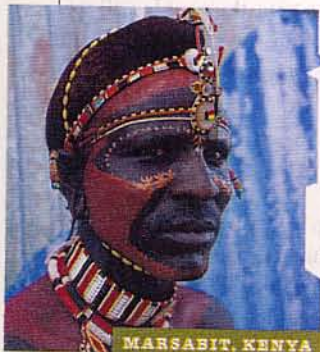
inches deep. The second, keeping to the outskirts of the villages, offers slightly better tracking. The third, hitching a ride on our support trucks, though the sanest, would be cheating. We choose the second, but soon find that these tracks, when we can actually ride on them, lead away from the Nile, our primary navigational guide. "When you can no longer see the shore or the trees on the banks," I tell our riders, "head back to the river."

I find a hard surface and, with the wind at my back, cruise for a couple of hours, spellbound by the endless expanse and utter silence of the desert. When I come to, I realize that it's been a while since I've seen the Nile shore. I get off the bike and start pushing it due east through ankle-deep sand. Over an hour later, I spot half a dozen other stragglers, and we push on toward the river together. We're all tired and hurting, and the mood is nasty. "Biking through Africa is one thing," whines Michael, an internet millionaire from Scotland,

"but this isn't biking. It's unrealistic to expect such a long distance in one day in such conditions." This kind of bitching makes me wonder why some of them signed up. After all, they were warned this wouldn't be a leisurely tour of Tuscany.

That wouldn't get them into the *Guinness Book of Records*. But if they stick to the rules, this trip will. They have a chance to establish a record for the fastest human-powered crossing of the African continent, but Guinness insists they cover every foot of it under their own power (no hopping aboard supply trucks). Most of them are still eligible, and they're determined to keep it that way. But it's late afternoon by now and we still have about 30 kilometres to go. If the road improves, we can make it to camp before sunset; otherwise, the trucks will pick us up—and the chance to be inscribed in history will be over.

As if that weren't tension-making enough, everybody's getting low on water. We're welcome to drink from the big clay jugs set out in the villages we're passing through. The water is meant for locals and strangers alike, but most riders are afraid to drink it. Not me. Surprisingly cool, it seems pure enough, but even if it isn't, better to get cramps that can be treated with antibiotics



MARSABIT, KENYA



than to become dehydrated which, in extreme cases, can be fatal.

We walk on—rest, huddled, under a solitary tree—and walk some more. Gradually, the ground hardens and we bike again. The group strings out; as usual, I'm in the rear.

A few kilometres later, I spot Lorry, a tall blond athlete from Calgary, sitting on the ground, her bike by her side. She's wearing a tight T-shirt and spandex bicycle shorts, not the smartest choice of attire in a country ruled by Sharia Law. Her face is strained. She's just thrown up. She could be suffering from exhaustion, dehydration or even food poisoning. It's hard to tell—but it's easy to tell that she's in a bad way. I suggest we thumb down the first vehicle that comes by. No, she insists, she'll finish the day. I ask a couple of people sauntering by how far it is to El Dabba, the town where we're scheduled to spend the night. Five kilometres is the average guess. Whether she can make it that far depends on what's ailing her. After a while, she decides she's feeling better and gets on the bike. In a few minutes she's back on the ground, retching. Gently, I suggest again that we hitch a ride. "No, even if I have to walk the rest of the way."

When an athlete reaches her limits, it's not uncommon for her to empty what's left in her gut, though it could be a symptom of dehydration. More worrisome yet is her willingness to damage herself for an entry in a book of records. Half an hour later, Lorry gets up; she's determined she'll walk. Eighty feet and she's back

BEREKO, TANZANIA



SOLOLO, KENYA

on all fours, puking again. This time I insist. A minibus comes by and I jump up and ask the driver to take us in.

