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Nature's Opulence and a Gardener's Green Thumb

It was a Friday morning, 7:30 am in June, 2005, when I got a call from my biking friend Sharon.

“Meet us at Kate’s at 12:30,” she said.

“Where are we riding?”

“Don’t know. We’ll figure out later. It might rain but we’re going anyway.”

For the prior two weeks since my father had died, I’d spent all my time coordinating task lists for arrivals from out of town, responding to questions from caterers and the funeral director, organizing the order of service with my brother and our minister, absorbing messages from family and friends. I was exhausted and a wreck.

“Believe me,” I’d said to my husband Michael as we dressed that morning, “If I could skip the memorial I would. If I could I’d leave town.”

But I needed that ride. At 12:30 pm, we met high on a perch above the Connecticut River on the Vermont side. Sharon, Kate, and me—three mid-fifties cyclists. We lifted our helmets and waited for Amber, our new convert, a twenty-five-year-old novice with *very* strong

legs. Mounting our bikes and heading south a few miles before crossing the river into New Hampshire, we meandered north along the river on country roads less traveled by cars and were mostly silent. The sky was dark and threatening but I'd dressed for rain and framing us on either side of the street were miles of blue and yellow irises, brilliant pink peonies, orange daylilies and purple delphiniums; blossoming pink and white crabapple trees and purple lilac; every mile a rolling testament to nature's opulence and a gardener's green thumb.

"I hate everything about my life right now, including my gardens," I called across to Sharon, riding at my side.

"Gardens are such a metaphor for life," she called back.

"I loved my gardens two weeks ago and now I can't even look at them. Weird, huh?"

"Death," she added. "It gets us. In our gardens and in life."

Recrossing the river back into Vermont, we looped south on a bigger road and Kate got us practicing our peloton skills. I loved her calling out commands, telling me what to do, someone else in charge. Sick of the details for my father's service, sick of organizing and corralling people, sick of my father. Really, I was sick of myself.

As Sharon hugged Kate's back wheel and Amber hugged hers, I clung to the thin white line at the edge of the tarmac. Kate, in front, moved left into the traffic lane and back behind me while Sharon took the lead. We practiced this forward and back movement over and over, getting the rhythm of a peloton, enough times to get it right. That was the summer of Lance Armstrong's final run at the Tour de France. We were fans back then, enamored of his impossible feats, only later to have to accept the inevitable fall of our favorite. We swore we

could make it up his hills in France. And we giggled and gossiped about his new affair with Cheryl Crow.

“Keep your eyes over the left shoulder in front of you,” Kate called from the back. “See what she’s seeing, what she’s feeling. If she brakes—for anything—we need to brake too. All our senses. In tune. This is drafting!”

A light but steady rain fell through much of our ride, but the physical exertion and camaraderie with women were just what I needed that day before my father’s memorial.

“Beat you to the top,” I said, standing on my pedals, seeing a short but steep incline ahead of me. Winded near the top, I caught sight of Amber in my mirror, gaining on me.

“Oh no you won’t!” she yelled, passing me to the top.

We’d ridden thirty-five miles and talked about so many things—the spring splendor of garden flowers, the truest green of new grass, the sweet and musty smell of wet pavement, and how to take a sharp turn at the bottom of a long, fast hill without pitching over our bikes. Lance and Cheryl. Just me on my bike with these good friends.

“There’s one last hill,” Sharon called to me over her shoulder. I knew the one, a two-miler at a twenty percent grade. “Let’s stop,” she said. “I’ve got something for you.”

While Amber and Kate scooted up the road ahead of us, Sharon and I clipped out, dismounted, and stretched our torsos over our handlebars. We soaked up water like parched elephants on a Savannah desert. As our lungs stilled and our breath quieted, Sharon pulled out her killer white-chocolate brownies, the ones I love best, and we luxuriated in chocolate and butter and sugar, licking the tips of our fingers sticking out from our gloves.

“Dad’s dead,” I said, looking squarely into Sharon’s emerald eyes.

“He is,” she said as if the fact of it was enough for that day. She clipped her left shoe back into her peddle, ready to take off, before adding, “what are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Well, no need to figure that out today. All we’ve got in front of us is this hell of a hill.”

That hill gave me twenty minutes to get clear on what I’d say tomorrow. I wouldn’t bash my father at his service. I wouldn’t tarnish his legacy. But I couldn’t lie. With eyes on the road beneath me, legs pumping, shoulders forward, that ride was about me, not him, me and my good friends, the convergence of heart and speed, the honoring of a mighty tree falling in the poetic forest, while I found my own path forward without him. I got the first and last paragraphs of my eulogy scoped out in my mind while pumping up that hill. The rest would have to wait for that evening.