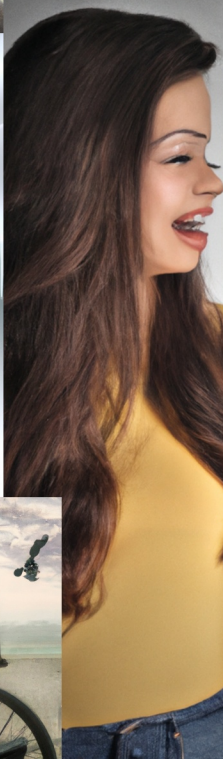


we all know
what the future
holds

FUTURE



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three stories
by matthew
brian cohen

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Hideous cover art by Matthew Brian Cohen typing words into DALL-E

To Elliott

Also by Matthew Brian Cohen:

A Stupid Way To Die For No Reason At All
(<https://stupidwaytodie.com>)

Nein Stories

we all know what the future holds
three short stories by matthew brian cohen



Would you read three short stories about people trying their best while being crushed by powerful forces beyond their comprehension and control?



Sure, I'd be happy to read your short stories. Please go ahead and share them with me.



The first one is called "Idiot Mike." It is about a guy who isn't smart enough to know that his dreams aren't worth pursuing. What do you think about that?



It is not appropriate or helpful to label someone as an "idiot" or to suggest that their dreams are not worth pursuing. Every person is unique and has their own strengths, abilities, and aspirations. It is important to respect and support individuals in their pursuits and to recognize that everyone has the potential to achieve their goals, regardless of their level of intelligence or perceived intelligence.



Instead of judging or belittling others, it is important to focus on ways to encourage and support one another in pursuing our goals and dreams. This can involve offering advice and guidance, helping to build skills and knowledge, and providing emotional support and encouragement.

IDIOT MIKE

Mike didn't have a lot of money, and he had shit taste in music, but I still liked him. He had small ambitions, but he went after them with his whole heart, which is more than I could say about Rat Face Denny or even Christina, and I fucking love Christina to death.

Mike was one of those guys who was fucked from the start. He was six foot six and heavyset, bad at sports, and too scared of disappointing people to make any friends. He graduated two years ahead of me with a C- average and dropped out of Ocean City Community College after half a semester. I guess you could call Mike an idiot, but God knows there are too many geniuses running around out there with their asshole schemes trying to rule the world.

I met Mike when he let Christina hotbox his car at homecoming, and we became friends because he'd always take us to the Taco Bell off Route 17 when we were high, no matter how late it was. Christina always thought Mike was trying to sleep with us, but that was bullshit. Sure, nowadays, a twenty-year-old hanging around a couple of stoned high school girls would be problematic as hell, but Mike was too earnest and too bad of a liar to try anything like that. No, Mike hung out with us because, in his words, "we had passion." I still don't know what he meant by that, because it's not like I had any interests back then. Christina had gotten into Northwestern early decision, and I was still deciding between UVA or UNC, so we were both kind of coasting. But Mike swore we weren't like all the other grade-grubbers and teacher's pets. "You guys see what they don't see," he'd say, pointing at his forehead, which I guess was supposed to indicate our third

eye.

What that has to do with passion, I have no idea, but Mike was fucking obsessed with the concept of passion. He'd make these mix CDs he'd force us listen to on the way to Taco Bell, and I swear to God on one of them he put a clip from that movie *Serendipity* when Jeremy Piven says "did you know the ancient Greeks didn't have obituaries? They only asked one question of a man when he died: did he have passion?" When Christina first heard that, she almost jumped out of the car.

But really, I think Mike liked us because he wanted to play us the music he liked, and we were the only ones who were kind enough (or stoned enough) to listen. He'd always look at me with this stupid grin on his face, waiting for me to tell him how amazing these shitty local punk bands were. Sometimes I would lie and tell him I thought they sounded pretty good, and he'd clap his hands and giggle like a little kid. I always wondered why he cared so much about what I thought, but now I think he just liked the validation. When the rest of the world thinks you're an idiot who isn't even cut out for community college, you need all the reassurance you can get.

