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Wrestling Murphysboro

Midnight at the edge of an empty Spanish highway. Kenny and I lay our bikes against the side of a gully and squat down in the dirt as car lights fan out behind us. It is illegal to be here, to do what we plan to do and so we are careful. Kenny moves over to my bike. Another car tops the hill in the distance, and Kenny's shadow stretches across the dirt before me.

We have been riding together for a month. I can remember images of how we reached this point, but they are like postcards passing across my vision—a rocky cliff jutting down into florescent green water along the Costa Brava, a wheat field on a rainy day in Northern France, the colors blurring into each other—sky, wheat, trees. What lingers is the motion, the motion of moving myself forward, legs spinning 80 revolutions a minute, struggling to top an incline, slipping down into a Spanish valley like a glider.

An hour ago, we were night-riding on the Spanish expressway, cycling along the edge of a highway we could neither see nor hear. Trucks screamed by, blowing their horns and flashing their brights. Blind and deaf, we pedaled on, waiting for eyes to readjust to the hints of outline, ears to re-focus on the soft hum of tires. We had taken to riding at night to avoid the intense heat that hovered above 100 degrees even as the Spanish sun known as "Lorenzo" dipped behind the hills. I have since heard that extreme heat can turn the human body into a kind of makeshift oven, skin serving as a sort of plastic oven bag while the organs cook inside. That is the closest I can come to describing how it felt to ride through interior Spain in the middle of August; someone had put me on a bicycle, set the dial to slow roast.

To avoid the heat, we spent the afternoon in the square shadow of a gas station along the highway. When the sky started to change colors and the air began to cool, we mounted our bikes and cranked onto the highway. The view was dazzling for the first 15 miles, mountains lit in neon shadow, pink glow outlining the ridges. As we continued, the landscape

lost dimension. The mountains cut a dark inch from the bottom of the sky, and then the world went black. I had grown accustomed to watching the road and this new element added a panicked immediacy to the experience. Pedaling forward blindly, I felt waves of anxiety shift from leg to leg. Instead of seeing things in front of me, I recognized the changes by the sound of texture scooting under my tires, the crackle of paper bags, the two-tone snap and return of an empty plastic bottle. Staring at the road in search of obstacles, I began to see things that weren't there—dancing yellow shadows that flattened silently under my tires. I tried to adjust my gait, pulling the pedals rather than pushing, but the effect was different in the darkness and I felt as though I were riding upside down, the darkness sucking me into it from above. In front of me somewhere, I could hear Kenny humming as if nothing was wrong, letting me know he would get through this too. He was not afraid.

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We had known each other only peripherally. College parties. He was there, always just there, arriving like a shadow, bowlegged in biking shorts, a bandanna holding back his blonde, shoulder-length hair. "Hey, man," he'd say and take a happy hop over to me, extend a hand. He had a wicked smile, Dracula teeth pushed forward into the front row, giving his grin a hint of potential mischief. He smiled like there was always a joke between us, some common knowledge below the surface.

It was my delirium that finally convinced him that we should stop for the night. He had looked back and seen me swerve perhaps, asked me a question I did not answer. Whatever it was, it was enough to make him decide we'd gone far enough. It was the delirium that had made him feel bad and, sitting in the dirt beside the highway while Kenny fixed the bikes and looked for a place to camp, it was the delirium that I treasured, that excuse that I wanted to hold onto. I felt safe in that confusion, knowing I was excused for now from pushing myself further.

A final car zipped by and Kenny climbed the dirt with long strides while I waited at the bottom of the gully. He was made from the hard stuff I was supposed to come from, the all-out masculine rush, determina-

tion, grit. Kenny enjoyed a free-fall down a curving mountain road along the outside edge of a cliff. He howled, zipped passed me with his bony butt in the air, long forearms holding the bars straight. His body was wire and muscle, frog legs coated in cotton blond fur. When I looked at him as I had looked ahead at him on the road every day for a month, I wilted inside.

Kenny was from Murphysboro, the closest town to my own and therefore our primary rivals when I was growing up. It was same town that spawned a wrestler who I could never quite beat, a skinny kid with a long bony face, all arms and legs and torso. I can't remember his name, only that I would size him up every match, look at him across the mat as if he were some kind of strange bug and wonder why I had to go through with it. He had a brown mole on his cheek like John Boy Walton. His face was skeletal, starved and vacant, the memory of a person more than anything that could be perceptively measured or calculated. While the referee went over the rules, he stared at me, stone-faced from the shadows of his eye sockets, shaking his legs and arms one at a time like rubber.

