

“Piper’s Mountain”
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Twenty years later, I finally put road slicks on the old Trek. It’s Thanksgiving morning, when I have a couple hours with no grading, no planning, no email, no texts, no Facebook status updates, and no reason to get dressed in anything but my threadbare Bowdoin College sweatshirt.

I can’t come up with a reason to shave. I do brush my teeth.

I’m pretty meticulous about the whole process – the road slicks, not the tooth brushing. I figure it’s because I woke one day and had a twenty-year-old bike that still rode pretty well, and decided that rather than invest in a new one, I’d keep this one upright as long as possible. That seems important.

The slicks are an expensive gag gift from Sandy, my wife. She listened to me bitch all summer about riding another year on knobby, off-road, high-friction tires.

‘Middle aged guys ought to have smooth bicycle tires,’ she explains. There are about eleven different meanings in that one jab, each more insulting or disgusting than the last. So I take her at face value, and gripe about my tires until she buys me a nice set. I’ll toss Sandy’s insult to my AP Lit students on Monday; they’ll love it.

The tires are nice.

And I’m going to be fast. Well, faster anyway.

Sandy says I’m nuts, putting the tires on now, with only a couple good weeks left before black ice and slippery snow bring another cycling year to a chilly close. Then it’s four months of slogging along on a stationary bike, tantric masturbation, or humping up the Stairmaster as if I’m headed for the Continental Divide in shorts and a Washington Redskins t-shirt. I used to ride all winter, but that was twenty-five years ago.

Ten years here, ten years there; eventually they add up.

I adjust the rear brakes. My son, Danny, watches. He calls it “helping.” I don’t mind. With our schedules only intersecting a few times a week, like loopy parabolas I see graphed in math class at school, I’m happy to have him hold up the garage wall, leaning there with his hands in his pockets. We don’t say much, but that’s okay. Just being together is more than we get most days.

He’s fifteen.

I’m forty-five. Well, forty-four and three-hundred-twenty-seven, three-hundred-sixty-fifths.

But who’s counting?

‘You riding today?’ Danny asks.

‘Just around.’ I don’t look up from my work, have to get the brakes just right. With twenty extra pounds over my belt, I can’t have enough stopping power. ‘I’ll ride long tomorrow.’

‘After gorging yourself this afternoon?’ He smiles.

I would sack Troy, by myself, for that quick-draw, carefree smile. ‘Yup,’ I say, ‘the way I’ve got it figured, if I ingest fifty-six-hundred calories of starch, fat, and alcohol today, I can burn it all off tomorrow, providing I ride from here to . . . Saskatchewan.’

‘Nice,’ he says. ‘Maybe I’ll come with you.’

‘5:00 a.m.’

‘Or not.’

‘What?’ I spin the front tire, test the brakes, and repeat with the rear. They grip nicely. ‘It’s the best time to ride: no traffic, no noise and haste, no vicious sun.’

‘Dad, it’s November.’ He doesn’t move from his place against the stained drywall. ‘It’ll be thirty-five degrees tomorrow morning.’

‘Perfect.’

I sneak a loop of the neighborhood, just to test out the slicks. They’re wonderful, almost smooth and agile enough to make me overlook the fact that I used to be able to ride this fast, in this gear, with heavy wide tires. Tough guy tires. Young tires.

I’ve lost a step or two.

But the tires feel good. I’ve got plenty of rear brake, and I look forward to tomorrow and my annual ride over Piper’s Mountain, a Thanksgiving tradition.

One of mine anyway.

I rack the bike, head for the couch, shove my son a few inches to the left, my daughter a few inches to the right, and plop down between them to watch as Tech trounces State or Burgundy battles Forest Green. I couldn’t care less.

Exactly three minutes and eleven seconds later, Sandy calls from the kitchen. She needs help.

I whine, but heft myself up and go. What the hell, it was a pretty good three minutes and eleven seconds.

We eat like paroled convicts at a Vegas buffet. Sandy mentions something about being thankful, but the kids ignore her and reach for seconds and thirds of sweet potatoes that look like a pumpkin mob hit.

After dinner and dishes, I ask if anyone wants to ride with me tomorrow. This, like the ride itself, is a Thanksgiving tradition. I honestly believe my family would be disappointed if I didn’t invite them. But again this year, they turn me down with a collective groaned vowel sound that could actually be “go to hell, Dad” in phonetic Neanderthal.

