

The Bicycles were Gravestones

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The bicycles were gravestones. That's why the neighborhood is like a graveyard.

Little Timmy Kroger was not struggling with his bicycle. The bicycle was partway in the street and part on the tree lawn, leaning funny, the front wheel spinning, as if little Timmy had been pulled off the bicycle and this is where the bicycle had fallen.

Mr. Haig was old. Bald with a few tufts of flyaway hair and a shirt not always buttoned, so when he walked, kids get a flash of his naked fat belly hanging over the belt of his raggedy work pants.

No kid knew what Mr. Haig did for a living, but he had a workshop above the back half of his garage, and his light was on some evenings in the twilight, and I could see it from my bedroom on the second floor in the back of our house.

I was ten, going on eleven, and it was summer, and I was the widow's kid, but I had two older sisters, five and six years older than me, but they worked together at the drugstore, so I never saw them and they hardly even saw me.

My mom worked, but I couldn't tell you what she did. She came home at night around six o'clock, hurrying her way down the street, and if I was unlucky to get caught by her outside when she came, I got hauled inside and didn't go out again.

She didn't like me playing outside, but it was summer, and I could look after myself while she was at work. She couldn't stop me anyways, but she could never tell me exactly why she wanted me inside all the time.

I was a kid caught up in frogs and climbing pear trees and dusty sneakers and my baseball bat and trading cards and horror fests down at the LaSalle Theater on Saturday matinees. I couldn't tell you what clothes I wore every day. Just t-shirt, jeans, socks and shoes. They were all the same, a blur to me.

I lived two seconds at a time, like most kids that age, with what just happened becoming what's happening. I never thought about tomorrow and never could remember yesterday.

We lived on Pasnow in Euclid there, a suburb of Cleveland that got built up and now was mostly filled in. The freeway was opening up in a couple years and soon we'd be passed by, jumped over, by Clevelanders starting suburbs further east.

Pasnow was the borderlands, no longer countryside and not quite citified. The houses were just like city houses, two stories and a porch, but the yards were huge lots with fruit trees and here and there country sheds. The horses and chickens were long-gone, but you could still find a dozen pear trees in a row, and everybody grew their own tomatoes bright as roses every year.

Mr. Haig was a fat ugly scarecrow. He lived, oh five or six house over from ours, an ancient three-storied house said to be the oldest on the block. It looked storm-damaged to me, but I heard grownups bragging how sturdy these old country homes could be. Not modern like the ones we were living in with modern appliances and fixtures, but sturdy just the same. Houses like that, they don't build them anymore.

Mr. Haig I hated because he was like an ogre in a library book. Only worse. He was old, old as my granma, and old people ought to be clean and neat and well-dressed.

He was fat and crouchy and lumbering along. Never got around to buttoning all of his work shirt buttons, and his belly, white and hairy and red from his scratching, hung over his dirty work pants like a threat. His pants he never changed, a sort of navy blue ones once upon a time, with stains here and there and even in his seat.

He had a grandniece my age that sometimes came to visit. She spooked me out by staring at me all the time like I was something she would like to eat. One time she sat on the Rafferty's swing and pointed at my zipper and said, „You got hair there? I got hair there.“ And the little kids thought what she said was funny, but I flushed red, and neither she nor me was laughing. She creeped me so bad, sometimes I'd circle her, trying not to pass her too close.

I remember the bicycles, maybe four in all, all the same. They all stood upright or leaned like trellises, locked to fences or gates or a tree, starting to rust or maybe rusted, locked into place, and never I ever wondered whose bike they were.

They stayed alone, never talked about, something else kids walked around, wherever they were going. Kids' bikes, forgotten kids' bikes, never talked about by grownups. Kids' bikes alone.

Our street and the next streets on either side of it were quiet every summer. Hard finding kids to play ball with, though nobody said why.

I rode my bike and dreamed of pirate rocket ships and mostly roamed alone.

Little Timmy did, too. He lived three doors down and he was almost three years younger. A skinny pale kid, and frail, my sisters saying once how sick he had been one year and had to repeat kindergarten. I always told him not to ride his bike in the street, but I never got told to look after him. He had to ride his bike and strengthen his legs, his dad told me once, thanking me for telling Timmy to get off the street, a car was coming.

