

## I Need A Bike

On looking into the freezer I took notice of the dream, my dream, mind you, not everyone's dream, not the dream of the up-and-coming acoustic-guitar-toting musician or the rising-star-playing-quarterback for his college team, but the dream of the breed of young adult boy who rarely works towards improving the state of his physical body, not because he needs to, he is in fine shape, but rather for aesthetic purposes. Although, stacked above the dream is something nearly as good, something comparably like the few seconds before sleep when you're too tired to worry but so awake so that you realize you're not yet dreaming, something nearly perfect, but not so, as the dream is within perfect grasp, so you push this feeling to the side, push it away, let it slide, remove it, get rid of it, who needs it, not me, I don't, why should I? Then there, underneath the frozen cupcakes, lies the dream, unopened, unchristened, alone, unbroken, the box of virgin ice cream sandwiches, perfectly refreshing in the scorching heat of the blazing sun, the desert that has become the back porch, no oasis in one's sight until one's sight reaches the freezer.

I have been working all day much like the children of laborious sweatshops popular in 1860's industrial America, when children were finally learning to get off the farm and off the cow's teat to learn how to properly operate machines and sew seams for ten hour a day, seven days a week. The deck needs a new coat of shiny pearl paint to make it glisten like new, and like it hasn't been sitting outside enduring the elements for fourteen years. The deck had been finished the day that I was born, perhaps giving me this special connection, this union, something that makes me and the deck an entity, we

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are like souls. Soulmates, maybe. For fourteen years it's stood up to life and so have I but no one painted me, no one gave me a new coat and covered me with a layer of clear shellac to protect me from the rain. Here we are though, me and the deck, the deck and I, a boy and his deck, man and man's best outdoor house-attached structure, living like we should be. If I finish this I'll get money, enough money to buy something special. Something good. Enough money for my own bike.

This was how the deal went; if I could finish repairing and reconstituting this deck by the time of my sister's to-be-engaged party, my parents would buy me a Speedliner X-720 Mountain Rider, complete with 12 speeds, front and rear wheel breaks, racing stripes and a bitching amount of pride. With a bike like that I could blow past Marty Schleinbaum and his pathetic Ollie Rex 600 Street Speeder, I'd leave him in my dust, eating my shorts, and crumpling into an insignificant fetally-positioned ball of wet tears and wet pants. With a bike like that I could leave home at sunrise and see the entire town, speeding past the Luminary Church and the Chester E. Johnson High School and leaving SuperMart after SuperMart behind, only to return home before the sun set, maybe with enough time to watch the sky go from blue to orange to pink to purple yellow to various shades of dark blue and black before triumphantly returning inside to get a champion's meal from my mother.

Leslie's here.

"Craig, let's go do something, I'm beyond bored. Ha!"

Leslie was six feet lanky, covered in acne, and she chewed with her mouth open. Every time Leslie yelled Ha she'd jab her hand, molded into shiv form, straight under my ribs and into my stomach, pushing my diaphragm into my lungs and nearly bursting my

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bladder. I hated it when Leslie yelled Ha. Sometimes when I saw her face contorting into a Ha I'd run and I'd jump, swivel, slide, and dance in all directions in no directions with no real movement at once. She never knew what hit her, but she wouldn't hit me. She wouldn't catch me again today, not me, I'm too fast, too dashing, too suave, too sleek for her. I'd have to watch her face.

"I don't want to do anything. I need to finish the deck."

"Give me an ice cream sandwich."

"No."

"C'mon, punk!"

"No."

"Ha!" With a contorted face.

She got me again, she got me good. I took a second to pull in as much oxygen as I could, while trying to not breathe in any nitrogen or argon (I don't think it worked). She would not be satisfied. I'd have to go with her somewhere.

"Let's go to Gerrard Park. We can throw rocks at the ducks."

"Fine. First you have to give me an ice cream sandwich."

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Gerrard Park was your standard middle-of-the-town, surrounded-by-white-picket-fenced-houses, suburban park, complete with a pond the size of a lake, one bald, elderly man per bench, and a playground which always had screaming children and overprotective mothers carrying boxes of band-aids, regardless of what time of the

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morning or afternoon it was. What always got me was how none of these mothers had jobs, they were always here. I'd watch their kids for them. That's something I'm good at, kids are like lab mice, if you set up a test for them to complete, they'll simply keep completing it without question as long as you give them a little chunk of cheese at the end.

