

Pilots of a funky squadron

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is, from Monday to Friday, one of the city's premier bicycle courier hang-outs.

The place has the mildewed ambience of a Haight-Ashbury coffeehouse visited during the Summer of Love. Gray planes of smoke hang in the air, a mossy fan spins in its beaten frame, and Cream's "White Room" is playing.

Already, there is a good crowd, dressed in the barbarous finery that has become the hallmark of the courier, a wild melee of fabrics and hair that give the room the look of a gypsy encampment or an urban Road Warrior set.

Some wear the Spandex tights and nylon jackets of racing cyclists, while others opt for torn hockey sweaters, Mexican ponchos or perhaps cut-off thermal underwear worn beneath pants with the seat torn out, giving an unrestricted view of the hind quarters and delivering an unspoken message to following drivers.

And why not? It's a combat zone out there.

Craig Rass, for example, has just finished taking a ride on the hood of a cab that T-boned him on the sidewalk near the Sheraton Centre.

Rass saw it coming and absorbed the energy of the crash by leaping on to the hood, like a matador riding a bull. With his free hand he held up his bike, his money-maker.

Now Rass is calmly reflecting on the morning's excitement: "No big thing," he says. "It happens. You worry about that stuff all the time, you better do something else for a living."

Rass is 29. He's been a courier for six or seven years now. He wears a red pirate headband and jeans flecked with chain grease. He spends his nights playing bass in a band called Boozass. He took a hiatus from couriers a few years ago by taking a job in a darkroom. But soon he was back on the street.

"It started getting to my head," he says. "You spend all day in the dark, then you come out and it's dark again. When you ride you're out in the light. This is the life. You can be outdoors. You can be whoever you want to be. All you have to do is make the deliveries."

Where else could you hang out with so many different people? Across the room is a muscled young courier with a fresh wound in his cheek and the antsy, hormone-ridden look of a thrash-metal guitarist. His thighs bulge like a centaur's. He's slugging back an Export and chain-smoking Players Navy Cut cigarettes.

At the next table there's a young courier sporting a huge set of dreadlocks, a monstrous woolly carapace that no helmet could ever hope to cover.

"You come here, nobody judges you," says a courier who has just arrived. "Nobody cares how much money you have. You're just who you are. Anyone can fit in here."

Standing by the cash register is a rider known only as Art. According to courier legend, he was once a professor of chemical engineering but gravitated into the courier trade after a nervous breakdown.

