

## On the Strand

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My mother's boyfriend was a man named Bang. I never learned his first name. He'd been an officer in the Korean army before coming to the States, and he would yank me out of bed at six-thirty every morning to do jumping jacks. I was a doughy nine-year-old and he was trying to make me leaner and tougher. If I got angry, he would dare me to hit him and stand up for myself, get it out of my system. On Sundays we'd go to his boxing gym to watch the men pound each other to pieces, which terrified me at first and then made me dream of days when I'd be big enough to put on gloves and whomp Bang in the gut. I needed a good ass-kicking, he would tease me in his throaty Korean. Anytime I wanted, I could challenge him. Mom didn't get involved.

The three of us went to Santa Monica Beach one Saturday afternoon to ride our bikes on the Strand. Bang would take me fishing on the pier sometimes and when we rode past it that day, I thought about how much I would rather be out there with a basket of calamari and a cherry Icee, watching our poles nod on the railing. It was one of those perfect afternoons when the California coast looked way better in real life than on the glossy postcards they sold on the boardwalk. Couples were stretched out on the sand, half-hidden under candy-colored parasols. The sky was ablaze in orange light. But I didn't care about the scenery. All I really saw was this endless bike path and its dashed yellow divider. The back wheel on my hand-me-down Schwinn was grazing the brake pad with every rotation and I lagged at least a hundred yards behind.

Bang had a metal bell attached to his handlebars and when the gap between us got too long he would ride back to me ringing it over and over. It was just a tiny metal dome but I could hear him thumbing it long before I could even make out his face. Each time it rang, something inside me wound up a little tighter. My legs were on fire from fighting this crap wheel and there was

Bang giving me the hurry-up music. He was wearing one of my father's old shirts and from behind, far enough away, it looked like Dad pedaling away from me, slowly shrinking. Then he would turn around to catch me up and it'd be Bang and his bell all the way.

We stopped for drinks at Venice Beach. I told them between swallows of Mountain Dew that this wasn't a race, that if they wanted to ride fast I'd need a long head start or a bike that wasn't a piece of shit. I expected a little sympathy. Instead Bang got mad that I was calling his son's bicycle shit and told me his boy had kept up just fine on it. Then my mom yelled at me for disrespecting the dead with bad language and made me apologize. I told them the kid was thirteen when he rode it, four whole years older than me, and anyway the bike hadn't been properly maintained after his accident. Bang looked at me and puffed up his cheeks like he'd thrown up in his mouth. He'd never hit me before but I could tell he wanted to now. Mom pinched my arm hard. She told me to apologize again but Bang waved me away before I could say anything. We circled back to the bike path in silence and they ditched me as soon as we got on it.

It wasn't that I hated Bang. He was a man of simple principles, who took scheduled craps and drank only on Fridays. He remodeled kitchens and bathrooms and I think my mother liked him because he produced something with tangible value. My father had been some kind of teacher and couldn't remember to eat proper meals. He would come home from the college with tattered shoelaces and lose himself in his books until midnight. Mom said he got cancer so young because he didn't pay attention to his body and his blood and tissue had fought back against his brains. Ignore the workers long enough, she'd say, and they'll rebel against the master. I didn't understand. My father was a tree trunk to me, stout and immovable. We would wrestle and he'd put my face in the rug every time. Then I saw him late in his sickness and he was just this old twig stretching his fingers at me.

Bang and my mother weren't even in sight anymore so I got off and dumped the bike in the sand. The shoreline was fifty yards from the path and banked sharply to its frothy lip, where the tide came in high and fast. I kicked off my shoes, crossed the crowded beach, and waded in up to my knees. The ocean was freezing cold. I didn't pay attention to the waves and one of them surged in on a diagonal and knocked me over. It was a long time before I got back up. I watched the Pacific unraveling itself, a past to its future and back again. The sun was heavy in the sky and gulls flecked the whole expanse like little pencil shavings.

The bike was gone when I returned to the path. I walked up and down a dozen times and eventually figured it was useless. I started asking passersby if

they'd seen a green Schwinn lying around and they shook their heads, said they were sorry. I was dripping wet and shivering, holding my shoes in my hands.

I don't know how long I spent looking for that thing. My head felt heavy. I wasn't sleeping well at night, still not used to Bang shutting my door after tucking me in. Dad was claustrophobic and hated to close anything; we even peed with the bathroom door open and the only lock we ever used was the one on the front door. When Bang moved in, I'd barge into my mom's room with some dumb request and he would leap out of bed, shirtless and sunburnt, yelling didn't I ever learn to knock. Before long he'd installed a bolt on the door.

The sun was just about to set when I saw them riding back toward me. Mom was on Bang's bike. He was on his son's, the one I'd lost, but the relief I felt when I saw it didn't last long. He dismounted and his face was this mask of eerie calm.

"Stop crying," he said.

I swiped an arm across my nose. My mother stayed behind Bang, staring at the waves. He said they'd ridden back to find me and guess whose bike they'd passed with some strange boy on it. "Kid said he just found it in the sand. I'm gonna assume he's lying."

I nodded.

"So you let him take it away from you?"

I nodded again. He put the bike on its kickstand and crossed his arms.

"What did he look like?" he asked. "And why the hell are you wet? Someone rips off your bike and you go swimming?"

He leaned down to get a better read and I don't know what happened to me. I reached back and smashed one of my shoes into his face. It made a loud thwap against his eye and sent him staggering backward. I grabbed the dead boy's bike. My feet were still bare and the metal teeth on the pedals hurt like hell, but I got a sprinting start and bore down without looking back. My eyes blurred and for some reason, grinding against those gears, I thought of a moment during Dad's illness, just before he was hospitalized for good, when I walked into the kitchen and saw him eating ice cream out of the carton. He was supposed to treat rich foods like poison and he grinned at me like a magician caught in a gaffe, his lips ringed with chocolate. Sometimes you just have to say the hell with it, he said, spooning me a scoop. The hell with what's best.

I rode as hard as I could, harder than I'd ridden that whole afternoon, shooting past other cyclists and skaters. I knew Bang was going to lay into me finally, that if I just stood up and took it, he would probably go easier. But I didn't care. My heart pounded, a bomb going off a thousand times in my body. It wasn't long before I heard the bell behind me, faint at first and then loud and clear. I pedaled faster.