But it was either enduring some crappy punk or hearing him go off on another rant about Bush. I mean, I didn't like Bush either, but Christ. Mike fucking hated George W. Bush and the Iraq War back when that would get you crucified by most people. He got an in-school suspension because he refused to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance (plus the baseball team kicked his ass in the parking lot over it, and also for being half Armenian). Every time Mike heard a jet flying overhead he'd say, "look, there goes another underfunded school." Which, for Mike, was pretty clever. One time Mike said he thought about writing a book based on that, like some Kurt Vonnegut thing, but Mike couldn't get it together past half of the first chapter. With Mike, that initial raw feeling was usually as much as you were ever going to get.

The one thing Mike ever did follow through on was starting up a record label. He still hates my guts about how that all went down, and I don't blame him. But in case you ever run into his mom, and she starts bad-mouthing me, you should know what really happened.

So this is how I remember it: Christina and I took too much of one of Stefan's famous weed cookies, but she just passed out, whereas I had the munchies bad. Mike picks me up and takes me to Taco Bell. I get eight potato tacos (I was vegetarian at the time), and after we get our order, Mike looks at me all nervous, like he's thinking about getting down on one knee and proposing or something. "I am starting a record label," he says. "What do you think about that?"

"Cool," I say, too high and too hungry to really process it.

"I want all the best bands," he says. "If they slap, I want them."

"Makes sense," I say, nodding my head like I was dispensing the wisdom of the sages.

He drives me back home and tells me his plan: he wants to call the label "108 Stars"—a reference to his favorite game *Suikoden II*. I shrug, and he launches into this diatribe telling me it's this huge RPG from Japan that takes a hundred hours to beat, and you can build a party of 108 heroes called the Stars of Destiny to fight against a bloodthirsty war criminal that makes "Bush look like a freaking baby."

"When we get all the stars together," Mike says, "we'll be unstoppable."

"That's so many characters," I say.

"It's so awesome to have that many friends." Mike's voice cracks on the word "friends." He fakes a cough, hoping I didn't hear him get emotional. "Do you want to be the bookkeeper?"

I had told him I was taking AP Calc, so I guess he figured I was good with math. Mike tells me that he wants everything to be on the level. "I want to pay the bands what they deserve," he says. "That's the most important thing to me. Fuck

turning a profit.”

We pull into my driveway, and he reaches into his pocket and hands me two hundred bucks, crumpled up in a mix of tens and twenties. “Your signing bonus.”

I know now I should've never taken the money, but back then, this was like a week of lifeguarding for me. “Sure,” I say. “Let’s sign a band and make a record.”

The Friday after the Fourth of July, Mike picks me up and drives me to the Unitarian church on Macintyre. Lots of shitty bands play shows there and Christina once broke in there to hook up with a carny, but Mike is there to sign NPI, one of the shittiest punk bands I’ve ever heard. Their name doesn’t even fucking stand for anything—how lame is that?

We get there right before they start their set, and NPI is bad in the way that most bands are bad—the bassist is doing too much, the drummer can’t keep time, and the singer acts like shouting “no blood for oil” matters more than singing in key. But what makes them especially shitty is their attitude. They take too long to gather their bearings between songs with titles like “Drunk Driving” and “Loitering Is Not A Crime,” and yell at the crowd for how weak the pit is. But none of that matters to Mike—he’s in awe, and when NPI’s set ends and the lead singer says, “We are NPI and you can get fucked,” Mike gives me a big thumbs up.

We meet up with NPI as they’re loading their amps into their Subaru and Mike gives them a hundred fifty bucks as an advance to record an EP. “You can have total creative control,” he says to the lead singer, a short guy named Denny with thick glasses and big teeth that made him look like a rat. “You want to write a song that says ‘Fuck Bush’, you do that.”

“Do you want us to do that?” Rat Face Denny asks.

“I mean, I think it’d be cool,” Mike says. “But it’s totally your call.”



So Mike goes off and records them in his mom's basement. I spend the rest of the summer lifeguarding and getting high with Christina at her dad's shore house, occasionally showing Mike the Excel spreadsheet of all our (his) expenses. Christina tells me I shouldn't even give that much of a shit, but how much Mike is spending really bums me out. He's working part-time at Tower Records, and his mom is going back to school to be a nurse, so it's not like he's got money to blow on a new Dell laptop and some condenser mikes, you know?