I make a mental note to Google it later, then settle in to see if the NAZIs might just shut those irritating von Trapp kids up this year. Christ, those guys were lousy shots. No wonder they lost the war. Thirty-nine singing Teutonic brats, dressed in floral-print drapes, and the entire Luftwaffe couldn’t hit them in a carpet bombing. I plunk a few notes of some forgotten Scarlatti etude on my old guitar and wait it out, figuring maybe later the Wicked Witch of the West will finally put an end to Dorothy Gale.

Lather. Rinse. Repeat. I’ve seen these films too many times and wonder if eighty and ninety year-olds, trapped in some retirement home are huddled around the television set, worried that the von Trapps might not reach Switzerland.

Piper’s Mountain runs uphill for six disagreeable miles. Twelve miles west of town, it rises above the Virginia countryside, as if one of the Shenandoahs got stung by a bee and swelled.

Switchback, plateau, switchback, plateau, succumb, weep, vomit.

I hate this motherscratching hill.

For twenty years I’ve been riding up and down Piper’s Mountain on my Trek 930. It’s not a fancy bike, or too expensive, but then Piper’s isn’t an especially fancy mountain. Some weeks, I get out this way twice. Others, it’s just once. For a while, I was down to only one or two long rides a month, but those were low times. And low times tend to pass.

This morning, I cover the twelve miles of gentle rolls quicker than I can remember. It’s the new tires. Slicks. They even have a fast name.

I’m on the big ring and cruising. My legs feel good. My back and shoulder feel good. My ankle’s been quiet, and my neck’s loose. Granted, I have a padded seat, a padded seat cover over that, a contoured chamois in my bike leotard (beneath Bowdoin College shorts, of course; some fashion atrocities should be illegal, even here in the South), and sometimes, not today, I add a Maxi-

Pad from a secret stash I keep in my bathroom vanity. I often wonder if *Tour de France* riders employ this same strategy when chafed. I bet they do.

I glance at my watch; I’m making good time. Rolling.

With ear buds in, I press PLAY on my MP3 player. Years back, I’d ride with a cassette player, a bulky, plastic juggernaut with the same mixed-tape on auto-reverse until it finally wore out. Now I download books from the public library, and biking time becomes reading time. My daughter laughs at me. She’s got eighty-jillion songs on an iPod, iPad, iTouch, iPhone, I . . . can’t keep them all straight, and tries to get me connected to the new Millennium.

Nope. Can’t do it.

Hooking up to the computer and downloading recorded books was a big step for me. I figure I won’t take another technological risk for five years.

This morning, I listen to *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*, by Mark Twain. No one knows it. No one reads it. It’s funny and tragic and engaging and insightful all at the same time. If I ever run into Mark Twain, I hope I’ll have something witty to say, and then I’ll ask if this book was actually his secret favorite.

It’s chilly this morning, not wintry or cold, but brisk, motivating, the temperature of great starts and good intentions. Humid clouds of wayward fog tumble here and there as if lost after a Thanksgiving party. Piper’s Mountain, just a couple miles ahead, remains bundled in gray-white billows, harboring secrets and waiting for me.

I cruise the last mile, start climbing. . . and downshift after only a hundred yards.

Yup, I’ve lost a step. I don’t regret the wine or the pie or the ice cream or the mashed potatoes or the homemade bread or the beer or the whacked sweet potatoes, not yet. But I will. After another half mile, another gear down, I tally the rusty, bent, broken, or taped-together bits:

Ankle. 1982. Football.

Neck. 1985. Football.

Shoulder. 1986. Baseball.

Left elbow. 1989. *Löwenbräu Haus, München*. Oops.

Right knee. 1994. Running in Atlanta.

Left knee. 1996. Bike crash in Virginia Beach.

Lower back. 2003. New York Marathon.

It takes a while – thanks to my hedonistic overindulgence yesterday – but I find a rhythm, settle on a gear, two higher than I’ve ever managed with off-road tires, and wait for my lungs and legs to agree on a pace. A mile up, my body finds a steady breathe-pedal-breathe-pedal-breathe-pedal motion that ought to get me over the hill and back without an unanticipated stop for vascular surgery.

A car passes, moving west. Out-of-focus reflections of half-naked hardwoods make it impossible to see the driver clearly. She is young, Asian, I think, and pretty. I smile, nod, and keep pedaling. She doesn’t wave back; maybe she struggles with commitment. Regardless, my thoughts drift to the pretty ones:

Rita Hayworth. 1942. *You Were Never Lovelier*.