Wrestling was all in the psyche out. For the most part, it was over before it started; either you knew you could beat the guy or he knew he could beat you. I would starve myself on carrots and celery diets in the fifth grade to stay at the 65-pound weight class, and then drink straight honey before the match, squeezing the bear with both hands and feeling the sweetness rush through me like ice water. But when I wrestled Murphysboro, I felt a dread go through my body, butterflies of adrenaline fluttering in my stomach as we shook hands. His grip folded my palm like pita bread. Standing across from him, my will exhaled out of me, leaving me exhausted before we had even started. I knew he could beat me.

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At the edge of the Spanish highway, Kenny appeared on the top of the hill in his black and silver rain jacket. The silver of his jacket glowed as his arms completed long circles as if beckoning someone in the distance. He had picked this spot to camp, not sure about the Spanish laws as they related to camping, but confident about the site, just passed the

crossroads of two highways. There were no towns 20 miles in either direction. The landscape was barren and unforgiving, baked in the daytime and lonely and still at night. At the top of the hill, rows of gnarled olive trees came visible one at a time, carving gray tributaries into the black sky.

Kenny found a safe spot and I sat in the dirt, let my throbbing legs lie flat. Neither of us spoke. Kenny made dinner—rice, noodles and a soup flavor packet—heated with water in an aluminum saucepan on a propane heater. When the wind blew, the flame sounded like a flapping flag, but tonight there was only the hiss of the propane and the clank of a metal spoon against the edge of the pan.

Sitting in the dirt, watching him stir the soup, I wanted to tell Kenny I was better now, that I felt better, but I did not speak. I had decided, even if he was not to blame, he was still no help. To show my weakness was to reveal myself as something less than him. The debate had moved inside of me. He was only a reminder of it, an outside indicator of how far it had gone and how much remained to endure. The real struggle was going on in my stomach, rolled up like a sleeping bag and stuffed into my torso, expanding and filling me with itself.

Kenny asked if I wanted some of his rice surprise. He was trying to be nice, to take care of me. His words came toward me from the edge of a dream that was still unraveling. "Aren't you hungry?"

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When I was nine years old, my older brother Mark rode a stationary bike in a plastic suit and jogged in place under a scalding hot shower to make weight for a high school wrestling match. I remember sitting in the bleachers when they announced his name. "Wrestling for the Carbondale Terriers in the 145 pound weight class, Mark Howie." Everyone stomped their feet against the wooden planks and thunder rose up to the rafters. There was a long pause. We knew Mark was having trouble making weight, that he had been working it off until the last minute. The roar settled into a mumble and rose again as Mark jogged out from the locker room, his headgear already in place, white plastic straps pushing down

thick locks of black hair. His entire body—arms, legs, chest, face—was glowing red.

As a boy, I took this masculine determination to heart, although it did not quite seem to fit in with the rest of me. In the fifth grade, when the coach said some of us were getting too fat to make our weight class, I stopped eating lunch at school. The assistant coach had to come and tell me to eat. I can't remember his name, only that he had a thick black mustache and a pained expression on his face as if making trips to middle schools and comforting wrestlers was as awkward for him as it was embarrassing for me. I remember looking up from my desk and thinking for a moment that someone in my family had died and the coach was here to tell me. I also remember thinking how strange he looked out of his uniform, in his blue jeans and flannel shirt, not quite knowing where to put his hands.

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In the darkness, on a hill overlooking the crossroads of two Spanish highways, I unrolled my sleeping bag across the dirt. The nylon surface stuck to my legs but I was glad to lie down and I felt as though I could die there, sink finally and forever into the ground. That's when we first heard the dogs. They were far off, a series of howlings and short barks that came toward us from across the highway. We lay silent. "Did you hear that?" Kenny said, but before I could answer, the barks came again, still far away but seeming to draw nearer. Kenny motioned for me to stay where I was and he jogged down the hill toward our bikes and disappeared, leaving me alone in the darkness.

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When the wrestling team traveled toward Murphysboro in the high school bus, I would close my eyes and go over moves I had learned in my head, imagine myself using the double grapevine, stretching my leg out to escape a fireman's cradle. I would hope against hope that he would not be there again this year, that he would have moved up in weight class,

decided to pursue another sport, or that his father (who for some reason I imagined must be in the military) had been transferred unexpectedly to Germany. But the lineup sheet always showed us across from each other, and my planning and imagining in the school bus drained out of me as I walked out in the center of the gym and saw him, hollow eyes, bony wrists, his skeletal face expressionless.