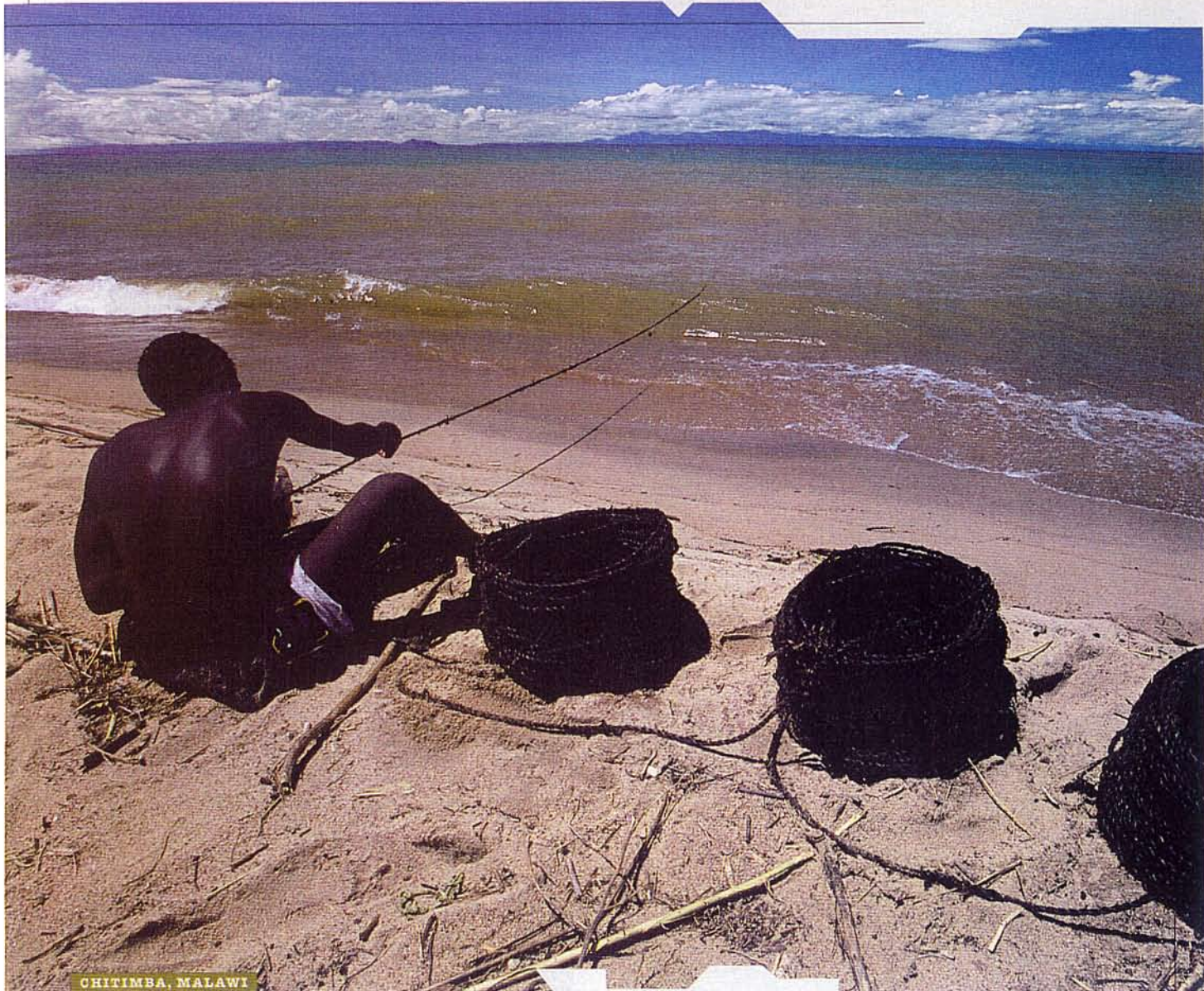
We arrive in El Dabba and get out in front of a Coke stand where several of our colleagues are replenishing fluids. I offer to pay the driver. He scowls at me, wishes us *Masalama* (peace be with you) and skids off.

Lorry is fine after a couple of days' rest on the truck. But it takes her a lot longer to get over the deep disappointment that she won't bike every inch across Africa.

