

Rails to Trails

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Rails to Trails

The Rails to Trails project had been completed a dozen years ago, when Northwestern Allied Lines had finally sold their land to the conservatory. Volunteers had stripped it clean, turning the ancient railway into a flat, albeit stony, trail suitable for biking and hiking.

Rob had driven past this part of it for the last three years on his way to work. His family had once owned land somewhere around here, but he couldn't remember which farm had once been his great grandfather's. He thought he'd been there once as a child, but it was rather hazy, just like all kid's memories. Was it memory or was it just something he read about in a book was his thought whenever he thought that far back.

His weight had risen in the last decade and he had decided to purchase a bike in an effort to cut the pounds down. Pulling the bike off the car rack, he sat it down and looked down the long trail. It seemed to go on forever – perfectly straight. It was entrancing. It was that reason why trains were so popular, the seemingly eternity of the tracks.

The bike he purchased was a Huffy, one of the many off-road varieties. Rob hadn't been on a bike in twenty years. At least twenty. Not since grade school. He locked the car and plopped onto the seat, his wide ass spilling off on either side of the extra cushioning. Pedaling off, he rolled onto the trail, slowly and trying to regain his bicycle legs. You never forget how to ride a bike... or so they say.

The early morning dew glistened thick on everything, and a bright yellow mist obscured the individual trees. The air was solid and heavy and the heat of the sun beat down upon him as he slid into a pace, rolling along comfortably, even though sweat had already begun to pour from him.

The sounds of birds met his ears, twittering and whistling as he rode along. Sweat rolled off his brow, staining his shirt. He wished he brought a drink, but then, he really didn't expect to be out very long. Just to test the bike, make himself aware of muscles he hadn't used in a decade.

The trail led into a forest, evading the sun and the heat. The foggy mist remained in patches, coalescing around the trunks of trees and bushes. It was vaguely eerie. To allay any nervousness, his thoughts traveled to his ex-wife and how in God's name he was going to pay for the divorce. She had left a month before for a guy she met at her work. Luckily they had never had kids, though he had friends that went through a messy divorce and found themselves without access to their kids and giving most of their pay to their exes to 'spousal support'.

It was bad enough they were through, and he hoped she would be civil about it.

Out of the mist he saw a man standing to the side of the trail. He was dressed in overalls and a dirty t-shirt. Roughly fifty years old, with graying hair, the man distantly stared off in the direction Rob was riding from.

The man didn't move or greet him as he passed and neither did he meet his eyes. They held such grief, such pain within them. And the face looked familiar

but Rob couldn't place it. As he rode by, Rob muttered a hello, but continued on pedaling.

It was the sadness in the man's eyes that caused Rob to pause. He swung the bike around, sliding to a stop. This place looked vaguely familiar, the way the trees were high on the hill, the way the slope pushed off the far side of the trail...

"Hey, are you alright?" Rob asked.

The man made no move to acknowledge his presence.

"Hey!" Rob tried again, riding the bike past and turning so that he stopped right beside the man. "Buddy, are you alright?" The face was familiar. Who was this guy? "Have we met?" The man never took his eyes from the point in the distance. "What are you looking at?"

"The train." The voice was deep and masculine, like Cary Grant or John Wayne. Like all farmers who have worked the earth.

"Train? There's no train here." Rob looked over the man's shoulder and followed his eyes. The man smelled of musk and manure. Potent. Fresh. "The train hasn't come through here in twenty years." As if in demonstration, he circled around the man on his bike. "See, no rails? Are you sure you're alright?"

The man continued to stare at something in the distance. What the hell was he looking at?

"You should leave, Robby."

The words caught him completely off guard. Robby? No one had called him that since he was a kid. "What? How do you know my name?"

"You shouldn't see this... You're too young to understand... I'm sorry..."

The words rang familiar. He heard this before. Somewhere... In the past...

"There is no train, old man," he laughed nervously. "Can't you see that?"

A loud whistle pierced the air. A train whistle.

The old man turned and locked eyes with Rob. "Goodbye Robby."

He stepped out into the trail, closing his eyes and lowering his head. Something invisible struck the man and he immediately faded from view in a disintegrating blur. A great wind struck Rob, knocking him from his bike, leaving him sprawled on the stones on the side of the trail. The whistle blew again, cutting into the roar of the wind, but overwhelmingly deafening. The repeating clacking of the rails filled Rob's ears. It was so close to him – so goddamn close...

The wind died in a rush. Silence returned to the forest.

Uncle James.

From where he lay on the rough stones, he shook with fear, finally recognizing the place. He had been five, secretly following his Uncle James through the forest just after Aunt Mary had died. His grandfather's farm lay up over the hill.

He was five at the time and had pushed his bike up the rocky hill, sliding down to where the rough hewn trail met up with the railroad tracks. His uncle staring down the train... Just before it arrived, Rob had spoke, surprising his uncle, asking him what he was doing. His uncle's reply was an apology and then he jumped out in front of the speeding freight train...

"No!" Rob shouted, jerking out of the nightmarish reverie. His breath was ragged and short. A bird began chirping in the distance.

So long ago. So traumatic, as a child he had wiped it from his completely from his memories. The incident little more than a nightmare. Even now he couldn't remember all the details of the hours and days that followed, his mind refusing to dredge up such horror. He never told anyone he had watched his beloved uncle take his own life...

Slowly Rob rose up and dusted off his pants with shaking hands. Unable to continue, he walked the bike back to the car, unable to ride and listening to the sound of a distance train whistle in his mind...

End