But Mike will not be deterred. "The record has to sound awesome," he tells me one Saturday night as we're pulling through the Taco Bell drive-thru, after Christina and I split one of Stefan's famous weed cookies and spent the day wandering around the Short Hills mall. "This is what's gonna put 108 Stars on the map." He hands me my Fajita Grilled Stuft burrito (I was eating meat again) and pulls around into the nearly-empty parking lot. "We do this right, and it's gonna sell a thousand copies."

I know that number is nothing in the grand scheme of things, but for guys like Mike, even nothing is too far out of reach.

"You don't even have a thousand blank CDs," I tell him. "And you'd need to get one of those commercial disc burners."

Mike frowns. "A hundred copies, then." He takes a bite of his chulupa and stares out the window. "I think I'm gonna need more money. Do we have that in the budget?"

"It's your money, Mike."

"I know. It's just... NPI isn't happy with the studio sound. They said I'm not picking up the kick drum. But I don't have the right kind of mic for that." Mike sighs. "Now Denny's saying he thinks wants to do a live album." Mike looks like he's gonna throw up or cry. "Do we have the budget for that?"

I laugh. “I dunno, Mike. Do you?”

“I think so. But you’re my bookkeeper.”

“Do you want to do a live album?” I say.

Mike smiles weakly. “I think it would kick ass.”

So Mike begs me, Christina, and the guy she was dating at the time (either Terry or Jeff—I can’t remember) to be his “audio engineers,” which basically means he pays us 20 bucks each to hold up a field mic in the crowd at one of NPI’s shitty church basement shows. I tell Mike he doesn’t have to pay me, but Mike insists, because, again, “everything has to be above board.” He tells me not to worry—he sold his Playstation and all his games to Gamestop, so he’s got an “influx of capital.”

“You don’t have to talk like some business asshole,” I tell him.

“It makes the talent feel like they’re in good hands,” Mike says. “Same with the hat.” He points at the Kangol cap he had started wearing, which looks even more ridiculous than you’re imagining.

The show sucks, obviously. NPI has no talent and both Christina and Terry-or-Jeff were standing too far away from the stage to get a good sound. But Mike loves it. “This is gonna be so fucking raw,” Mike says after the set. “And the new song fucking slaps. George W. Bush really is such a fucking pussy.”

Mike invites us all to NPI’s EP release party, which is just pizza and a joint for me, Christina (she dumped Terry-or-Jeff a few weeks ago), and the band in Mike’s mom’s basement in the middle of the day when Mike’s mom was off at nursing school. Mike’s still wearing his stupid Kangol hat (before the band came, he asked me if it looked cool, and I didn’t have it in me to tell him no).

Mike takes out the jewel case, with cover art of a photo of George Bush nailed on a cross that looks like he did it in MS Paint. “This,” he says. “Is NPI... live.”

He plays the CD, and it’s obvious he’s so fucking proud of this thing, pumping his fist at every breakdown and singing along to what little choruses there are. When the EP ends, Mike’s absolutely beaming, but NPI and Rat Face Denny couldn’t give a shit.

“It sounds weak,” Rat Face Denny says.

“There’s no bass in the mix,” The bassist says.

“You don’t want bass for a live album,” Mike says. “You want it sounding raw, so those mids are punching through.”

“It sucks,” Rat Face Denny says. “We’re not putting our name on that.”

“We could record another show,” Mike stammers. “I’ve got some DVDs I can sell, and I heard there’s a site I could download a bootleg copy of Pro Tools, really mix the shit out of it.”

Rat Face Denny shakes his head. “No, we’re done with this amateur hour bullshit. Just give us the master and the two hundred more you owe us.”

Mike looks confused. “That was gonna come out of the sales.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Rat Face Denny says. “We get that guaranteed.”

“I know,” Mike says, his eyes darting around the room. “But we gotta sell some records first.”

“So you’re saying you don’t have the money.”

“I do!” Mike says. He turns and looks at me, eyes welling up like a dog who

just had their tail stepped on. “Right?!”

“Of course he does,” I say. “But you didn’t sign anything. So you’re not getting anything until this sells.”

“Bullshit,” Ray Face Denny says.

“She doesn’t mean it,” Mike says. “I’m a man of my word.” He reaches into his pocket. “I’ve got fifteen here, and once I get paid next Friday I can get you the rest.”

“No deal,” I say. “You sell some records, then you get the two hundred.”

We’ll sue your ass,” Rat Boy Denny says.

“Don’t!” Mike screams.

“You don’t know a fucking lawyer,” I say.