I longed for a freak accident, the stands collapsing just as we walked out, the referee tensing up and toppling in a sudden and catastrophic heart attack. But he was there too, same as last year. "Ready, Wrestle!" He said, and it all began again, Murphysboro too wiry to catch, his chin and arms too hard to maneuver. When I was on top, he would go flat on his stomach, splay his arms and legs out like road-kill and wait. I tried to jack him up like a flat tire, but he was too stiff. I tried to work my arms under him like a spatula, but he was too wide. I felt like a bear cub trying to make sense of a turtle, a lesson I had to learn. The screaming from the stands confused me, the clipped directions of Coach Long didn't make sense, "Arm-bar, work it under, work it under." At the end of the match, the referee would hold us side by side, and bring up Murphysboro's arm as he held mine down. When he let go, Murphysboro would shake my hand and trot off.

Kenny had that same bull-like determination that I envied but could only pretend to have myself. When we left New York, he demonstrated his will against the corners of his cardboard bike box. We were standing on East 4th Street in Manhattan, trying to fit both our bikes into the trunk of a yellow taxi. We were on our way to the airport for an international flight to Gatwick. The cab was double-parked and cars were rumbling past.

The olive-skinned cab driver tried to work Kenny's bike box in on top of mine, but the bottom corners stuck out. He stepped back and lifted up his palms as if he could do no more. Kenny stepped up to the trunk. "Oh, it'll fit," he said, slamming the box down with rapid-fire karate punches until the cardboard smashed in at the lower corners and the box fell into the trunk with a thump.

Something about that moment lingered in the back of my mind as we pedaled toward Spain. The further we rode, the less capable he seemed of

bending. We were both suffering, but for Kenny it seemed like part of the equation, a necessary and important part that was not to be given into—we were not to give up. Somehow, he would fit this trip into the shape he wanted, even if he had to break the edges.

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It was day 23 of the bike trip when my will finally gave out and I asked Kenny for help. We had turned away from the Spanish coast and were heading inland toward Madrid. We started the day ascending a long, low grade. Surrounding us was a desert of wilting grape vines and stagnant, baked earth. Kenny adopted a four-beat motto that I heard him breathing ahead of me. "No pain, no heat. No pain, no heat." A dry wind whipped across the plains. Kenny slowed down and I struggled, with the little extra energy I could muster, to pull up next to him. Ahead, the trees at the edge of the road were bending toward us. Garbage skidded past.

"Maybe we should take turns leading," I yelled. "It's too hard riding against this wind alone."

In four weeks of riding, we had never tried to draft off one another, reducing the effort of moving forward by working together, using each other's strength to move ahead. The entire trip, Kenny had been leading and I had been following, trying to keep up, at once exhausted and resentful, trying to prove I was strong but feeling my weakness with every begrudging crank of the pedals.

I asked Kenny again if we could take turns leading. He did not respond. I called out that the wind was too strong to ride against alone.

"It's a bitch, ain't it?" The wicked smile that stretched across his face sent a wave of desperation through me. I saw in that smile a hint that Kenny enjoyed seeing me suffer. It proved something to him, that he had been right about me all along.

"I'll lead," Kenny said, finally, emphatically.

"Don't you think it would be better if we took turns?" I asked.

Again he waited to answer, as if he had become absorbed in the music pulsing through his Walkman. I was sorry I had revealed myself in this way, embarrassed by my weakness. He seemed to wait so I could have

these feelings, so I would feel the full force of my inadequacy. Finally, Kenny took out one of his earplugs and leaned dangerously close to me while he steered with one hand. "What?"

"Wouldn't it be better if we drafted off each other? If we took turns leading?"

"I can't ride like that," he said.

I remembered all we had been through in the past month. Kenny's eyes were forward and he was bopping his head and patting his bars to the beat of music I could not hear. He tucked his head down and pumped out ahead of me, his back curled like a shell. Five miles later, my tire went flat and I screamed ahead to him in what was more of a bellow than a call. He waited 50 yards ahead, watching me sort through my bags for a spare before he coasted back to see what was the matter.

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After I wrestled Murphysboro for the last time, he came up to me after the match, shook my hand and told me how much he had enjoyed wrestling me over the years and how much he thought I had improved. "The first time I won 11-2," he said. "It got closer and closer every time. This time I beat you by one point." It was strange to hear words come out of his mouth. He seemed almost handsome without the headset covering his ears and pushing the hair down into a straight line above his eyebrows. I had not realized our matches were close. I had always assumed he would win and at the end of the match he always had.

