

## S-12

I'm going down to S-12 today.

I'm wearing my red helmet on account of having to duck under the trailer's overhang to get my bike, and there are cobwebs under there, light as a feather but all sticky in my hair, they'd probably feel like silkworms if I let myself touch them.

When I get onto the dirt lane I slip a leg over the bike and run a finger over the handlebar's shiny blueness, like the endless sky, which today is all filled up with cottony clouds. Lately their puffy softness is F-18s and dinosaurs; their sinister jaws or tails distort every time the Wind Gods blow.

I pedal hard to get up some speed. I tilt my head and listen to the tires on the gravel they put on the road to keep it from getting muddy. Today there's a sizzle to the usual crunch. Stinging sweat soaks my armpits and my thighs are wet, because it's so bloody darn hot that I'm melting from the outside in, I think.

The blistering breeze off the Darnley Basin slaps my flushed cheeks. I ride faster, like the wind. It cries all in and around the hurts. Howling, I hurl myself into its mercy and grace.

Red cliffs on the other side of the basin rise like warnings, all shadowy and light. At the top there's a soft coating of green grass, and if I squint I can see tufts of Devil's Paintbrush. I wonder how the yellow flowers got their name but my heart knows it can't be for any good reason.

I float past two women talking by a trailer. One is all bright and sunny in her orange shirt. But she doesn't wave, even though I look at her, my smile ready. I turn my head away to stare at the water, and then the smile comes unbidden, because stifling heat melts in the face of a Gulf breeze.

I whip around the corner at the end; it's either that or catapult into the basin. I'm already wet. I don't want to get soaked.

There's a cadence to my ride. I start pedaling back uphill. A burn starts in my quads and I drive harder, rhythmically, because music keeps me from giving up. I keep the beat, one leg circling and then the other. I grunt over the handlebars.

Soon I start a new downhill. I coast to S-12. My heart is light; I smile all the way down.

I shove my right leg out and drop a faded, dirty flip-flop onto the bench seat of a tired picnic table. My foot slides along until I'm stopped.

I fix my pale eyes on S-12.

It's empty.

I sink into my seat, knuckles white as they clutch the bike's black rubber handle.

S-12's ghosts come back to haunt me.

One night we strolled to a deck overlooking the white sand beach and got a plate of steamy mussels. They came with a tiny clear plastic butter dipper and I ate my mussels soaked and dreamy but my guy ate his naked. There was a long-faced singer. A lady went up and sang harmonies with him and I thought she did a good job for being unrehearsed. She wanted to sing 'Wagon Wheel' but he ducked his head.

"One day I'll learn it."

Then he turned the page on his music.

Later, my guy said the fella would never learn 'Wagon Wheel.' It ain't his kind of song.

Behind us, wavelets kept hugging the beach, which was all sunsetty purply-pink and divine, and all tired and worn out.

I let my eyes drift over to S-12. I was careful not to do that too soon because once I go *there* sometimes it's hard to come back. But the guy's sing-songey voice was as melty as the creamy pool of butter and the mussels were salty like their old sea-home, so I couldn't help myself.

What took me over the edge in the end was the French family, Quebec French for sure although lots of P.E.I. Acadian folk camp here too, by the twin shores, but I knew this family was Quebec French because the mom had a wide bandana where the hair met her forehead. Her hair was curly and black and she had leggings under her sundress, which also gave the truth of her away. She touched my shoulder when she squeezed into the wooden bench to go sit behind the dampness of her cardboard mussel plate. I felt her go through me and it made her real, even though when I watched her with a nice man and little girls I made up my own stories.

I made her live in a condo in Montreal, with curved iron steps. She planted pink flowers in baskets on each step. At the mussels, one little girl with copycat momma hair and a miniature sundress started to cry, I don't know why, but the momma pulled her onto her lap and then the man of the family bent down in front. Even though a makeshift table and glisten-sharp hard-cracked mussels were between them, his gentle fingers brushed the little girl's cheek, and it was then that I knew I had to go to S-12.

So I looked behind the sweet family for whom I knew – I just *knew* – that life was perfect, and after I studied the sky for a moment, now with shards of pink glass cottoning the warped clouds, I let my eyes drift down to S-12.

There was a lady there, that night, and she was dancing, I thought, but my eyebrows got all puckery as I watched her because her silly arms were waving this way and that, and her legs beneath her sundress were bent and dan-cy but not in time to the music the ‘Un-Wagon Wheel’ guy was sending forth to the sea. She had something in her hand and I think it was a flipper like the kind you use for turning burgers. And so there was an *A-ha* moment for me, because S-12’s picnic table was in front of her and there was something smoking on it, I could just see it from where I was spying. So maybe while she cooked, she was being preyed on by a wasp or by one of those huge horseflies that hurt so bad when they grit their teeth on your virgin skin. Thus her crazy dance.

I sat back and watched her mystic dance because behind her was an old tent trailer like I had when I was a kid, and I was always the barbecue-r, and the tent trailer with its half caved in canvas was such a lovely backdrop to this weird dance by the young lady with the pretty summer dress and the bare legs peeking beneath it and the bare feet all carefree and loose below that.

I didn’t see a man, or kids, but I knew they had to be there, too. Somewhere.

Watching her beyond the saw grass and the thick pale green nautical rope and the dirt lane that separated us made me remember another night. Only this was a bike ride night.

There was a young man with black curly hair the same as the young mussel momma, which got me to thinking *maybe they are all a dream*. He had a guitar in his arms and he was all slumpy on the top of the picnic table where the food goes. The song he thrummed was meant for the ocean. Overhead, in the grip of the gulf gusts, soaring seagulls kept time for him.

I passed in slow motion on that perfect summer’s eve, turning my red helmeted head towards him while my blue bike crunched along the gravel. He met my eyes; I mean, I know he was too far away to really *see* me, but still I *knew* his eyes peered into mine, deeply, like to see my soul, because this tiny smile went on his mouth, and he didn’t even stop humming or strumming to do that, it just happened.

I let myself see what carried him to me, and I knew what it was before I looked, because it was what I wanted back then, so long ago, when I had hope. It was a white Volkswagen van, the kind with this large big circle of a wheel and a tiny kitchen and somewhere a bed to lay your weary

head on, and of course a roof that opened and let the wind in, and the stars, and the moon, too, if you wanted them.

I knew he did not have a woman and two beautiful little girls, yet. But I thought that someday he would. I almost cried for the simple beauty of it all.

I came down to S-12 today because I had to. Because children are dying in Syria. Because last week my friend shot a bad guy. And because when school started yesterday my friend posted on Facebook that it sucked that her kid couldn't start grade ten. You can't go to school when you're dead because an older kid sped too fast and you forgot to buckle your seat belt.

I dig my nails *hard* into the back of my hand so the pain goes somewhere else instead of into my raw belly.

I came down to S-12 today because I had to.

I'm melting. From the inside out.

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