

Close to Home
by Chris Bradley

Slowly the man rose from the patch of grass. His bike lay in the gutter a few feet away, its handlebars twisted backward and its front wheel bent. The man leaned to one side, and the other, then shook his head. Long, dark strands of hair slapped his face.

A dozen yards away, and only five minutes from home, Josh dismounted, took a breath, and approached. His front LED illuminated the man in flashes. The man scratched his beard with a clawed hand and shifted his gaze up and down the street. On the edge of downtown, it was dark except for periodic halos under the sodium street lights. The men stood between two, untouched by their yellow light. No cars passed.

Josh switched his light to a steady beam and propped his bike on its kickstand ten feet from the man. Other bikers would have cursed the man and continued on their way—he had come straight at Josh in his own bike lane, and Josh had perceived him just in time to swerve into the street. Josh had stayed on his bike, but the man had struck the curb and flown off.

Josh smelled a trace of something sour—old alcohol, but something else, too, like mold. The man swayed, lifted his eyes to Josh's, then swept them once more along the street.

"Are you okay?" Josh asked.

The man turned to Josh and held. The grime of his face and his black facial hair absorbed and deadened Josh's light, even as the man's green eyes flared. Dirt covered the bare patches of skin on his face, and on his arms where he had rolled up his sleeves, everywhere streaked by sweat. He seemed about thirty-five, ten years older than Josh.

"Are you okay?" Josh repeated.

"I've had the worst day—the worst day." The man's stumbled out, as if he were chewing

something. He stuffed his hands in the pocket of a red sweatshirt that read Roosevelt Middle School. It barely reached his waist. Baggy jeans fell the rest of the way to his feet, which were bare and nearly black.

Josh's apology caught on his tongue. It implied guilt; his dad had taught him that. "Are you hurt? Can I help you?"

The man clenched his hair, let it drop, then seized it again. It glistened, greasy, under Josh's light. "The worst day."

"Where are you going?"

"Whitaker district."

Whitaker, centered around an abandoned two-story warehouse that once produced paper products, lay more than five miles away, in the direction opposite where the man had been riding. Josh knew the man's bike would not even roll that far. "Do you know people there who can help you?"

"Yes." The man ran the knuckle of his index finger across his forehead, following a crease. "My brother Logan."

"Can we call him?" Josh's hand went to his pocket, halted halfway, then pulled out his cell phone. He flipped it open and glimpsed his wallpaper of a Victoria Secret model. He reddened, but handed his phone to the man.

The man took the phone with both hands, his nails scraping Josh's palm, and punched a series of numbers. Josh wiped his hand on his jeans. He listened to the outgoing call. The road was quiet for a Thursday evening; still no cars came. It was only eight o'clock, but the sun had been down for an hour and a half, and vast cloud banks hid the stars above. These clouds appeared dark even in night, and threatened rain. That was all clouds in the valley seemed to do once October began.

People who could be indoors, were. A few houses squeezed between the street's dental offices and law firms, and lamplight showed from their inner rooms. People caught up on the newspaper they had skipped that morning, and maybe a few articles from Wednesday's they hadn't yet read. They sipped wine or cocoa. Down the street, Josh's roommates drank a few beers and prepared to go to Rock 'N' Rodeo. Josh might still catch them if he left now.

The automated voice of Logan's voicemail spoke through the earpiece. The man snapped the phone shut, seemed ready to throw it—Josh lunged forward—but returned it safely. Josh backed away, and the man resumed staring. He peered toward downtown; scattered bulbs remained lit in a few three- and four-story buildings. From the top of the farthest, ten-foot-tall white neon letters read, "PEACE ON EARTH." A set of headlights turned onto the street a mile away.

The man stomped his foot. It made a soft thump on the grass. "If only I had a gun," he said. He turned to Josh.

Josh retreated a few steps. The car would pass in a minute. He could flag it. "Do you know anyone else?"

"No."

"No one?" Josh had once carried in his wallet a business card for a twenty-four hour crisis clinic. He searched for it, then remembered it had been destroyed when he'd jumped into the lake fully clothed during the previous summer. Lacey, floating on her back and sitting up occasionally to sip a can of Steel Reserve, had dared him. Josh did find his tips from work, about twenty dollars. "What if—what if we got you to Whitaker? Could Logan help you?"

"Yes."

"I'll call a taxi. A van, one that will fit your bike."

The man grunted and toed the ground. He shone brighter as the car passed. His eyes

were lively, but the rest of him, his face and body, slumped. He turned from the light and picked at a bush by the sidewalk. He pulled off a leaf, tore it in two, and let each half flutter to the pavement. The elderly man driving didn't turn his head, and the car quickly receded.

Josh dialed directory assistance. Soon he had a van on its way. The company quoted him ten dollars, which would leave Josh another ten in tips for Rock 'N' Rodeo.

The van would arrive in ten to fifteen minutes. Josh remained several yards from the man as they waited. A cricket chirped nearby, then ceased. Briefly, a breeze rustled the sidewalk hedges. Josh moved toward his bike. But the man made a noise—a cough, a hack, or maybe a rough sob—and Josh stopped.

"Did you go to Roosevelt?" Josh asked.

"No, no. Nephew did—Jeremy. Few years ago. He's in high school now."

"In town?"

"Yes."

"I thought you said you didn't know anyone?"

"Well, I know Jeremy. He's at some high school. Don't know which. Logan keeps moving his family around—I go to see my nephew today, and they've moved again. My brother doesn't tell me where. Worst day." The man crouched and buried his head between his knees, his matted hair falling forward in a sheet. With each breath his shoulders rose and sunk. He coughed, and, after several seconds, rose. The man's eyes widened, and Josh tensed. "But a neighbor told me. I persuaded her. I just need to get to Whitaker. I just want to see Jeremy. He won't let me. I was a good uncle, don't you think? I rode to see Jeremy every day after he got out of school." He waved an arm at his mangled bike.

Josh rose to his full height, nearly six feet, and squared his shoulders. "I'm sure—I'm sure you were a great uncle." He glanced at his bike, a few feet behind him, its light glowing.

He stepped back and swung his leg over it. The man watched him, but made no movement.

"Are you going to be all right?" Josh asked. "The taxi will arrive in a few minutes."

"Absolutely." He bowed, lost his balance, and fell beside his bike. He picked at its foam seat, already eaten through. He spoke to the bike: "I can't pay for a taxi."

"I'll cover it." Josh counted ten dollars from his wallet, compressed the bills in a ball, and tossed it to the man.

He cupped the money as if it might melt through his fingers. The first drops of rain fell, and the man placed the money in his sweatshirt pocket. He crossed his legs on the grass, grabbed his feet, and began to rock forward and backward. Thicker raindrops struck and ran off his hair, and darkened his sweatshirt.

Rain pattered Josh's helmet and chilled his torso through his synthetic shirt. He moved to the bike lane and set his light to flash. He pedaled away just as the man began to sing.

"Run, rabbit, run. Dig that hole, forget the sun..."

Josh glanced back after a block, almost veering into the curb. The man hadn't moved. When Josh looked again a block later, the man had blended into the dark. Josh set his gaze ahead and rode as fast as he could. His tires flung water on his face and up his back, and just as his feet began to slip on the pedals, Josh rolled up to his home. The den was dark. His roommates had already left. For ten minutes, Josh sat on his bike in the rain.