

### **Eighteen Years on a Bike**

The faded lines on the pavement blur together, and I revel in the wind while I coast.

Having just reached breakneck speed on my tuned up, sexy Trek Dual Sport, I glance up for a moment only to be barraged with melancholy. I am on Dykstra Road heading west. The route and points of interest haven't changed significantly over the years. There was a bike path thrown in at some point, the aftermath of felled trees and strewn shingles picked up after seasonal storms, houses repainted to compete with the neighbors, and lawns sprinkled through the dry summers with the same rationale. There was the Catholic church's weathered sign that read "Pray for Father Bob" for a time, and then eventually "Praise God, he's home!" My home turf never quite experienced the urban sprawl and development that seems common in stories of small-town boys growing up. In fact, ask me what has changed and I will tell you that nothing has, except the lenses through which I've viewed it all. Each lens was dependent on the relationships I had, or those I had eventually lost. My lenses shifted focus as my interests morphed with time, as did my philosophies and motives. Therefore, my perception of what I observe is never quite the same for each little bicycling journey I take through the town of Muskegon. The only personal experience that *does* feel constant is the input/output flow of my energy and the forward motion of my tires.

I begin to brake as I near the intersection of Horton Road, and I reflect on my childhood. I'm at once alarmed that I can not recall everything that took place during those seasons of life. The snapshots of my youth, of my coming of age, are archived somewhere in my head, only to surface briefly when I witness something familiar but forgotten. My rides serve as catalysts for remembering. Most of the memories have faded like these mustard-yellow lines below me that hypnotize as I pedal on. I ponder why I remember what I do. What sort of reasoning gives my brain the latitude to write over the moments I'd like to keep? Yet even in the uncertainties of my mind and my past, I know one thing: I rode my bike through it all.

Past the intersection lies the driveway to the the modest house I've lived in my entire life. It deserves honorable mention, being conveniently located in the comfort zone of suburbia with just the right splash of frontier for a curious child to explore. It offered me physical protection as well. Its benefits end there. Perhaps this is just one of my latest lenses narrating, but my philosophy is that skin and bones are rentals, and sentimentality is the poison that blinds you to life's real gifts. I, at one point, let the constrictions of my house limit me. You'll never know a world view when the TV is flipped on, spewing its unobjective and illusory nonsense. It's easy to get sucked in. I think if you're human, you probably have at one point or another. Four walls can separate you from your potential. This is why my home is mobile and completely exposed to the elements. It gives me solace when all else can not, and the only pre-requisite to a rewarding experience is setting it to seventh gear.

I zoom past the Fenner Glen sign. When I was nine, I packed a picnic with my friend Cameron and my older brother Forrest. We ate at the sign. Cameron was athletic and brave. I envied him when he'd perform jumps over the sign on his gutsy BMX bike that had the pegs

and everything. I'd glance over abashedly between bites of sandwich at my unworthy Schwinn. Days like this were replicated summer after summer until Forrest got into high school and locked himself in his room for four years. I started coming in second place by default. He would say he was swamped with homework when we'd beg, but I'd barge my way into the stale room and he'd have this glazed look over his eyes, staring up at the ceiling. I silently wondered what sort of hells high school entailed. I knew his situation was what caused my parents to fight more frequently, so I naturally avoided the situation in the best way I knew how. Unfortunately, I couldn't ride with Cameron anymore because he had moved away after his parents' divorce. I attended parochial school across Muskegon Lake in Roosevelt Park, and none of my school friends lived close by. As far as forming new relationships in my neighborhood went, I felt too embarrassed of the fact that I, for no good reason, attended a school outside of the Reeths-Puffer district. I did not want to explain the complexity of my situation, so I remained reclusive in North Muskegon for a long time. At twelve, I had spent most of my free time in Norton Shores, where my two best friends from school, Wes and Tommy, lived. Wes had recently moved out of a trailer park into a two-story house with a forest in the back that afforded us an excess of opportunities for imaginative adventure. During the summers, I would take the Lakeshore Bike Trail regularly, speeding my way through the Nature Preserve, over the causeway, past the B.C. Cobb plant, into Heritage Landing, down McCracken Street (across from the candy emporium), eventually to Lake Harbor Road where I would turn onto Forest Park Drive and see Wes through his window feeding his turtles or playing with legos. I had great freedom then. I would make the journey back in the evening, an hour before sunset, and arrive at home tired and satisfied having successfully avoided another day of confrontation with the metastasizing struggles at home.

When I was thirteen, we'd taken up the ritual of riding to Pere Marquette or Lake Harbor Park to fish and swim. We'd hop off our bikes (I was now sporting my uncle's old Trek mountain bike. Its pedals had a tendency to fall off) and take a hike into the nearby woods. Soon we came upon what we would deem our own private swimming area. We'd stay late in the day, skinny-dipping during a red flag or traversing nearby dunes. By the next year we had added two friends to our group, James and Neil. It was now a motley brotherhood of imbalanced hormones. We lit many fires in Tommy's backyard behind the shed. We'd come back in for dinner, and his mother would ask, "Were you lighting fires? I don't want you lighting fires." "No," Tommy would murmur as the stench of char wafted through the room—the box of waterproof military matches displayed plainly in ashen hands. She'd rebuke us, but we never got in any real trouble. After filling our tires with the free air at the gas station, we'd head to Lake Harbor Park. We caught multitudes of gobies each time and put them in piles, feeling proud that we were carrying out our civic duty in destroying a strain of Great Lakes invasive species. We all decided we wanted to be DNR officers around that time as well. Once we felt we had caught an ample supply, we would begin the "Goby Wars." What started in a harmless fashion comparable to the commencement of a food fight, escalated into a grand battle of chucking the dead fish at one another in rapid fire, eventually forcing someone from the group down onto the dock and bashing him repeatedly across the face with the fish. Soon we were windmill-throwing the tormented fish at the windshields of cars driving across the overtop bridge.