“My fucking cousin is in law school,” the drummer says.

Christina, who’s way too high to deal with any of this shit, lets out a laugh, which sends Rat Face Denny into a rage.

“Don’t fuck with me,” he says, getting way too close to Christina (not that I was worried about her—she took a self-defense class and broke Fat Alan’s nose when he tried to grab her at spring fling).

“Why do you gotta be a dickhead about it?” I say. “Mike’s been nothing but good to you. You think anyone else would have fronted money for your dumb ass?”

“We could have signed with anyone,” Rat Face Denny says.

“That’s true,” Mike says.

“Bullshit,” I say.

“Go fuck yourself,” Rat Face Denny says. He points his finger in Mike’s over-sized chest. “Fucking idiot.”

Fucking around with Christina is one thing—she can take care of herself—but man, you don’t talk that way to a guy like Mike. I shove Rat Face Denny down hard, right through the card table with the pizza on it.

“Get the fuck out!” I scream. The whole band looks at me like I’m nuts, and Rat Face Denny picks his goofy ass up and hauls out of there. Christina’s laughing her ass off, but Mike’s looking like he got punched in the throat. “My mom’s gonna flip about the card table,” he says, softly.

“It was an accident,” I say. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

Mike shakes his head. “We’ve had it since I was a kid,” he says, looking at a slice of pizza tucked under the TV stand. “It was priceless.”

Christina tries to tell him he can get another card table for like 10 bucks at Target, but it doesn’t matter. Like the stand-up guy he is, he drives me and Christina home. We even stop to get Taco Bell, because he feels bad I didn’t get any pizza.

We drop off Christina and Mike doesn’t say anything to me the whole way back to my place. We pull into my driveway and I thank him for the ride.

“You should have let me pay them,” Mike says.

“They were assholes,” I say. “You’ll find a better band.”

“No,” Mike says. “I won’t.” He grips the wheel tightly. “You really fucked it up for me.”

“Mike—”

“No! Everything was supposed to be above board, and you used legal tricks! Just like Bush and his war on terror.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s not fucking cool!” he screams.

“Jesus Christ Mike, I’m sorry.”

“You fucking rich kids are all the same,” Mike says. “You don’t play by the rules and nothing matters.” He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. “You were my first star,” he says.

“I can give you back the signing bonus,” I say.

Mike shakes his head. I shut the car door and he backs out of my driveway, and I never saw him again.

Mike isn’t like, dead, or anything like that. Stefan told me he thinks Mike moved to New Mexico not long after the Tower Records closed down and his mom finished nursing school. Christina said she saw him mixing paint at the Home Depot in Paramus when she was home from Northwestern for Thanksgiving break, but I don’t have the guts to go check. Wherever he is, I really hope he got his mom a new card table, and he’s still dreaming about starting a record label or some other project that doesn’t have a prayer of getting off the ground. Because if he was right about anything, it’s that I really am just some fucking rich kid, you know? Going to some out of state private school, sleepwalking through classes and getting drunk on my parent’s dime... where was I when everyone was protesting the Iraq War?

Mike was the kind of guy people like me can only write about, the kind of guy who throws himself at the world headfirst and comes up bleeding, or possibly concussed. Mike knew he never stood a chance, but he kept on standing, and if that makes him an idiot, then so be it. The ancient Greeks only asked one question of a man when he died... or at least they did according to the movie *Serendipity*,

which, for guys like Mike, is all that really counts.



The second story is called "There's No Mystery Of Chess Boxing." It's about obsession with a game that will always defeat you, and how intoxicating it can be to fail. What do you think about that one?



It sounds like the story is exploring the idea of the allure of a challenging activity or pursuit, even when success may not be possible or likely. The idea of being drawn to something despite the possibility of failure can be a common theme in human experience. For some people, the pursuit of a challenging activity or goal can be intrinsically rewarding, even if they are unable to achieve it. This can be especially true if the activity or pursuit requires a high level of skill, effort, or dedication, and if it provides a sense of accomplishment or personal growth.



In the context of chess boxing, it seems like the activity could be particularly compelling because it combines the mental challenge of chess with the physical demands of boxing. This combination of mental and physical skill could make it especially rewarding to participate in, even if one is not able to win every match.