FEBRUARY 25

Debre Tsyon, Ethiopia

Ethiopia is mountains, gorges, hills and valleys, no flat stretches to give us a breather. The roads—packed dirt and stones—give off clouds of dust every time a vehicle passes. Whenever I see a car or truck approaching, I

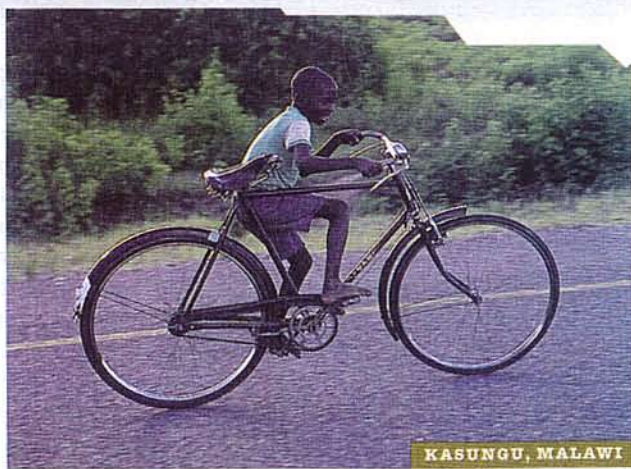


CHITIMBA, MALAWI

pull a bandana over my nose; it doesn't do much good, but anything is better than sucking dirt. Sometimes, I watch which way the wind is blowing, and cross to ride on the wrong side of the road, thus escaping the dust but putting myself at dumb risk. Fortunately, traffic is light.

Ethiopia is kids—heart-breakingly poor kids in tattered clothes and rubber-tire sandals—who swarm us at every stop. Give me, give me, give me—hundreds of times a day. Give me money, give me pen, give me anything. Whether we're biking through a town or stopping to drink *buna*, the superb coffee, or to eat *injera*, fermented pancakes covered with stews, the children are always there—"Ferenge (stranger) give me"—and so too are many adults.

Ethiopia is hunger. Every year, the country has a critical food



KASUNGU, MALAWI

shortage, usually in the region that's had a poor rainy season. Sometimes this shortage escalates to famine, in which millions die. In 1984, the famine was so severe it shocked the rich Western nations into staging an unprecedented relief effort: planes, helicopters and trucks brought food to a starving nation. But the following year it was just hunger as usual and the usual relief effort. What Ethiopia needs is a kind of Marshall Plan with a continuing investment in time and effort—plus a prolonged period of peace.

Ethiopia, at least this part of it, is stones. Throwing them is part of the culture. Kids throw them at cattle, goats, sheep, dogs, each other—and us. Occasionally, an adult takes it in mind to protect us from pestering kids by winging a stone in their direc-



CAPE PENINSULA, SOUTH AFRICA

tion. None of this is meant to cause injury. The kids, a couple of us decide, just want attention. So when we see them coming, we start talking to them and holding up our hands for high fives. It works. They never throw another stone. Well, almost never.

MARCH 8

Yabelo, Ethiopia

We're in the south now, where the population is sparser and the land more fertile, or rather it's not exhausted from thousands of years of cultivation as it is in the north. As I bike along, a boy is running beside me. He runs effortlessly, his gait as simple and efficient as a thoroughbred. A mile goes by and he isn't even breathing hard. The road suddenly slopes upward but he never breaks stride. Whenever I glance over at him, he smiles. He may be 9 or 10 or even 14 (in Ethiopia, with its scarcity of nutritious food, it's hard to tell). He runs with us for 15 minutes, yet still shows no sign of fatigue.

In my mind's eye, I see another boy, a white boy sitting in the



NEAR CAPE TOWN

stands of a large stadium filled to capacity. He has come from his home in the countryside to visit his older brother who's studying at a technical high school in Kosice in eastern Czechoslovakia. It's 1962, and my brother and I are awaiting the appearance of the front runner in the International Peace Marathon, Europe's oldest. As the roaring crowd rises to its toes, he glides into the stadium, completes his final one-and-a-half laps and

crosses the finish line, where he does not, as any other mortal would, collapse in exhaustion, but keeps running with the same graceful rhythm around the stadium again. He waves at the spectators, who are overwhelmed, as they should be, for this is Abebe Bikila, the great Ethiopian marathoner who, two years earlier, running barefoot on hot asphalt, won the gold medal at the Olympics in Rome.

I glance again at the young boy running beside me. The odds

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