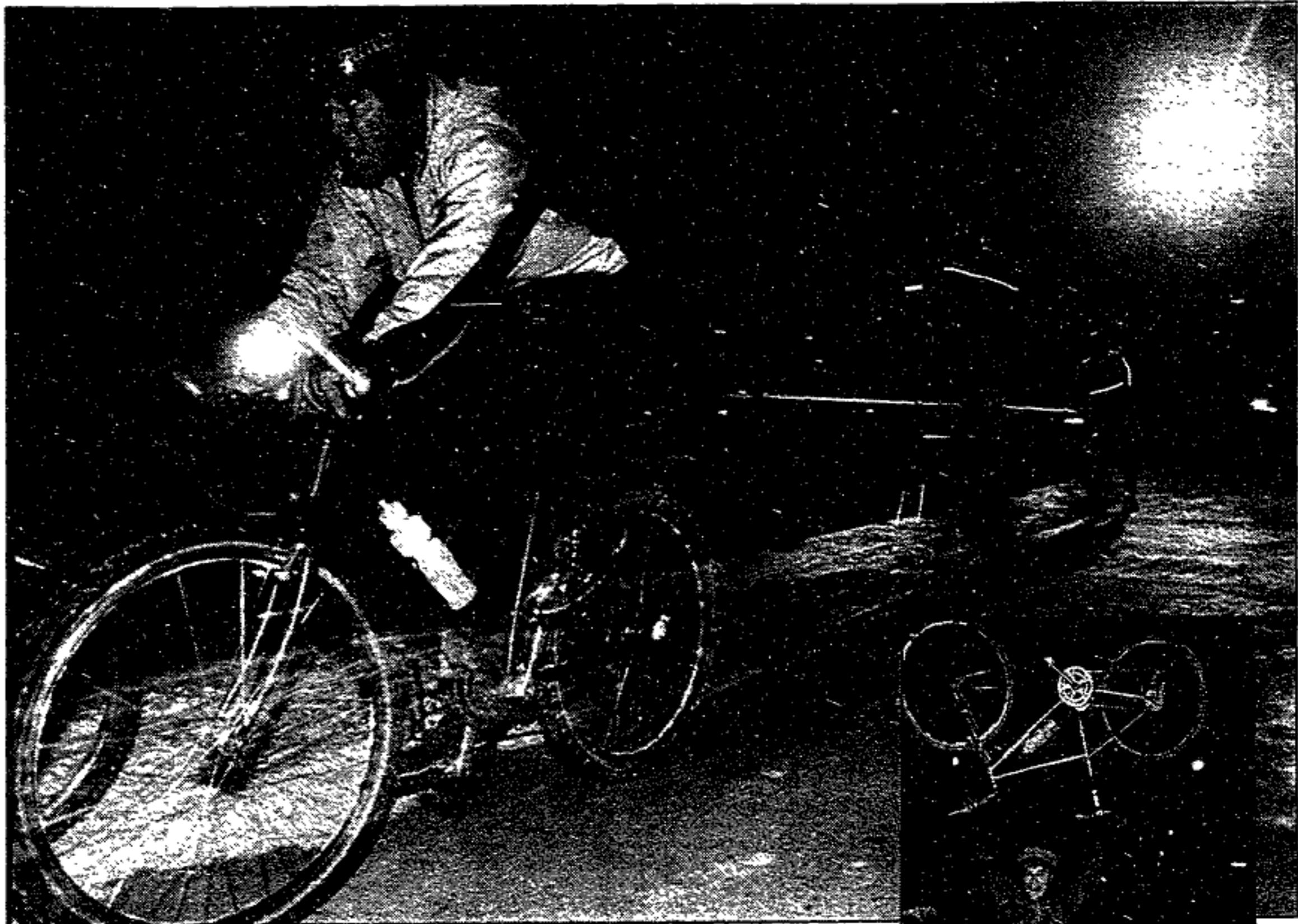
This seems plausible: Art resembles the eccentric doctor from the movie *Back To The Future*, right down to his white, blown-back hair — the look of a man who has just staggered away from a chemistry lab explosion.

His face is in constant, silent contortion, as though he were holding a raging argument behind soundproof glass. His age could be anywhere between 40 and 70. Every minute or so, Art slaps himself hard in the face.

"Hey, it's the sound of one hand slapping," offers a young courier wearing plastic knee pads and a fresh facial abrasion. "Art slaps the hell out of himself."

Art is renowned for his ability to ride a bicycle while simultaneously smoking and drinking coffee, a feat made all the more difficult by the fact that he refuses to wear a bag to carry packages in.

"He likes to hold all this stuff in his hands," says another rider with awe. "Everything, man. It's unbelievable. Guy looks like a juggler riding around in a circus. He keeps right on smoking



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and drinking that coffee, too."

Art is also famous for his refusal to use bicycle locks, an act of hopeless defiance that ranks up there with NHL goalies refusing to wear face masks.

"He just parks it," says a rider. "No lock. Nothing. He loses a lot of bikes."

John Zeidman is 21. He used to work in the parts department of a motorcycle dealership and a bar, but nine months ago he decided to become a courier. He's been hit by cars three times since then.

"The money sucks," says Zeidman. "But it's a great job ... you're outdoors. You stay in shape ... being a disillusioned, Generation X kind of person, it's nice to do something that's environmentally friendly, that isn't blowing a hole in the ozone or anything."

"But there's a lot of people who think we're nuts. We're a misunderstood race, man."

Dwayne White, 26, came to Toronto from Newfoundland to play in a rock band and become a pilot. He studied sculpture and painting at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. But he's working as a courier. He rides a beaten mid-70s vintage Peugeot 10-speed he picked up for \$100.

"It's outdoors," he says of his trade. "Back to the land you might say. Too bad it's all concrete."

He takes a laid-back approach to couriers: "There are guys doing 50 miles a day. Not me. I might see St. Clair Ave. twice a week."

Bob Byers is 46. He used to be a bookbinder and earned \$22 an hour, but quit after an 18-month strike and became a courier.