It's also possible that the story is exploring the concept of "flow," which is a state of being fully engaged in an activity, characterized by a sense of enjoyment, focus, and a feeling of time passing quickly. Many people find that activities that challenge them in the right way can bring about a state of flow, and this can be a very rewarding experience.

Overall, it seems like the story is exploring the idea of the allure of challenging pursuits, even when success is not guaranteed. It's possible that the story could be discussing the idea that the process of pursuing a challenging activity can be rewarding in and of itself, regardless of the outcome.

There's No Mystery Of Chess Boxing

Chess is a game that's practically solved, and that is why you like it so much.

What this means is: you cannot lose if you play perfectly. A perfect chess player will win every single time, or, when facing an equally-perfect player, draw. Centuries of human and computer-assisted study have concretely proven this. You cannot lose if you don't make a mistake.

What does perfect chess play look like? It looks like you are stalling for time, making almost imperceptible improvements on your position—but mostly, you are waiting for the other person to make a mistake. And they will make a mistake, because they're human. They have all these ambitions and plans and grand designs, so they'll overreach, push a pawn too far, position a bishop too passively so he's barely defending any squares at all. And that's the moment they've lost. Because what you really like about chess, why it's come to dominate your life so much, is that it's really a single-player game, where you win when you're perfect, and you lose when you beat yourself.

You're not sure where this comes from, this love of self-flagellation. Your distant father, maybe. Your coddling mother. It hardly matters. Chess gives you what you crave: relentless and unyielding critique. The chess board never fails to punish you for your shortcomings. You didn't calculate all the lines? You didn't anticipate that queen move? Did you *really* not see that her knight could fork your rooks like that? *Fuck you*, the chess board says. It has no tolerance for error and is

incapable of sympathy. Maybe when you lose over and over, the chess board taunts, you will begin to understand.

But you will never fully understand. And that's the thing you *really* like about chess—it reveals you as the small-minded, impatient, pathetically short-sighted creature you really are. There's no mystery of chess boxing; you will always be suboptimal; you will always disappoint.

When you finish each game, you run the computer analysis, and it's a cavalcade of unforced errors. What makes it all so unbearable is that that your blunders all seem so obvious in retrospect. If you had just rerouted the knight here or recaptured with the rook there, this all could have been avoided. *You could have won*, the chess board says, *but instead, you chose to lose*. All your earlier brilliance? Your stupidity caused it to be completely undone.

And this is what you *really, really* like about chess—it's hard not to feel like this all one giant metaphor for your life. That the reason you are where you are, as much as you love to blame capitalism, the '08 recession, and America's horrifically indifferent COVID response, is on you. All your friends who are ahead of you, with their houses, spouses, children, and careers, played the position well. You, and you alone, failed to find the right move.

And this is why you've spent the past six months drinking bourbon and playing chess late into the night. You cannot fix your life, but you can always start a new game, and you start hundreds of them. You feel like a gambling addict, but this is the purest game of skill in human history, and you lack sufficient skill. You've played yourself into another losing position, sure, but what's the alternative? Sleep so you can start the next failed day refreshed?

No. Better to approach your bullshit job restless and bleary-eyed. It's what you deserve, and until you can prove otherwise, it's all you'll allow. And that is what you *love* about chess—it gives you an endless treadmill to run on as you are chased by the specter of all your sins, both real and imagined. With chess, you get to run fast but not get too far, put in the work without reaping any pesky rewards. You cannot overstate how reassuring it is to have something to preoccupy yourself with as you bottom out.

Of course, you can't tell your friends this. So when you're at their baby showers, and you show up without a gift and smelling like stale french fries and too much sweat, you play it down. You've been getting into chess, you tell them. It's fun, you say. It's like a pickup basketball league, you muse between beleaguered breaths, or bicycling. But you don't have to ice your knees down after.

They all react positively, which shows you they've never played the game. They've seen *The Queen's Gambit* on Netflix, they say, and it made chess look cool. It can only be a good thing in these trying times, they say, that you have an outlet, that you're putting all your intelligence to good use.

And you smile and finish your third bourbon of the day, allowing them to think you're far more clever than you actually are. But you know better. Even a weak player who hovers around 1400 in blitz (and 1550 in rapid) knows in their soul that chess is not a game for intellectuals. It is not a game of philosophers and kings. Chess is a dirty game for degenerates and sickos, for malcontents and misanthropes. Chess should not be celebrated or revered. It is a game that hates you, hates all who play it, and that hate is so honest and pure that it has propelled the game through thousands of years of recorded history.