Ursula Andress. 1963. *Four for Texas*.

Candice Bergen. 1975. *Bite the Bullet*.

Marlee Matlin. 1986. *Children of a Lesser God*.

Diane Lane. 1999. *A Walk on the Moon*.

Diane Lane. 2002. *Unfaithful*. Yeah, she gets two.

Halle Berry . . . in anything.

I think about Sandy. Twenty years down the road, we still enjoy sex together. Granted, it doesn’t happen as often as it did when we were kids, but it’s still worth the price of admission. She

remains the first woman who comes to mind when I get to thinking about an oil change. *Every three-thousand miles!* I don’t know if that’s just because she’s still the woman who gets into bed beside me each night. That helps; I admit. And since Halle Berry isn’t around, I suppose being horny for my wife is a healthy step in the right direction. I wonder if she still finds me attractive, twenty years and as many pounds from our wedding night, or if our periodic conjugal visits are just maintenance.

I’ll ask her.

No, actually, I won’t.

I look over my shoulder, back along Route 27. The rising sun, still invisible somewhere over the Atlantic, whitens the morning fog. Shades of gray war with smeary greens, golds and browns in an ephemeral battle to color the morning. For a moment neither side gains any ground, and I am trapped in an acrylic painting I watched an artist complete in twenty minutes on PBS. It isn’t beautiful here. Ansel Adams wouldn’t photograph it. Poets don’t write about it. For a few seconds, nothing moves. Only my sloppy breaths crowd the silence, and time slows, granting me fleeting peace on my inexorable climb.

The kid materializes from a chubby wisp of fog. Pedaling hard, he climbs the last switchback, turns the lazy corner, and catches up with me easily.

‘Good morning,’ I say over Mark Twain in my ears.

He glances at me, nods once, then lowers his head, leaving me behind.

I pedal harder, not willing to have my ass kicked so thoroughly by a kid who can’t be bothered to say, ‘good morning.’ He’s on a road bike, a nice one, with the clip-in shoes and the gaudy, day-glow jersey that looks like something Salvador Dali barfed after eating from the kids’ menu at IHOP.

But I can’t catch him. Like me, he’s on the big sprocket, but he’s in a gear I haven’t used uphill since the Clinton administration. I make a good show of it, chasing along behind, standing on the pedals, breathing in my nose, out my mouth, but I’m screwed.

He disappears around the next turn, but not before I notice the white bear stitched into the thigh of his riding shorts.

I pursue him for the next half mile, coveting the idea that I might gain even a few yards, then give up. No one’s watching. It takes a few minutes for my heart and lungs to forgive me. They slowly return to normal, venting their anger as deep, thudding pain in my thighs, hamstrings, and lower back. Now I do regret the potatoes, the beer, the homemade bread, and am glad Halle Berry isn’t around, just in case I decide to pull over and hurl into the sumac.

At the next turn, I’m surprised to find the kid off his bike, waiting for me. He drinks from an ergonomically-grippable Gatorade bottle as he checks text messages on his cell phone. I consider riding on, blowing by him like Lance Armstrong in the Alps, but I could use the break and silently thank the kid for giving me an excuse to stop.

I quiet Mr. Twain and fight to suppress the wheeze in my voice, ‘Hey.’ It’s all I can manage without panting.

‘Nice morning for it, huh?’

‘Yeah. Nice bike. All carbon?’

He considers it. ‘Sure. It’s a rental, some place down by the college.’

I step off, prop my bike on a nearby hickory. It buys me fifteen seconds to catch my breath. I make small talk, ‘not too chilly.’

‘I could do without this fog, though.’ He gestures towards all of northwest Virginia. ‘Guys in town told me there was a decent view from up top.’

‘Probably not today.’ North of us, the piedmont folds and wrinkles its way toward Harpers Ferry. A farmhouse sits quietly at the far end of a field bursting with dry corn stalks. Cow corn. Nothing says *autumn in Virginia* as adamantly as cow corn.

‘You from around here?’ The kid fires another blast of Gatorade down his throat, holding the bottle a few inches from his mouth, like LeBron James.

‘Winchester,’ I say. ‘You?’

‘Denver.’ He is perhaps twenty five, big through the shoulders and arms, with a narrow waist. It’s a body I might have possessed, without appreciating it, two-and-a-half decades earlier. Now, I couldn’t buy his figure for all the money in my 403b.