"I lost 20 pounds the first two weeks," he says. "I love this job. I love being outdoors, and I love the people. The people are great. Ninety-nine per cent of them are naturally nice. And they all like me because I'm old."

Byers smokes Export A's as he speaks: "It's weird, isn't it? I bet 90 per cent of the riders smoke. Why is that? You got me. Maybe it's the stress."

Lynne Bachelor, 24, is one of a handful of female couriers who work in Toronto. She knows the other women riders, if not by name:

"Let's see ... there's the blonde, there's the dark-haired one, then there's the freako bag-lady. ..."

Bachelor has been riding for about

18 months.

"I was working for a landscaper, doing interlocking bricks. I was racing bikes, and I just sort of slipped into this, I guess ... You've got to have the right attitude. You've got to be independent ... I used to work in retail and stuff. I couldn't stand having a boss."

"The thing about this is, it's never boring. It's different every day. But it's a dead end. What do you do when you write your resume? What do you say — I've been out riding around on a bike for four years?"

The St. Valentine's Day Massacre is the biggest courier race of the year. Like the others, it is a clandestine affair, known only to the couriers and their closest friends so as to avoid the unwelcome presence of the police.

The police would no doubt crimp the event's rare style: The racers gather at 9 p.m. in front of The Silver Shack, a Kensington Market bar and restaurant, several preparing for the grueling time ahead by passing around a fragrant joint the size of a Cuban cigar.

The street is filled with snow and sheets of glare ice, but dozens of riders tool around as if they were on a bare parking lot in summer, wheeling and spinning like acrobats.

Last year's Massacre champ, Joe Dias, is on hand, wearing tights and a jester's tricorn hat. Dias has the lean, muscled look of a coyote, and warms up by sprinting up and down the street, performing effortless brake-stands — pulling on the front brake so hard that the rear wheel rises into the air.

"Tonight it's anybody's race," Dias says. "But I'm ready."

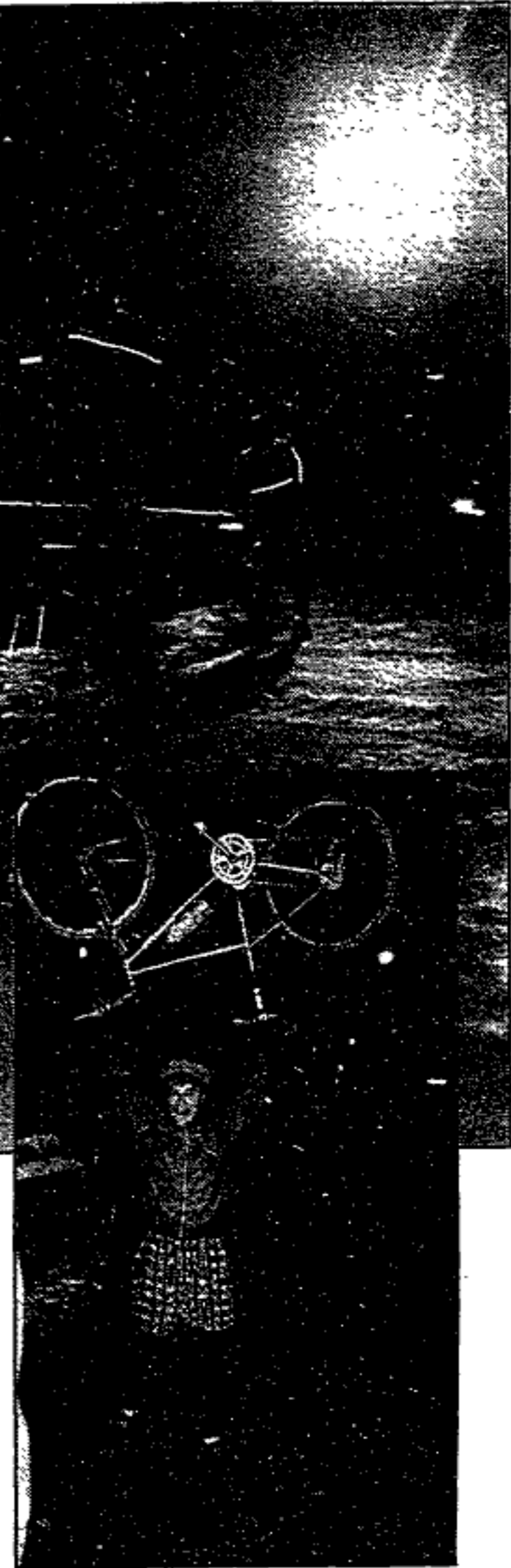
As always, the course has been kept secret, and is announced only at the start of the race. This fakes out the police and forces riders to use their ingenuity.