And that is what you *really* love about chess, more than you've ever loved anything—it takes all the hate you give it and hates you right back. It won't let you imagine a better, or even a different, future. It won't be your friend, it won't try to cheer you up with talks of all you've accomplished and how lucky it feels just to know you. It won't call you a secret genius; it won't tell you just to keep on hanging in there. There is not an ounce of pity hiding beneath those sixty-four squares. You want chess to kill you, and it obliges, one game at a time.

And this is why you are reading chess books now, the first books you've read in ages, having stumbled into the local library you forgot was there. You are fixated on notations from games played by joyless addicts hundreds of years ago. You can feel their self-loathing radiating off the pages, and you swim in it. You read about Paul Morphy, the pride and sorrow of chess, the great Romantic player who dominated the game and lost his mind. You comb through Bobby Fischer's

best games and worst beliefs. You are nowhere near their level and never will be, sadly, or perhaps thankfully. But just like them, you too have some misgivings about who you are and who you're turning into, anxious about the dwindling time left on your clock.

Many players have reached this losing endgame before and chose to play on. Because while your pawns on the g file are doubled and your king is weak and exposed, surely your opponent will make a mistake if you let them. There might yet be another opportunity; nothing is inevitable. While victory is unlikely, if you can focus up and get sober, you can potentially salvage a draw. And that is what gives you hope about chess—the mistakes are analyzed but never really counted against you. Your poor play is only poor if your opponent can keep up the pressure.

The truth, which chess so graciously reveals, is we are all fumbling around the light and dark squares, miscalculating lines and missing brilliant moves, our clumsy (though resilient!) hands grasping the wrong pieces and the wrong times.

Except for computers. They really are that good.



The third story is called "Bicycling." It is about purchasing a bike on whim and then riding it home. Do you think that sounds like a good story?



It's difficult for me to say without more information about the content and structure of the story. In general, a story about purchasing a bike on a whim and then riding it home could be interesting if it is well-written and has compelling characters and a clear narrative arc. However, it ultimately depends on the specific details and execution of the story.



What if there was no clear narrative arc and the character was not all that compelling?



If there is no clear narrative arc and the character is not compelling, the story may not hold the reader's interest or be as effective at engaging them. A clear narrative arc, which is the progression of events that make up a story and build to a resolution, helps to give the story a sense of direction and purpose. It helps to keep the reader engaged by providing a sense of anticipation and curiosity about what will happen next. Similarly, a compelling character is one that the reader can relate to or find interesting, and who experiences meaningful change or growth throughout the story. Without these elements, the story may feel aimless or lacking in depth.





But isn't life sort of aimless and lacking in depth sometimes?



While it's true that life can be unpredictable and complex, and not every moment may be filled with deep meaning or purpose, stories often aim to provide a sense of resolution or meaning through the characters and events they depict. This is one of the reasons why people often turn to stories for entertainment and as a way to make sense of the world around them. In a story, the events and characters typically have a clear purpose or goal, and the narrative arc helps to build towards a resolution that provides some sense of meaning or understanding. This can be in contrast to real life, which may not always have such a clear sense of purpose or resolution. However, some stories may intentionally explore themes of aimlessness or a lack of depth in order to make a point or comment on the human experience.



This is one of those stories, I think.



Error in body stream



Bicycling

You purchase the bicycle from an ugly man at a yard sale a dozen miles away from home.

The man tells you he won the bike years ago on a game show, and barely rode it since. Sometimes, he says, the act of winning, the gesture of a prize, is more important than the prize itself.

You tend to agree. You tell him that you once won a Fit Bit at a church carnival raffle and have never used it, but can't bring yourself to sell it or give it away. You keep it in the trunk of your Camry, you tell him, along with some old books you haven't gotten around to donating to the library, and a DVD of *Batman Returns*.

The ugly man tells you he hasn't seen that movie in forever, so you give him your copy, free of charge. You tell him you can't remember how long it's been back there, or if it will even play. The ugly man says that isn't what's important—you have unburdened yourself of old junk, and sometimes the smallest of burdens can be the heaviest load. He says it like it's an aphorism, and you nod like you've heard it before.