At fifteen, we all decided to take up skateboarding. On one particular ride, I overestimated my invincibility and took on a hill far too treacherous for the likes of me. I got the speed wobbles and flew off of my board just in time for a Chevy Colorado to rear around the corner. By fate, or by God, I was flung like a ragdoll to the right, dodging the truck, but landing and rolling on the guardrail until flopping off and skidding on the pavement. I stood up with my tailbone on fire, my hands shaking, and my body covered in blood and road rash. My only concern in the moment was that if this information was leaked and my mother discovered I almost got killed... she would probably kill me. I hobbled slowly back to Neil's house. There, I gauzed myself, took too much pain medicine, and made Neil's parents promise not to tell my parents. The morning after, I couldn't move my limbs without moaning.

At the end of that summer, we would all be entering high school, which meant that we would be separated for good. Tommy, Wes, and Neil, the way I saw it, were getting the better end of the deal. They got to go with the rest of our small class to Mona Shores, and I had to face my self-created fear and attend school alone at Reeths-Puffer. James had moved beforehand, being one year ahead of us, to the North Muskegon school district after his mother married Darren. Initially, I was thrilled to have one of my best friends with me on my side of town, across from Family Video. I fantasized about the different opportunities we now had on the north side. For a short while, it played the way I expected. I purchased the Trek Dual Sport the summer after eighth grade, and I would ride up Witham Drive, meet him at Wesco to grab snacks, and then continue onto Lake Avenue, past the good ol' Nature Preserve, and out to fish under the causeway bridge. I spent the night at his new house once. Something struck me odd about the environment, particularly Darren. I would try to make plans with James in the forthcoming years to no avail. Each time I'd call, Darren would pick up and grumble drunkenly that James couldn't come, or that I couldn't come. I then let the relationship die out in the same fashion I had with Cameron, and I predicted the same outcome when I would separate from Tommy and Wes for school in the fall.

The ride of my life took place one month before the first day of high school. At the time, we had regulated Forrest's medication to an extent and his paranoia was fairly subdued, so I had started inviting Tommy and Wes to my house. After fixing up their bikes, I took us on a trip that signified the beginning of our journey to adulthood. We turned onto Horton Road off of Gaylord, and Tommy, in his typical childhood-resemblant absentmindedness, peddled across, reaching the bike path just before getting slammed by the oncoming traffic. A plethora of honks greeted him. We continued south and then turned east onto Fenner Road. We traversed the hills of the backwoods, gazing upon the trees that had barely begun to prepare for autumn with redness.

Nearing Ruth Ann's Ice Cream, where I had worked for multiple summers, and the Campground, we turned left and headed south again, making our way up the hill to the Blockhouse. Soon we were out at the beach, hiding our bikes in the tall dune grass. We stood briefly in silence, looking out at our Lake Michigan, her waves returning to the sky its pink and orange vibrance in a pulsating gesture. We then talked. I don't remember what we said.

With the setting sun in mind, we headed out, taking an alternate route home on Memorial Drive past Snug Harbor, where we had filmed our deranged home movies. I directed us left onto the bumpy Green Creek Road, eventually merging us back onto Fenner. I saw us right then in slow motion. Our laughing faces became silhouettes. In cutting out the last remaining light, the treetops had obscured our features. Yet we didn't need the visual to understand our feelings at that moment. The final signs of day faded entirely, like my memory of our childhood friendship does each year. Now, I lose even some of the details of that moment that epitomized what I wanted in my life. There were shots like gunfire that broke my trance, and the sky caught on fire, glowing red, white, and blue with the fireworks of July. Their youthful faces were illuminated so richly with color in front of me, and my lens focused. In that moment, regardless of our phase or the decade or the school or my perspective, I knew *exactly* who we were.

High school came, and freshman year proved to be the ultimate challenge, entering without a single companion, which was partially my own fault. I isolated myself, refused to move on, and hermitized my evenings away. I didn't want to see how the friends who had abandoned me had prospered. However, time did what time does, just like it did for Father Bob, and it healed in its own genuine way. I made a new family and fell in love with my high school. I began reconnecting with Tommy and Wes the following summer. I saw James for the first time in four years at his graduation open house. More importantly, I took a step to further embrace and appreciate (instead of avoid and fret over) my brother diagnosed with schizophrenia and accept the changes in our relationship, recognizing that the battles he fights now make him a braver inspiration than before. I have finally prioritized my relationships in a way that leaves me without regrets as I ride and recollect.

Now we ride in cars. I often feel desensitized in a car, trapped inside, victim to its autonomy. But sometimes, when the moon is out, I find myself in a car with my boys driving God-knows-where. I take the city lights in, then the amber waves of grain, and neither feel right when I stay too long. So we drive on. It has become a compulsory ritual to flip on the 95.3 Midnight Jazz station if we are driving after 7:00. We tune in. The saxophone pours its melody like an astronaut intimidated by the roaring of the rising rocket, sweating profusely as he enters the thermosphere. It grows more ecstatic and frantic. The licks seem aimless and disjointed.

Suddenly, the cymbals make one dignified crash, and all goes quiet. He is now in space. The movement then starts over— this time, humbled by what is unknown. The Hammond replaces the saxophone with its mellow swirl. It drones softly as we remember everything again, perfectly, in that moment. We are slinging gobies. We are testing Mother Nature. We are bleeding and healing. We are on bikes.