"It's not just about being fast," says Dias. "It's about figuring out shortcuts."

And they're off, sprinting away into the darkness, moving at more than 50 km/h (31 m.p.h.) over the ice and snow, hooting and yelping like a pack of jackals nipping at the flanks of a wildebeest.

The race will cover more than 25 kilometres (15 miles). Dias will win for

THEY'RE OFF: Couriers wheel along in their sporting event of the year, the annual St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Winner for the second straight year was Joe Dias, right.



the second year in a row. But who's counting? At the finish line another stogie-sized joint is fired up and beers are cracked.

Fear looms on the bike courier's psychic horizon, a dark angel that must be kept at distant bay.

According to government statistics, there are about 4,000 bicycle crashes a year in Ontario. But you can't dwell on that. Instead, you must believe that death or maiming are not your karma, that you are not to be the one who shall be mowed down by a cab, T-boned by a van or strained through the grille of an oncoming truck.

You must believe that you are the charmed one, the one who will elude all dangers, the one who will find a way to deke out of every crisis.

If your psychological armor cracks, you start having nightmares about lunatic cabs and trucks with no brakes. And when that day comes, your days as a courier are numbered.

Brad Burgess, 23, has been thinking about that. He's been working as a courier for a year and a half. He dresses like a bicycle racer and looks fit and healthy, the kind of guy you'd see at the Golden Grain health food store buying a tub of natural-culture yogurt.

But within, a kernel of anger and fear has taken root.

"I'm kind of in the middle of denial and acceptance," says Burgess. "If you think about all the things that could happen, you won't be able to work. But let's face it: You can get killed."

Brad recently had two courier friends taken out when a cube van pulled out in front of them as they

tooled down Yonge St. They suffered painful but survivable injuries, saved by their sheer youth and rude animal health.

But it was a premonition, a sign of what could happen.

"It can get to you," says Burgess. "Man, the stuff that drivers do is just unbelievable! They make one stupid move and you get whacked! You know what they could do to save everyone a lot of trouble? They could use their turn signals! That's all they'd have to do — lift their finger and put on the signal! But they can't even do that. It's too much trouble for them!"

"People do something that's their fault, then they get out and start screaming at you. ... It can really blow your mind. I've lost it sometimes. I've yelled at people and not even realized what I was saying. I've learned what temporary insanity really means. I can relate to people who plead that."

A courier must be in a constant state of high-tuned awareness, keen to a thousand dangers and their subtle clues — the slight movement of a driver's head that precedes an unsignalled turn, the textural changes that reveal a hidden ice patch, even the fat tires and hood scoops that tip off a testosterone-crazed street warrior.

And then there is the constant surveillance of parked cars, watching for a door opening — the courier equivalent of the anti-personnel mine. Once you've hit one at 30 km/h (18 m.p.h.) or so you'll never feel the same again.

Lately, Burgess keeps having this fantasy: He has torn off a car door with his bare hands. He holds it up like a shield, and car drivers are fired into it, like human cannonballs, one after the other.

"You start thinking stuff like that," says Burgess, "well, it's not a healthy sign."

The late 1980s were a golden age for bicycle couriers. Business was booming, and fax machines still cost a fortune. Then, a top rider could earn as much as \$1,000 a week, and plenty were pulling in \$700. Now they're lucky to make \$350.

"It's a dying way of life," says one rider. "You work and you work and you don't make a damn thing. In the old days business people would pay \$80 just to get something across town in an hour. Cost was no object. Now, they just say to hell with it, tomorrow's soon enough."

"We're like the pony express. Some day there won't be any more of us. We'll just be a memory. So the way I look at it, I'm going to enjoy it while I can."

ROAD WARRIORS: Courier takes a cigarette break on delivery, far left. "I bet 90 per cent of the riders smoke," says one. "Maybe it's the stress." Couriers gather at a special hangout, left.



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