I say, ‘Colorado, huh? You in for the holiday?’

He shakes his head, replaces the bottle in its carrier. ‘I’m playing tomorrow night at the college.’

‘Music? You in a band?’ I notice his fingernails: long on one hand, short on the other.

‘Guitar.’ He flutters his fingers; in my mind I hear a soundtrack for Clint Eastwood.

‘Really? Jazz? Blues? What’s on the program?’

‘I’m a classical player,’ he waggles his fingers again. ‘I played last year in Europe, got lucky with a grant. These days I’m fine tuning some new pieces for a trip to Africa.’

‘Holy shit,’ I say. I can’t help it. ‘Like flamenco stuff? Music to kill bulls by?’

His brow furrows. ‘Um, more like Mozart and Granados. Music to bore people to sleep.’

‘Africa? No kidding?’

‘No,’ he pretends embarrassment, but sheer, unchecked enthusiasm comes off him in heady waves. ‘I’m pretty pumped about it. I mean . . . it won’t be fun to leave my girlfriend here for four months, but I don’t want to miss this chance. Merrill Lynch is funding the whole shootin’ match.’

‘Wow,’ I say and feel like a dumbass. ‘Can’t she go with you?’

‘Maybe for part of the time,’ he says. ‘But I tend to close up a bit when I have to play that much. You know?’

‘I can imagine,’ I say, then shrug. ‘But don’t worry. If she’s the right one, she’ll be here when you get back.’

‘I worry.’

‘You shouldn’t.’

‘Hey,’ he says as an afterthought. ‘What do you do?’

‘I’m an English teacher.’ There’s no way to make it sound romantic or exciting.

‘Oh . . . nice . . . um, like Proust and Shakespeare?’

Good try, kid.

‘No, more like Twain and Steinbeck. Toni Morrison. A little closer to home.’

‘Don’t ask me nothin’ – then I won’t have to tell no lies.’ He reaches his arms out wide, like a kid. He’s got enviable arms.

‘Huck Finn,’ I say. ‘Good one.’

‘There’s a lot of reading time on tour. I read it in France last year, for the second time.’

‘So did I . . . for the eighth, but not in France.’

‘Yeah. I try to do something educational most days. It’d be easy just to lie around, drink too much, watch TV. You know.’

‘Keep reading,’ I say, then run out of gas. Sagacious wisdom invariably escapes me. I’m Teflon coated when it comes to wisdom.

A thick, clumsy silence finds us there, halfway up Piper’s Mountain. My chin strap drips sweat onto my chest. I unfasten it, pull the helmet off and imagine tendrils of steam rising from my pink scalp. Embarrassed again, I want to ask about the polar bear on his shorts but don’t.

Eventually, I say, ‘what time are you playing?’

Again, he beams. ‘7:30. Sheridan Hall.’

‘I’ll come.’

‘Bring your entire family, extended family,’ he says. ‘If you get there by 7:25, you’re almost guaranteed seats right up front.’

I laugh and wipe moisture from my face. It’s been the dark side of a decade, almost two, since I’ve been as optimistic about anything as this kid is about Mozart. ‘I’ll bring my wife. You play some Springsteen, and she might just throw her bra on stage.’

‘I’ll work on a transcription today.’ He reaches for the Gatorade, gulps another swallow, then fastens his chin strap. Time to ride. ‘What’s on the other side?’

I nod west, up Route 27. ‘Not much. Clarence’s Café has decent coffee. Chicory stuff, like New Orleans. It’s worth the effort getting over. Otherwise, nothing.’

‘I’ll race you,’ he grins. ‘Loser buys.’

I raise both hands in surrender. ‘I’ll tell you what . . . when you get there, you pour. I’ll buy. I won’t be too far behind.’

‘What? You’re doing fine . . . for a guy your age.’

‘Careful. I’m forty four and three-hundred-twenty-eight, three-hundred-sixty-fifths. I’m thinking that fraction can be reduced, but it’s early yet for math.’

He laughs out loud, then reaches a hand to me. ‘I’m Steven Taylor. And, come to think of it, I’ve got a birthday coming up in a couple months as well: twenty-five, a quarter century.’

I take a deep, slow breath, hide it behind an awkward moment as I wipe my palm on my shorts. We shake hands. ‘My friends call me Doc.’

‘Nice to meet you, Doc.’ He clips one riding shoe onto its pedal. ‘I pour; you buy?’