Leslie picked up what we called a skip slider, a rock that was about half an inch tall and shaped like an oval. We called it a skip slider because these were the perfect rocks to use to hit ducks. These rocks would skip across the water, we were good at skipping rocks because we had so much practice, and if you threw them right, they'd slide across the top of the lake, ending in a fantastic quack from a duck that had just gotten blindsided with a rock. Anyways, Leslie picked up this rock, this skip slider, and she hurled it the way she can, side-armed and backwards, like she was throwing a Frisbee. It's all in the wrist, she always told me, and if it's all in the wrist, than her wrist must have been an Egyptian pharaoh with hoards of concubines, endless heavy wooden tables of feasts, and gold, gold, gold; her wrists had it all. The rock skipped and skimmed and slipped and slid until Wham! Quack! Bingo.

Now it was my turn. I scoured the shores for skip sliders and finally found a rock so brightly red I was convinced it was a broken piece of the Mars. When I was younger, I thought rocks like this were from the sun, but now I know the sun is just a massive ball of floating, burning gases. So it had to be Mars. I picked up this Martian skip slider and I wound up my arm tighter than a ballerina in a jewelry box and side-armed it with as much force as I could. The rock skimmed and slipped and slid and finally skipped so high

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it jumped over the duck and dove down into the water deep with a tremendous cannonball style. This was going to hurt.

“You couldn’t even hit the duck.”

“I just missed this one, alright? I didn’t want to slam that duck. I like that duck. I just wanted to scare him away so you wouldn’t peg him.”

“Sure, next thing you’re going to be missing the little girls with your spitballs or taking hard candy from some grandma. Softie.”

“I don’t have time for this; I have a deck to paint.” It was true, too. I did have a deck to paint, my deck, my wooden comrade, my soulmate, I could hear the deck calling to me, saying things like “Come be with me!” and, “You haven’t forgotten me, have you?” and begging for me to come home quick, to give it another quick coat of shellac, to care for it and broom the leaves away.

“Do you want to come to my mom’s for dinner?”

“Yea, sure.”

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Leslie’s mom was a pure knockout, to the fullest extent of the phrase. Leslie’s mom could make the president’s jaw drop, and while it was dropped she could walk up and take his wallet and no one would do a damn thing about it. Her mom could rob a bank, test make-up on animals, and persecute sinners based on her own religious convictions for years and the police would simply give her a slap on the wrist with a smile and a sigh. Leslie’s mom, though, was a terrible cook.

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Beef Stroganoff.

To any normal human or subhuman (orc, goblin, molemen of sorts), beef stroganoff consists of pasta topped with beef in brown gravy. Leslie's mom makes pasta drowned in brand name pesto with roast beef on the side, the pasta more like pebbles the beef more like leather straps. We ate in silence until her mother asked me about my summer.

"Hey Craig, how's your summer?"

"Busy."

"Busy with what?"

"Painting decks."

"Why are you painting the deck?"

"So I can get enough money for a Speedliner X-720 Mountain Rider, complete with 12 speeds, front and rear wheel breaks, racing stripes and a bitching amount of pride."

"Don't say bitching at the table, Craig."

"Sorry."

With that the conversation ended. Dinner was terrible, the conversation was terrible, and Leslie was acting terribly quiet. She didn't say a word. It was time to leave.

"Thanks for dinner, I've got to get home."

"I'll drive you."

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I got home when it was dark out, dark like a TV gets when you turn it off and leave it off with heavy eyes at four in the morning after watching a marathon of some show in black and white, where the humor doesn't make sense, or at least doesn't apply to everyday life. Before going in I stood outside to take in the rain, which was hard and uncaring. The rain was bitter, as bitter as that last bottom-of-the-pot cup of coffee from a gas station café. I got home and I felt sick. I got home and I passed out.

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The phone rang at a decibel somewhere between 125 and 135 decibels, the levels of a jackhammer and the ear's threshold for pain, respectively. My head ached; I always woke up this way. I wasn't a strong sleeper.

"Hello?"

"Craig, it's Leslie. We're leaving. I need you to come over now."

"Where are we going?"

"No, stupid, my mom and I are leaving. Dad showed up last night. We're going now. Listen, I have to pack, mom's screaming. Please come over."

I got up and I ran. I didn't brush my teeth, I didn't throw nice clothes on, I didn't tell my mom where I was going and I didn't stop for breakfast. I just ran. I cramped hard, but I ran. I ran as though I were an Olympic gold medalist in track, as though a mountain lion had come down from its lofty clouded mountains just to hunt me for sport, I ran like I would never see Leslie again. I ran at 190 steps per minute, the average step to minute ratio of the common professional runner. Her house wasn't far, I got there fast.

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Fast as her car was driving off. I couldn't see her, there was too much packed into the back of her mom's dusty eggshell station wagon. I couldn't see anyone in the mirrors. I couldn't see anything but a car that drove faster than I ran, faster than I could ever run. I just needed to say goodbye. If only I could stop them, if only I could catch them.

If only I had a Speedliner X-720 Mountain Rider, complete with 12 speeds, front and rear wheel breaks, racing stripes and a bitching amount of pride. Then they'd never get away. They did, though.