Mostly I played with the Rafferty twins from across the street. Redheads both, they were always getting in trouble at the public school. They always were late coming home from school, always doing detentions, and I'd sit on the back stoop waiting.

Summers mean screen doors, and Mrs. Rafferty, the fat neighbor lady who smoked cigarette after cigarette, was inside her kitchen with instant coffee at the table, talking loudly to somebody on the phone.

My mom didn't like Mrs. Rafferty because she smelled of cigarettes and blew smoke around my mom and always asked how she and her girls were getting on without her husband and their dad.

That fat neighbor lady had her back door open, and I sat on her back stoop, and twelve feet apart we were on two different planets.

I was listening to the houseflies buzzing around her sick old cat mewing to get inside, and the fat lady was talking about the bicycles that leaned alone.

„Those bikes are monuments to missing kids,“ she told the telephone. „It's been going on for years, fifteen years or more, long before we got here.“

I knew the bikes she meant.

One was inside a garage on the next street, covered in dust and rust, but still new, and I remembered how I wanted it.

A half-block away one was in a backyard by the vegetable garden, chained to a stone bird bath no one ever added water to.

Bikes that never had kids to ride them. The people who lived there were parents without kids. They never came out, they kept to themselves, and nobody said a word about them or their houses, or where their kids had disappeared to.

They came home, they went to work, they kept to themselves. They stared at us kids but never said anything, just stared. We didn't know their names.

I grabbed the only thing I could find that was handy, and that was my shiny wood baseball bat that I never got a chance to use and get good at because there were not enough kids around to go down to the dirt field one street over and play baseball with.

I was running and dragging the bat because I couldn't run faster with the bat on my shoulder because the weight and its awkwardness would have slowed me down.

I ran out of the Rafferty's back yard and across to our yard and across Mrs. Rose's front yard and her driveway to Mr. Stever's tree lawn where little Timmy's bicycle lay part on the tree lawn and part in the street, the front wheel still spinning.

I looked down the street and saw no cars and no grownups and no kids for the next block, maybe two. And nobody was on the other side of the street. No

lights on in houses or people on porches or kids on bicycles or sprinklers on lawns. I looked up the street, most of the way I had come, saw nothing.

For some reason I figured the ogre had taken Timmy back through Mr. Stever's yard, past his house and up his backyard past his garage and then his green apple trees and his dead rose bushes into that no man's land behind everybody's house and before the backyards of the folks on the next street.

I ran back there, still pulling the bat across the grass, looking for any sign of somebody moving.

Lots of things happened back there.

Us kids liked to play back there in the overgrown back yards that went unfenced for a dozen or more homes. One back yard bled into another and then another yet beyond. Grownups worked for a living, and so most of them let their backyards go, well, almost unchecked.

We played back there, feeling safe from grownup eyes, hide and seek games sometimes, but explorer games most of all. Each year we'd all try Mr. Stever's green apples, each take a bite and spit it out, they were all sour and stunted. Apple trees we could climb, but only one at a time, and one of us would be Tarzan until the other kids had turned their attention to something else, and we'd have to climb down carefully because climbing down trees was more dangerous than climbing up them, because you just climbed up as fast as you could but you had to look below when you were climbing down.

Once in a while one of us would get boosted up onto somebody's garage roof and walk around the roof, only here there wasn't much to see, what with all the trees in all the back yards, and if there were three of us, one of us could get boosted up and he could help one of the other two up, and always the third guy couldn't get pulled up, not even by the two of us, and his whining always brought us down sooner rather than later because he was left out of the fun.

I was running, dragging the bat across the grass and I was scared because I didn't see Timmy anywhere, not deeper in the backyard, or in the backyard next door, or back in the vegetable garden on my left, and I was scared for myself, wondering what I was going to do if I caught up with whatever had taken Timmy.