I nod. ‘You pour; I’ll buy.’

‘How do you take it?’

‘Splash of cream, one sugar.’

‘Huh. Me too.’ He pedals away. I take a moment to stretch my back, then start after him. It’s not long, however, before he’s lost from view. I don’t restart Mark Twain. I’ll listen more on the way home. The last two miles up Piper’s Mountain pass in numb silence. I troll through memories, wondering when it was that I found this niche, my brightly-polished, smoothly-worn mediocrity. When was it? When had I last felt a wellspring of unexpected, unchecked enthusiasm? Fifteen years ago? Changing Danny’s first diaper that morning at Rose Medical Center in Denver? Was that it?

Fifteen years. It’s a long time.

The view from Piper’s Mountain is impressive. On a clear day, I can see Harper’s Ferry and the confused junction of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers. But not this morning. There’s a Diet Coke can, a broken beer bottle, two bickering squirrels, and an impenetrable bank of chilly fog, brightened to Confederate gray by the coming morning. It’ll be the color of vanilla ice cream by the time I ride home. That’s a heartening thought.

Off to my right, a clutch of evergreens grows together like a patch of unshaven whiskers. I imagine myself riding across northern Maine, with fifty million similar trees, all clones, lined up and waiting for orders to lay waste to Boston. Or through South Dakota, where beige, purple, orange, yellow, and green melt together so tragically that it hurts my eyes. Or along the Florida Keys, with humid air stuck to my skin like paste and the smell of salt and fishy decay hovering over aquamarine perfection. Photographs and paintings can’t get them right. I should go, take Sandy, the kids, my old bike, and go.

But I won’t.

Maybe Steven Taylor will, on some concert tour, riding a rental bike and losing sense of himself after only a few miles.

Another heartening thought. Two in less than a mile. Not bad.

I miss Sandy, want to turn around. But that’s silly.

At Clarence’s, there’s no sign of the kid’s bike. I’m not surprised.

Keep reading. Is that the best you could do? The most you could offer this morning? Keep reading? Dumbass.

The car that passed me earlier is parked beside the wraparound wooden porch. I lean my Trek against the wooden railing, check the pressure in my slicks, and head inside. The café smells of woodsmoke and autumn, coffee and fried bacon. A little bell, suspended above the door, dings when I enter, announcing to anyone in the back office that I’ve arrived.

A young Asian girl, the driver, emerges. She’s wiping her hands on an apron. I know her, have seen her here before, had her in class a few years back. But I can’t recall her name.

‘Good morning, Doctor Taylor,’ she says, and gestures to a cup of coffee on the counter beside the register. ‘You make it over the hill all right?’

‘Yes, thanks,’ I lean on the Formica. ‘Did . . . he . . . leave this for me?’

‘The coffee?’ She organizes cinnamon rolls beneath a clear plastic cover. Each one looks like fifteen minutes of uncontaminated happiness.

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘The guy . . . on the bike . . . did he . . .’

‘Um . . . nope,’ she says. ‘I poured that for you, saw you coming down 27, figured it was you. You’re the only one riding over this hill at 6:00 on a holiday. Cream and one sugar, right?’

I nod. ‘Thanks.’

When I unzip my windbreaker, the girl notices my sweatshirt. ‘Doctor Taylor, did you go to Bowdoin? My cousin goes there.’

‘Sure did,’ I sip the coffee; it burns my lip. ‘The Polar Bears, class of 1704.’

‘C’mon, Doc,’ she finishes stacking cinnamon buns. I want one. ‘You’re not that old.’

Kelly! That’s it: Kelly Hahn Min or Min Hahn or something like that.

‘You’re right, Kelly. I’m not. Thanks for the coffee.’

‘No problem,’ she wipes the already clean counter with a paper towel. The smell of bleach threatens to derail the aroma of chicory and artery-clogging breakfast. ‘I remember you drinking it in class all the time, and when I saw you coming down the hill, I just figured . . . well, like that guy, whatshisname, you’re known around here, Doc.’

‘Who?’

‘You know . . . from that book . . . dough head, flour head . . .’

‘Pudd’nhead.’

‘That’s it!’ she stops cleaning long enough to slap a hand on the Formica. ‘Pudd’nhead Wilson!’

I sip again. It’s good. ‘Thanks Kelly.’

‘Have a nice ride home, Doctor Taylor.’

‘I will.’