

*Note: The following was written as a well intending—albeit offbeat—tribute to the prose of Ernest Hemingway. It assumes that the literary legend would have included, if given the chance, mountain biking in his arena of sporting interests. Indeed, he did write of road racing (in such works as A Moveable Feast). And perhaps the backdrop of Central Oregon, like Ketchum, would have served as a place of inspiration.*

Jack pedaled down along the path through heavy groves of ponderosa and beside a river that moved dark and without hesitation. He felt the joy of the moment and the gears shifted smoothly as he went. Dust followed him in small plumes and here and there the shadows of morning fell sharp in the woods.

Jack felt happy to be riding again, pedaling fast down the trail as the sun shone brightly off the river. It was a good feeling to have your bike beneath you, light and steady in your hands with the cranks turning strong and your legs slicing fast and evenly. It was a nice feeling to be on your bike in the woods.

In the woods the tall trees showed copper in the bright light. In between the trees the air smelled sweet. It was a fine smell of vanilla and the smell came up to meet him as he rode through the trees.

The path followed the course of the river, but in places it left the river and spilled over a broken ridge and the river would pull away and then return. There were clusters of rock on and below the ridge. There were rocks in the trail too, and you had to watch for them.

Some weeks ago he'd stuck his front wheel hard on a rock. It pitched his body over the ground, a fast rushing fall, and he fell as twisted and crude as a desperate animal that has been hit by a car. He could almost see the spill before it happened, the change of rhythm between him and the bike, and he knew with a blunt sureness what was next. That's how it happens before you spill.

He'd landed not like they tell you to. He didn't ball-up as he fell. He landed flat and open, and his knee tapped down on a rock fast and quick like you do with an egg on the rim of a heavy bowl. It split the knee open easily. He'd cradled his leg and rocked back and forth in the dust gritting his teeth while the blood dripped in thin lazy streams from the cut on his knee. The cut was long, and deep too.

After a while the pain dulled and he used a tree to pull himself up and then hobbled to the edge of the lake while his bike lay awkwardly in the trail. The bike's handlebars were bent back like a broken neck. He'd washed the open gash in the cold, deep water of Waldo Lake, the cut stinging into him while he sat in the sun.

Now his knee didn't bother him. Only the thought of his knee bothered him.

Jack liked the longer rides on the trails. You forgot about everything on those long rides. The scenery blurring past and the throb of wearing muscles. It was a time to think, too. When the world passed fast you could think like at no other time.

The trail opened up and Jack went easy on the brakes. There was the sharp report of twigs snapping as he rode

over them. Ahead a mound of earth appeared in the trail and Jack hit it and pulled on the bike and arched his back lifting the frame with his body and they rose together before landing. When they landed it was if they landed as one, the bike a mechanical component of his body.

He had a race coming up and his rides were getting longer. A small cycle shop in town was organizing the race. The guys at the shop wore rumpled aprons that ended at their shaved calves and they always had rinds of grease on their hands. The guys would talk to you while working on the bikes that were held up on stands. They'd talk as they turned pedals purposefully with one hand and shifted gears with the other. He liked the bike shop, where the smell of citrus cleaner and fresh rubber hit his nose when he entered and the guys were always turning wheels.

His bike was older than most and it lacked the nice features of the new bikes. Its once glossy frame was chipped in places and it had some islands of rust and was a bit heavier than most other bikes. The cogs were hewn rough from the back and forth dance of the chain. Jack felt comfortable on his bike, though, with its well-worn feel.

The trail ahead was clogged with mud, stuff the dull color of spent coffee grounds. He pedaled quick now and rode into it with good speed and tipped slightly off his saddle for better balance. Cool mud splashed up as he pedaled through and it splattered his shoes and legs. He felt some streak across his face too. The chain turned noisily as it bit down in the mud and then continued easier when the mud was churned out. Biking through mud, he decided, was not unpleasant if there was nothing clean about you.

He biked on and came to a steep hill. Jack shifted into a small gear and his knees beat quick. Jack climbed the hill staring at the front wheel and hunched over the frame as he went leaning hard on the pedals. The cranks creaked like old joints. The bike is rebelling against the hill, he'd think.

At the top, there was a good view to the mountain range. He stopped there and zippered his jersey open to cool off. In the distance he saw the mountains. The mountains showed like a faraway city through the trees, white-washed against the broad blue sky.

He leaned the bike against a tree and pulled an energy bar from his pack and sat on the other side of the tree to eat and rest his legs. He took off his helmet, and as he pulled it off he felt the lining was cool and wet from his sweat. He leaned back on the tree and opened the energy bar, peeling the wrapper back like a banana skin. It was a fine energy bar that smelled of apple but did not taste of apple. He drank some water from his mud-stained hydration pack, pulling the water through the hose when he caught his breath. The water was warm and slightly stale.

Riding gave him a distance from things. It also gave him a closeness to things. It was a comforting thought. He leaned with satisfaction against the thick bark of the tree with his bike on the other side. He liked having something reliable at the back of his mind.