I could see through the trees in Mr. Haig's yard a light was on in his upstairs workshop above the back of his garage, and I headed that way, wondering if I could clamber over his wire fence to get in his yard that all us kids were warned to stay out of, and how was I ever going to climb up to his workshop because I didn't ever see more than only the one side that was facing our yard, and I didn't know if he had a ladder leaning against his garage that he climbed up to get into his workshop, or if he had some rickety stairs that might squeak and sway, if it was there at all.

Leaving Mr. Stever's yard and cutting across Mr. Edgewick's yard, I see the back door to Mr. Edgewick's workshop is open just an inch. Now, Mr. Edgewick was about my dad's age before he died, a nice man with a mustache and all his hair, who had his workshop part of the rear of his garage, only Mr. Edgewick never parked his car in his garage, but in the driveway leading up to it.

Mr. Edgewick would let us kids come into his workshop and read comic books there, the ones like Tales of the Crypt and Mad magazine that our moms always took away from us. He brewed coffee back there and the workshop smelled good like a kitchen or a restaurant. He did woodwork back there, had

an electric table saw, and the smells of 2x4s and sawdust on the concrete floor was also good to smell.

He has no kids of his own and his wife always wore long summer dresses, and I used to see her staring at us in the second floor windows looking down on us and the backyard. A worried woman always frowning at us. But she never came outside or called down to us or to her husband.

I come up by his workshop, still dragging that bat, was going to ask him, oh, I don't know what, if he had seen Timmy or Mr. Haig walking through the backyard, or, if he would help me look for them, but I didn't have any words in my mouth or any pictures in my brain to ask him about.

I pulled his door open. He always kept the hinges oiled, saying squealing doors made horrible sounds, and I see him inside, his back to me, and a flash goes off, like a camera taking a picture, and I heard a tiny moaning sound beyond him than only could have come from Timmy.

I come inside across the threshold of Mr. Edgewick's workshop, he still doesn't see me, still got his back to me, and he takes another picture, and I see beyond him Timmy in his underpants, his legs tied together, his hands behind his back, facing Mr. Edgewick's camera, duct tape across his mouth, his eyes wide and red and scared.

Mr. Edgewick must not have heard his door inch open, must not have known the latch didn't catch, he didn't know I was coming up behind him.

I lifted the bat, got it up on my right shoulder and swung it as hard as I could, aiming for the soft spots in the back of his legs, behind his knees. I hit there with all the might of a ten year old boy.

I caught him unawares, his right side best of all, and he went down and sideways, banging his right arm and shoulder on the workshop wall.

As he's falling, I'm lifting the baseball bat up again and swinging around in a circle to get more power. I swing around from back to front and hit him on his left side while he's still saying oomph. I swing around from right to left, from back to front again, still mad, and this time, when I hit him, I catch him across the neck and the back side of his head and part of his face.

Then I stop swinging around. I stand over him and swing the bat up and back and down again, like some big hammer I'm driving a nail in with, and I'm hitting him in the face and skull again and again. And there's blood, and he never saw it was me, blood, and more blood, and I keep hitting him, and he stays down.

I don't help Timmy. I want a grownup to see him good, the way I found him and Mr. Edgewick, and I drop the bat, and Timmy's crying, but I stumble out of Mr. Edgewick's workshop, and I see Mrs. Edgewick in her house on the second floor looking down at me in her backyard and we stand there staring at each other. Then she goes away. And I'm standing there, no idea what to do.

I see the light next door at Mr. Haig's second floor workshop window above his garage and I pick up a stone and throw it at his window and I hit his wall instead. Another stone hits the downstairs part of his garage, and I see Mr. Haig's light bulb has a shadow passing cross it.

I throw another stone and this one breaks a window, and Mr. Haig comes angry to the window and looking down at me, and I see him cursing.

I throw another stone, a bigger one, and this one misses the window even though he ducks and hits the wood instead.

Mr. Haig is getting pissed and swearing at me. I keep throwing stones until he comes running outside, his shirt tail out and flapping, his belly fat hanging out. He's cursing me until I showed him Mr. Edgewick and Timmy in Mr. Edgewick's workshop.

Then Mr. Haig calls the cops.

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