

Miles Per Minute

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She told everyone – whether they were listening or not – about how she couldn't wait to get out of there. She had decided a while back that she would do more than dream about her new life that awaited her in the city. She would train, and she would escape.

Along her quiet country road, she'd kick up dust with the turning wheels of her more-rusty-than-red bicycle. Everyday she would trek down the bumpy gravel driveway to become one with the long yellow dashes on the road. She would shoot at lightspeed towards the city, the dashes blending into one continuous line. Her blue and yellow striped shirt whipped in the wind, clinging to her sweaty shoulders. She was sure she was moving so quickly, biking so fiercely, that her shirt must have looked green to the onlookers lounging on their porches. Old Mrs. Thomas who brought her dinners, Dr. Greene who had explained what a period was, Sheriff Bill who brought Daddy home sometimes and other times took him away.

Sometimes she could hear someone's yell getting lost in the wind behind her. Asking where the hell she was going in all that rush, or asking about Daddy. She didn't have time to answer any of them. She knew she would need to reach Indianapolis before anyone could realize she was gone. Breathing more deeply the more rapidly she turned the disintegrating pedals, focusing harder to ensure she would make it. A mere 32 miles stood between her hometown and the city where her aunt lived.

Every day she saw the same sights, timing the seconds between each one. She always held her breath biking past the cemetery and the peeling blue barn. It wasn't quite haunted but she'd spent enough time disappearing there that it may as well have been. She went to that barn, climbed up to the loft where the windows were permanently open and would watch the sun finish setting. But that was only when Daddy had a bad day, and he didn't always have those.

There were some nights when he plodded through the doorway merrily, leaning against the dark floral wallpaper, with rosy cheeks. He would grumble at her to make him a G&T while he made his way over to the record player Mama had left behind. Thumbing through a stack of vinyls, he shouted that it was time for her to rack up the goddamn pool table. And those were the good nights at home. She did worry though. About what Daddy would do when he eventually smashed his last highball glass – Daddy had an affinity for crushing objects against the basement's peeling wood paneling, especially when he sunk the 8 ball in a pocket too soon. When that finally happened, she worried about the suddenly-shortened lifespan of the beautiful green-tinted juice glasses that were also left behind by Mama.

School was almost out and the pool would soon open up, transitioning the small town into another summer. It was almost June, and the Summer Solstice was to be the day. The longest day of the year. She would need every second of that day to get to the rest of her life. To her Aunt in the city. She hadn't seen her in a while – a long time it felt like – but she knew her Aunt would be okay with her showing up. She had told her so the last time she came to visit.

“You been doin’ okay, sweetie?” Aunt Emmy had asked, eyeballing Daddy from across the room. He had been stumbling more than usual but cursing more quietly. She'd processed the question as she'd rushed over to pick up the newspaper that had fluttered to the ground, and responded habitually.

“We're all okay, he's always like this.”

Her Aunt had nodded her head with hesitation, as if she could really understand.

“Mmm,” she'd continued, “alright, honey. If you ever need anything you just call now. I can be here in no time. I know things have been different lately – hell, I'm not even sure what things were like before. But you're not alone, hear me?”

She had responded by giving her aunt a hug, thankful to have been so close to a warm, perfumed body. She'd wanted to say so, she wanted to thank her, but all she could do was cry into the hem of her aunt's faux fur jacket which smelled a little bit like Mama. She had figured her Aunt just felt bad for her. Aunt Emmy's sister was the one who left her daughter behind, dooming her to a life of loneliness in a loudness that always surrounded her.

“Reckon you oughta be headed back to all those lights now, huh Emmy?” Her father had spat the words out like venom. The slurring of his words had seemed to scatter their meaning.

“Why don't you sit down, Stu?”

The way her Aunt had challenged Daddy made her tense up. Did she not realize she couldn't talk to Daddy like that? Mama had known. She had been reminded lotsa times. She had watched Mama beg Daddy to stop repeatedly, to put down the bottle, but he never would.

She knew Aunt Emmy wasn't prepared for his wrath, how could she be? Aunt Emmy didn't know what she knew, what she'd seen. She'd pleaded with her aunt, for both of their sakes.

“Please, it's fine. He don't mean it, Aunt Emmy. He just gets this way sometimes.”

She had glared at Daddy with daggers while she'd spoke.

“Nobody should get this way, ever.”

Then Daddy had gone ahead and proceeded to get that way. His voice had carried over the endless cornfields. The last surviving plates from the green-tinted set had met their untimely demise. Mama'd only been gone a couple weeks and Daddy had already finished off the salad bowls, too.

She had always swept up the gleaming shards, watched Daddy leave or pass out, then she would take off on two wheels that shook as she picked up speed. But that time Daddy hadn't passed out and instead of him leaving, Sheriff Bill had shown up.

At the height of Daddy's hollering, Aunt Emmy had calmly walked to the kitchen and dialed the police. By the time he'd known she had done this, Sheriff Bill had already been knocking on the front door, interrupting Daddy's rage. They'd then stood and watched Daddy do what he always did best: lie. Aunt Emmy had watched as Daddy had assured the Sheriff that, like she had told her aunt, everything was fine.

As she biked down roads that only she knew about, she contemplated the idea that she was a liar just like her Daddy. She should have said everything wasn't okay, that Aunt Emmy could save her – had to save her – that Sheriff Bill should take her away from Daddy.

But she hadn't. She was afraid. She was afraid of Daddy and she was also afraid of leaving Daddy. Daddy, who Mama had already left, who was still there for her. She remembered how Mama had looked at her the night she crept past her bedroom to the front door. She had looked in at her wide-eyed child and shook her head with impending repentance. She had said goodbye, Babygirl and told her to take care of herself and then added Daddy, too. She wished every day she had asked to go with Mama. But she hadn't. So after Sheriff Bill's cop car and Aunt Emmy's Buick had galumphed out of the gravel driveway, Daddy had cut the phone line so nobody could call 911 anymore.

Eventually the days got warmer and she got stronger, angrier, fueled by the idea of burying her face into one of Aunt Emmy's soft, flowy sundresses and inhaling deeply. She prepared herself for salvation every day, smelling the sweet country air mixed with the scent of diesel as she got closer and closer to the city. But each time the skyline was about to appear, she turned around, and headed back to Daddy with lead legs.

But not for much longer. This time she wouldn't look back.

She picked up her aluminum chariot from the overgrown grass in the front yard, hearing its pieces squeaking and rotating into place. Gears, chains, handlebars. Everything was set, her long awaited liberation finally underway. She gathered dust flying down the driveway, it followed her as she turned onto the infinitely stretching state road. The dust swirled around her as she blew past

forgotten stop signs, it provided her with a sooty cloak as she whizzed past the Sheriff station. Through the dust, she pictured the Indianapolis skyline opening up for her. She imagined the magnificent cluster of skyscrapers welcoming her home. She could hear the gentleness of Aunt Emmy's voice cradled between the hum of cars stuck in traffic and the ambience of the nightly talk radio.

The sun was setting at her back, soft pinks and purples painting the sky overhead. For the past few hours there had been no noise. No sounds other than her steady breath and the soothing clank of her bike chains. Slicing through her soundless bubble of triumph, on and immediately off, was the quick flip of a siren. Sweating and breathing heavily, she pedaled faster. She pedaled faster than she ever had, fast enough to get clear across the country if she wanted. She was almost there. The car pulled up slowly next to her – not even breaking a sweat to match her fervid pace.

“Hey kiddo,” Sheriff Bill said, “I figured you’d be heading this way.”