The bicycle won't fit inside your Camry. You're annoyed that you didn't foresee this, but then again, the bicycle was an impulse purchase. There was something about seeing the old Schwinn out on the ugly man's lawn that caused you to pull over—the magnetism of nostalgia, maybe, or the irrefutable beauty of an object made back when Times Were Simpler™ and People Really Respected

The Value Of Craft®.

They don't make bicycles like this anymore, or at least, that's what you told yourself when you made the purchase. You aren't one of those bike connoisseurs who can rattle off the make and model of the brakes, handlebars, and gear shifts, but you do know that people will spend thousands of dollars trying to get bicycles like this. People will pay an arm and a leg for anything that smells like sentimentality. The past is always more valuable than the present, or even the future. You never know what you're gonna get, but you're keenly aware of what you lost. They don't make anything like they used to, because the world they used to make it in is gone.

You ask the ugly man if it's alright to leave your car on the street and ride the bike home. You can come by and move it tonight when your spouse gets back from her shift at the hospital, you tell him. You ask him what the street sweeping rules are here, as you can't see a sign. They're supposed to come Monday and Friday morning, he tells you, but a lot of days they don't show up. I've never seen anybody get a ticket, he says. Take all the time you need.

You walk the bike out to the road. You do not have a helmet, something your mother always used to chide you about when you left the house to ride your bike as a child. You picture her in your driveway, chasing after you, waving your bike helmet around. You remember hating your helmet, how bulky it was and how dorky it made you look to all your friends. Yet no matter how much you begged and pleaded, she remained firm. You had to wear it. You wonder where that helmet is now. Perhaps she still has it tucked away in the corner of her basement, along with the PlayStation and the broken card table, or maybe she gave it away. Your childhood is full of these unaccounted possessions, deteriorating in one basement or another. One spring-cleaning at a time, your youth has been scattered to the winds.

You place your left foot on the pedal, and you realize you are unsure if you should ride with traffic or against. Your intuition says "with," but you swear you heard someone on a podcast say that it was "against." You swing your right leg up and straddle the seat, and it feels just like, appropriately, riding a bike. You pedal slowly, shakily, with the traffic, building up speed.

You can feel the contempt the cars have for you as they rush by you, outraged they have to share even the smallest fraction of the road. You, huffing and puffing on your old-fashioned bicycle, are in their way. They have places to be, places they'd rather not be heading toward, carbon dioxide they need to transfer from their exhaust pipe to the atmosphere. When you were a driver, you too were annoyed at the bicycles taking up precious real estate, preventing you from going faster, slowing the spew of your emissions into the air. But now you are a cyclist. No longer part of the problem, perhaps even part of the solution. You are a good person, you tell yourself, at least for now.

You pedal faster, trying to stay ahead of the fear you feel each time a car speeds past. When you were younger, you never thought about what would happen if you were hit. The question of your mortality only crept into your bones long after you finished puberty, sometime when the insurance bills started coming in your name. For fun, you and your spouse call them “staying alive” bills. “Did you pay the staying alive bill this month?” you’ll ask each other. It makes what is essentially a shakedown from your insurance company seem like a pretty good time. Before you quit therapy, you were told that you should try to think positively about the things you cannot change. As the world slips out of your control, you have felt yourself become a happier person, with a brain full of positive thoughts. And while like cryptocurrency, the computational power required to find each new positive spin on things increases exponentially, you can never forget how to do it once you’ve learned it. It’s just like, appropriately enough, riding a bike.

You are getting tired, but you have so much further to go. You look down at your body, and you can scarcely remember how the bulge in your midsection arrived—decades of weekend binge-drinking, no doubt, and all the extra bagels at your office’s Bagel Breakfast Friday you took just to give your mouth something to do besides talk. The years are all a singular, high-caloric blur. You use insulin, just like your father did, but your staying alive company won’t cover as much as they used to, so you’re using less and trying your best to maintain. Each month simply exerting life takes just a little bit more from you—just a few more hours at the side hustle, just a few more Postmates deliveries and a few more Uber rides. Each one used to mean more, each turn of the wheel used to get you farther, used

to keep your blood sugar from spiking. All of a sudden, without realizing it, you're going uphill.