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Another car zoomed by along the Spanish highway below me. Kenny appeared at the edge of the hill like a walking shadow. He was carrying something in his hand and when he got close he handed me my bike pump. "I've dealt with dogs before," he said, but he did not sound so sure.

He rested with his eyes open as the barking of the dogs came again, floating toward us across the plateau. Kenny had one hand above his pillow where his bike pump and pocket knife lay side by side. Seeing him

lying there with his hand next to such unlikely weapons made me feel strangely relaxed. I let my arms fall down by my side and unrolled the tension from the pit of my stomach, breathed it out into the night air. My eyes shut and my shoulders relaxed. The dogs sounded scared and I heard in their call a primal bond that was more of a message than a threat.

The next day we arrived in Madrid and my oldest brother, Mark, congratulated us. He told his Spanish friends what we had done and they shook their heads in amazement. "Como burros," they said. Mark translated. "Like mules." He assured us it was meant as a compliment.

A few days later, Kenny left to return to London alone on his bike. I bought a plane ticket instead, feeling at once guilty for deserting him and thankful that I had made a decision to do what I wanted rather than what I felt was expected of me. It was the same feeling I had the day I finally quit the wrestling team, approached the coach with a note from my doctor saying my back was hyper-extended. The doctor had said I could go back to wrestling in a month. I told him I would appreciate it if he didn't mention that in his note.

Kenny and I met up again at the airport in London. He told me it had been a struggle to make it back alone. At the ferry crossing in Spain, he hadn't been able to understand the ticket seller and had to wait more than a day to get a boat to England. We talked about the trip, all we had been through—the rain of northern France, struggling over the Pyrenees, the heat of interior Spain, and that last night, falling asleep to the barking of dogs. It was over. We both admitted it had been terrible, but we had shared something and I regretted all the resentment I had felt toward Kenny realizing it had been hard for him too.

Later, after I got home, I unraveled the orange air mattress I had leant to Kenny for the return trip. In the corner was a tiny, child-like drawing in ballpoint pen of a small home, a swirl of smoke coming out of the chimney, flowers in the yard. That picture reminded me of what Kenny and I had both written in our journals that first night in England, while the mist shook our tent in waves. We had managed only 35 miles that first day, not used to the weight of our packs and confused about directions along the winding, English roads. When we asked a British Bobby for directions, we could make out only half the words. As evening approached, I skidded off

the road, barreled chest-first into a tree, still holding the handlebars as I was tossed against the trunk. Kenny had forgotten the in-soles for his biking shoes and the bottom of his feet were checkered with the pattern of the plastic soles. At the campground, a group of tourists fell silent as we rode up, followed us with their eyes as we led our bikes to a patch of grass, and set up our tents at the edge of an open field. We wrote in our journals before we went to sleep, but did not compare notes until later. That first night, our entries were short paragraphs, ending with nearly the same sentence even though we did not share what we were feeling in words, even if neither of us was willing to admit it. We both wrote, "I want to go home."

David Crouse

What We Own

The evening I arrived home from the army, my father began to cook again. My mother says that I didn't eat the meal he made me that night—that I just moved the food around the plate as I listened to him talk—but I remember how it tasted. It was better than I had expected, and I was as relieved to be back home as I had been to leave six months before.

"You're so skinny," he said. "I should sue. I should get a good lawyer and drag them into court."

He was always threatening to sue neighbors, bosses, and rude sales clerks. It was like a gun he took out and showed you and waved around his head without firing.

"I'm okay," I told him.

We had just driven two hours from the airport, and although it was late at night—so late that it bordered on morning—he had decided that I needed food more than sleep. He had been trying to make an omelet, but at some point had become frustrated and scrambled it up into a mess of cheese and green peppers and spinach.

"It looks good," I told him.

"The secret is a little bit of cream," he told me, as if this were something only the two of us were going to share. "Do you want anything else? Do you want some toast? We have rye bread."

To this day my mother talks about how he blackened her best pots, broke a bowl that had belonged to her great aunt, and salted the food as if he was trying to kill us all slowly. "I don't think he's that hungry," she said. She was sitting across from me, folding and unfolding a paper napkin.

"Where's Tim?" I asked.

She glanced at the ceiling, at his room hidden above our heads. "He wanted to stay up and see you, of course, but he has school in the morning."

"He'll have plenty of time to visit you tomorrow afternoon," my father said, as he brought the pan over to the sink. "He's doing even more poorly lately, if you can believe that. Discipline problems too. I have to hear