

THE DIRT GANG

I REMEMBER MY FIRST TWO-WHEELED BIKE—a zero-g geared Schwinn with a seat twice as wide as mine. I've since overcome the disparity. It's amazing how we 'puddle' like candle wax when we grow older.

I digress. Dad screwed wooden peddles on top and below the original peddles so I could reach them. I'm still vertically challenged but bikes today are more forgiving. I recall the coloured, plastic streamers hanging from the handle bars and the nerdy (the word 'geeky' hadn't been invented yet) wire carrier in the front. Yes, it had training wheels but I was determined to ditch them as soon as possible. So what if it meant missing lunch and sometimes even supper—practise, practise, practise. After all, a man has his pride. Chucking the training wheels was like earning my first stripes. I'm sure my little chest ballooned as I stood over my bike a` la Superman with my hands on my hips. As I grew, I ditched the wooden 'lifts' and raised the seat until it could rise no more. I'm not sure what happened to my personal chariot but the memories that it conjures up compete for head space with those of my first girlfriend. I'm sure my first bike holds a prominent place in bicycle heaven.

My next series of bicycles took me on journeys to exciting, exotic locations fit only for a pre-pubescent boy. I spent countless hours fishing for the stripe-on-silver Sheepshead in the turbulent Detroit River. There I would sit and fish from sun-up to sun-down. My faithful bike would stand at guard just behind me, always ready for a quick

getaway should someone challenge me for my preferred spot on a rough-planked, creosote-soaked pier.

Some mornings I would peddle to the mysterious Derbeshire Pond—a forbidden world of black, bottomless water, surrounded by an impenetrable forest of giant tulip trees and swamp oak. Their flat black shadows would push aside the sunlight and torment my pond like rude bullies. I alone had the power to scatter them with the aid of a swing-rope and a strategically-placed, contemptuous butt-flop. All the while, my bicycle ‘had my back’.

When my bike and I weren’t on safari, we were forced to experience the adult world of work, responsibility and character-building. I thought that there was nothing wrong with my character but my dad’s opinion trumped mine. My bike and I delivered the Detroit Times, News and Free Press across Windsor through weather that would cause a mailman to cringe. Collecting payment was not an easy task. Some of my customers were reluctant to part with their money. But my bike was there—my trusty steed, standing resolute, providing quiet, determined support. I would look back at my getaway ride, stiffen my spine and make the customer ‘an offer he couldn’t refuse’. To this day, although I dislike asking people for due consideration, I manage.

At the ‘know-it-all’ stage of my life—fifteen years, I abandoned my bike. My teenage psyche left little room for emotions such as guilt or remorse. My last bicycle for many years to come would sit at the back of our garage, alone and ignored. I occasionally glanced its way as I passed by and

noticed, with detached observation, that it seemed to have grown smaller and lacked original lustre. Had I bothered to pay more attention, I would have noted the cracked, deflated tires—a once proud bicycle now slumped in despair. I would have been mildly surprised by a frame and spoke wheels being suffocated by a creeping growth of weeds, vines and grass—a matted shroud slowly drawing itself up and over a bicycle cadaver. And I might have guessed that the lack of shine and colour was likely a product of despair as my bike shed rivers of silent bicycle tears. However, I had been consumed with self-centred teenage bravado and it would be almost five decades later that I would really discover what owning a bicycle meant.

SO HERE I AM, PEDDLING AS FAST as my stubby, sixty-four year-old legs can manage, perched on my 21-speed, blue and white Raleigh. I sport a matching aerodynamically-shaped helmet, and a fluorescent orange vest. Yes, I wear padded bicycle shorts, but they are well hidden underneath my jeans. I convince myself that the jeans were necessary as a cover-up so the contour fitting shorts didn't display the equipment that would likely distract the ladies in our group. I won't accept the fact that they feel like an adult diaper and that I'm not too far removed from the real thing. I wear a fluorescent-green bicycle strap around my right ankle to prevent grease stain on my jeans and I have a flashing red strobe light blinking furiously just below my seat at its back. I am 'eclectic man' and I ride with my equally

eclectic bike gang-members. *Move over people—the circus has come to town.* We zip by the high school in Almonte at warp speed on our way to Blakeney, our destination before a return journey. The kids outside the school watch us fly by. Some are chuckling, some are smirking and a few wave in mock salute. They remind me of . . . me, when I was brimming with contempt for the adult world. One particular jerk gives us a middle digit salute and yells, “Hey man, your butt is flashing!” I hurl my iciest ‘Clint Eastwood’ squint his way. *Don’t mess with us, kid. We’re the Dirt Gang!*

We’re an intimidating group of seniors and sub-seniors. We represent almost every shape and size within the homo-sapiens catalogue of humanoid models. Our elder-rider is Bryan. I clock in at number two on the age-o-metre. From that point on, the rest are mere kids. There’s Marion and Dave, Betty, Terri and Alf. We’re the Dirt Gang, riding ‘cross the country looking for trouble. We sing well off key with, “No road is too rough, no hill is too tough. We may pant and wheeze but we’re made of good stuff. We’re the Dirt Gang!”

We all have something in common—the love for biking and an unspoken fear of growing old and fat. Our bikes are the keys to eternal youth and transform us. Each trip is an adventure and we’re giddy with joy. There is much laughter and joking. Our petty worries flit away like wind-born leafs as we pass by forest and farm-land, river, creek and lake. Our thoughts expand with anticipation and wonder as we approach the next curve or hill. Adult thoughts puddle

like warm ice cream and are replaced with simple, light, child-musings. For a short window in time, we are children riding our bicycles in strange new lands, happy within the comfort and protection of friends and the complete absence of responsibility. We are, in one glorious, powerful word ... free! Yes, eventually we will return home exhausted, stiff and sore in places that don't see the light of day but the rush of youth is an aphrodisiac and heaven knows we've earned our fix.

I know now that the imagination I developed as a child was in some part, nurtured and shaped by my bicycle. Somewhere within the metal, rubber and plastic a bicycle heart pulsed and a bicycle soul rose up and silently cloaked me with a protective soul-cocoon. Without thought or design my bicycle and I became one. I now understand that without my bike, my early life experiences would have been trivial and mundane, my imagination untapped.

Today, as I step into senior-hood, I can bring back the child within me at will. I simply have to throw a leg over my trusty steed, gently grip the reins and forever ride on into the sunset—or at least until my butt can't take it anymore and my back and legs require a dismount and a stretch. It sucks to be a ten year-old in a 64 year-old body. But it's worth the pain and every regressive, simple moment of freedom.