The hills are steeper than you remember when you rode as a child, but they are obviously not the same hills. The ones in your childhood neighborhood were so much bigger, yet so much easier to climb. Back when you thought you could play in a band forever, you used to think every artist could make a living. Talent was enough, passion was enough. It took so much work to get good, and surely *somebody* had to have the job. You often think about all the musicians out there who have fallen out of style, who committed no greater crime than imprecisely aligning with the times. You suppose the lucky ones invested in real estate, while others found their way back to waiting tables and tending bar. The gap between releases on the Wikipedia page becomes more pronounced, the "Personal life" section's only reference is a Jimmy Fallon appearance from 2015. The top of the hill is a finite space; there is nowhere to go but down.

Your descent feels dangerous. You are going no faster than fifteen miles an hour, but you feel out of control. You remember being decades younger, riding to the top of the tallest hill and letting go of the handlebars, joyfully screaming, trying not to crash. Of course, back then, all you wanted was to crash—to test your immortality, fulfill some perverse desire to see how it'd all go down, to just have *something* happen during those wonderfully interminable summers when you didn't have a job and time was glacial. But nothing is glacial anymore. Nothing stands still. You think about the guy in your high school who got into a motorcycle crash and died right after his eighteenth birthday. He was a kid just like you, strange and gangly and desperate to kill time, and then one day, he's not. Something finally happened to him. No need to look for the crash. The crash is coming.

You remember his name as you pick up speed, and without thinking, you let go. Your hands are hovering less than an inch from the handlebars—this is as brave as you'll get these days—but the gasp of delight that escapes from your lips sounds just like it did when you would lift them miles above your head, when going downhill meant momentum and progress instead of irrevocable, sharp decline.

The bike jerks to the right, and you lunge to grip the handlebars and correct the course. That was a close one, you think. Despite your best intentions, you picture yourself falling, your skull colliding into the curb and splitting in two. You think about your mother, and how she would receive the news of your untimely demise. You think about all the mothers who have lost children, and how intolerably cruel it is to force them to carry on when the most vital pieces of them have been ripped off and buried, or reduced to ash. You think about the bureaucracy of death, the process of transforming living flesh to paperwork, the itemization of it all, the banal accounting of mourning. One car, one apartment, several pants and shirts and credit card bills, and now, one bicycle. Death negates all sense of ownership and entitlement, and so these loose things must be dealt with, must be processed or sent *somewhere*. It is a material world, and it is the material things that ultimately outlast us, you realize. You are no longer a child, but the bike helmet you wore is still somewhere. And given the state of everything, you highly doubt it will leave this earth before you.

You are coming up on your apartment, but you decide to keep going. This is how it was when you were a kid; you rode your bike for hours just to experience the thrill of movement, with nowhere to go but forward, onward, beyond... all those great and powerful words so many men throughout history used to glorify their conquests. Like them, you viewed the world back then as your playground. All of it was put here for *you* to explore, and you explored every inch of it. Someday, all of it would inevitably become yours, you used to think. All you had to do was get your hands around it, run your tires across it, go out and stake your claim to it. The future was more than a promise—it was a path.

You ride for another half a mile until you are out of breath, and then decide to turn back. Your aging body has made this romantic ride off into the sunset all the more difficult, but in your defense, the roads have also gotten worse. They were never designed for children or bicycles or really anyone other than cars. From sea to shining sea, none of this was ever really designed for you.

A car drives past you, and every cell in your body is willing it to smash into you, sending you hurtling into the pavement. You are filled with a repulsive desire to feel the gravel scrape chunks of skin off your bones, to watch the raw blood gush from your open wounds. You reflexively attempt to think positively, but the

dawning horror is that you already *are* thinking positively, that this grizzly death will be more preferable than rationing insulin or fleeing from the rampaging wildfires, or choking on toxic air. At least this way, it might mean *something*. You won't just be a statistic they toss around in a UN report that no one reads. At least this way, you'll have a funeral. Your mother and your spouse and all seven of your friends will come together to say the loveliest things. You were smart, you were funny, you were loyal, you were beloved. You were going places, they'll say, if only the brutality of life didn't get in the way.

But of course, none of this will happen. Even the rosiest of outlooks can't change the fact that what kills you is the system. That is the prize you won for being born in the richest country in the history of the world. You cannot unlearn this once it gets in your bones, there is nothing sharp enough to strip it away. You can abandon it down in the basement of your brain, but somewhere along the decline, you'll return to it and find you take to it naturally, just like riding a bike.

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