

## **Isla Westwood Middle School**

Halloween had come and gone. Most jack o'lanterns had disappeared from the steps and porches lining the road, and those that remained had dulled considerably, maniac grins transformed into jagged-toothed frowns. The few inflatables left on the streets had either had their fans shut down, and were crumpled in a heap of grimy plastic, or were dingy and tattered from the previous night's storm, leaning over as if they didn't have the heart to stand.

While I always got off work in the evenings, I'd been later than expected, held up when the rear wheel of my bike became entangled with a hanging strand of jack o'lantern lights. When I finally unraveled the little orbs from my tire, I jumped back on and zoomed through the near-deserted town.

Mountainside was a small, out-of-the-way town where I worked on my weekends, and it was usually bustling, but tonight was the Autumn Lights festival, held at the fairgrounds a ways from Mountainside, and no one in town, except me, would miss it for the world. I didn't even live in Mountainside, but on a farm past the foothills, where my parents raised goats for milk and cheese.

At the edge of the plateau, I caught the end of the sunrise, and stopped and stood at the edge of the road, watching the clouds' brilliant colors cool like hardening metal, then set off flying down the hill. I still had miles of forested road to go before I reached the fields nestled deep in the woods, where a late dinner awaited me. At the foot of the descent, houses were replaced with trees and tall alder shrubs. I glanced back once at the nearly-dark town, high above now on the plateau, and the craggy mountains looming above it. Then I turned and sailed on into the trees.

The road through the foothills was narrow and undulating, winding the best way it could find around the sudden steep clefts nestled in the gentle hills. I pulled over when it became too dark to see and turned on the bright light on my bars. The basket on my rear wheel rattled loudly when I reached in to pull out my jacket, and I jumped as a grouse, nesting nearby, thrummed her wings in fear. I took a sip of water and was on my way again.

Clouds rolled in and out under the moon, giving it a gentle, ghostly halo. Owls whistled, silently gliding above me. The night grew darker, but my light stayed strong. Suddenly, there was a loud clunk, and my feet flew from the pedals as my bike bucked. The pedal spun wildly, free of the hub, as I tried to regain my balance. Instead, I ended up tipping over in a less-than-graceful dismount that left my bike on the ground and me teetering on my feet.

"Flip!" I said, turning on my phone's flashlight and gathering up the spilled contents of the basket. It was crumpled beyond repair, and the carton of eggs I had bought earlier was oozing goo all over the road. I pulled my backpack off my shoulders and managed to jam the other things into it. I tossed the ruined eggs into the woods for foxes and then upended my bicycle, but immediately encountered a problem. My chain had cleanly snapped apart, somehow halving a link in the process. My night was about to be even longer than expected.

Unzipping my bag, I dug around until I found a chain tool and spare link, but when I finished replacing the link, I found that it was too short. I groaned and pulled a

package of biscuits out of my pocket, eating them as I sat on the side of the road. There was no cell service out in the mountains, and I was unlikely to encounter anyone for the rest of the night. As best as I could see, my only option was to walk the fifteen-odd miles home and hope my headlight wouldn't die on the way. I checked my watch, discovering that it was already nearly nine thirty, so I hoisted my bike back onto its tires and set off down the road at a brisk jog.

Bats darted about the trees above me, barely visible against the nearly-black, overcast sky. The clouds were racing now, flashing random fragments of moonlight across the forest. At the top of a steep hill, a sudden gust of wind hit me like a pillow in the face, buffeting my hair back. Alder leaves began tumbling in crazed spirals over the road, taking small twigs and billows of dust with them. The circling owls and bats were all gone now. The trees creaked and rattled as they bowed against one another, springing back and forth like plucked strings. A small bow of pine needles smacked my face and tangled in my hair, and I gingerly plucked it out, sending it flying again. I began to hurry on again, head bent against the whirling dirt and leaves. Before long, my lips were chapped and my hands felt like I'd been massaging them with sandpaper.

At the top of the next hump, I took a chance, fastened my helmet back on, and settled myself on the saddle of my bike. Wobbling in the brutal gusts, I soared down the hill, thumping painfully over downed branches that littered the highway. At the bottom, I dismounted and trudged up the next hill. At the top, I froze and twisted my head around when the creaking and wailing of wood suddenly intensified. A crashing and the sound of snapping limbs met my ears as somewhere, in the whirling darkness, a tree splintered and came down.

"Oh, flip," I muttered, blowing out a slow breath through pursed lips, and continued on my way.

I reached the Zooal Mountain pass, which crested a narrow saddle in a spine of stony ridges. It marked seven miles from my house, but I was dreading the climb up the winding road. The accent was every bit as arduous and tiring as I'd thought it would be, and when I reached the saddle, the wind shadow I'd been lucky enough to catch under the ridge disappeared and I was blasted by howling wind. I felt extremely exposed on the stony spine, in a dip between two scree fields. Something shifted the rocks above me and sent a volley of pebbles tumbling down into the road, and I shuddered and hurried off down the other side of the pass.

This side of the highway twisted along the sheer northern face of the ridge, rusty guard rails perched precariously on the edge of the stony cliff. The wind pooled and eddied in the cleft, swirling unpredictably and threatening to knock me over as I coasted down the hill on my busted bike. The other side of Zooal wound through rolling fields of pumpkin vines and toppling corn stalks, and although it was nice to not have to worry about toppling trees, the wind was harsher here. I could lean into it and almost be held up. Bits of dried cornsilk mixed with the dusty gusts, peppering my face until I could barely open my eyes.

There was a sudden *wchack*, and the farmland lit up around me. I cringed as the lightning struck behind me, and my hair pricked on the back of my neck. Now falling trees seemed like a trifle as I started running, hoping for dear life that my aluminum bike wouldn't become an awful problem. Another bolt struck somewhere within the forest, this time where I could see it, and in the distance I heard the creaking as multiple trees

came down at once. I had reached another band of forest and rushed through it, but when I turned back, for some reason or another, I saw a rusted orange glow catching the trees where the last strike had come down. Whatever smoke the burning trees were making was instantly swept away by the rushing wind, which I knew would only fan the flames. All of a sudden, with a wail, a huge pine tore its roots out of the soil and toppled over onto the road where I'd just been. I froze, then turned and began running across the next field.

Eventually rain began pattering across the road, dripping through the vents in my helmet and off the tip of my nose. The wind tossed sheets of rain like a breeze on curtains, and I winced every time lightning struck nearby. When I reached the last copse of trees before my house, my fingers were stiff and hard to pry off the handlebars and I couldn't feel my lips. I was relieved to finally be home, but when I entered the woods, I saw that a pileup of ten or more trees had blocked the road. I stood there, water running off of my hands and bike, while the trees dumped more on me as they flailed. Finally, I decided to abandon my broken bicycle on the side of the road and push through the huckleberry shrubs around the mountain of wood.

When I at last saw the lights of my house and unlocked the door with frozen fingers, I found my mother sitting on the couch, apparently waiting up to make sure I reached home safely. I don't think reheated green beans and soup ever tasted so good.