BIKER’S GUILT

By Lee Haas Norris

The Vermont valley was so thick with fog and rain I could barely see the black rubber handlebars of my bike as I pushed it along the soaked gravel of the road's edge. The morning was still early, not much past nine, I guessed, but the Ludlow youth hostel lay fifty miles south. In this weather my goal of getting there under my own steam was feeling illusory. First I'd had to stop pedaling. Even worse, I'd managed to veer off Route 7 (who knew how long back), onto an almost deserted unmarked road, dimly and occasionally pockmarked at the sides by farmhouses and barns, and heading nowhere. Or so I assumed until, through the wet grayness, a small sign's scarlet arrow pointed to "Bob's Café" off to the left. The dirt parking lot harbored no cars; the small, gray-shingled café looked dark inside, but, concurring with Lear that nothing would come of nothing, I banged on the front door.

Minutes went by, then footsteps sounded; a porch light flicked on, the door opened, and a mid-thirtyish, stringy, dark man took in my drenched condition and the distress on my face. “Coming down in buckets, get inside,” he laughed, half pulling me and the bike in. Not to worry, he added. He was Bob, the café was for real, but he'd only recently bought the building and, despite the sign, wasn't quite open for business yet. Quickly Bob found a dry shirt and a pair of pants for me to change into. He laid my wet clothes and sneakers next to the hot woodstove, handed me a pair of soft woolen Argyle socks for my cold feet, and ushered me to a stool at the café's counter.

No, I hadn't eaten any breakfast, I admitted, in answer to his question. Neither had he. From an ancient GE Monitor Top Refrigerator, the kind with the motor on top, Bob nimbly removed bacon, eggs, butter, and orange juice; from a pantry shelf he plucked a round loaf of homemade bread and a jar of purple-black preserves—blueberry and blackberry as it turned out. As he transformed fixings into fare with casual efficiency, I told him how I'd washed up on his doorstep this September morning in 1956.
I was about to start my senior year at Barnard College in New York and had spent the summer waitressing at a resort up north on Lake Champlain. The night billing clerk had suggested an appealing end-of-season adventure for me: buy a bicycle with my tip money, pedal my way south through back roads, and sleep in cheap American Youth Hostels along the way. He'd even helped me plot the stopovers on my 500-mile route. On my new, three-speed Raleigh I could make the trip in a leisurely eleven or twelve days, we figured, if I averaged between forty and sixty miles a day. Always up for the untried, I'd taken practice runs to build up my stamina and left three days ago. Until this morning the days had been glorious with brilliant autumn sun.

Bob liked my “spunk,” as he put it. He knew the hotel where I'd worked. He'd done some distance biking himself, though he probably wouldn't be doing any more for a while. An

inheritance from his late mother had let him quit ten years of pushing papers in an office in Hartford. Bob loved quirky, rural Vermont; he wasn't a bad cook, he said with unnecessary modesty; most of all he enjoyed feeding hungry travelers, local folks, just about anyone who came along, and hearing their stories. Whether the café would make it on this lonely little farm road was dicey, he knew that, but he was up for something new, and he'd take his chances, at least for now.

An hour later I was telling Bob about the makeup Botany 101 exam I was facing, when yellow stripes across the wooden counter made me look up through the window to see Vermont made bright again. I'd have to get back on the road fast to make it to Ludlow before dark. Bob scrounged in the fridge, and by the time I'd changed back into almost dry clothes, I found a sandwich and two apples waiting in my bike basket. Bob insisted I keep the Argyles on; my socks were still wet. He stuffed another pair into my pack “just in case.” No, he wouldn't take money for the food; we were fellow adventurers. The one thing he'd appreciate, Bob said, jotting down his address, would be the return of those socks sometime after I got home. They were his favorites; he couldn't say just why.

Of course I'd send the socks back, and all clean, I promised Bob, grateful almost to tears for his kindness as we said good-bye on the sunlit roadside and warmed by the thought of that morning for the rest of the journey. I would mail back the socks just as soon as I returned home, I told myself.

If memory serves, I don't think I went so far, even, as to wash the socks. When I finally wheeled across the Henry Hudson Bridge into Manhattan, my 500 miles at an end, I was bursting with weary triumph. Back on the Upper West Side, where I shared an apartment with two roommates, I had time to throw my own clothes in the Laundromat, time to regale friends with my adventures, including, of course, the stop at Bob's. But days went by. The cheerful impetus to hand wash two pairs of wool socks in cold water for someone who'd entrusted them to me slid almost imperceptibly into a chore to put off until the next day, and then the next and the next. The packing, the sending: the entire project dove deeper to the bottom of my checklist while other concerns more pressing—some perhaps more gratifying—swam upwards: the dreaded botany exam, the first week of classes, formidable new reading lists in Medieval History and 18th-Century Literature. In a couple of weeks the first paper would be due; a new boyfriend dominated my thoughts.

How long could it have taken me to wash Bob's socks, to find the brown wrapping paper, the string, the pen? To enclose a little note telling Bob how warm the socks had kept my feet that night in the cold Ludlow hostel? How long would it have taken to walk to the neighborhood post office, to wait in line at the window, to get the package weighed, paid for, and on its way? Not long. Too long. Years after the socks were eventually thrown out, the address relinquished to the wastebasket, I had replaced guilt with nostalgia whenever I thought of Bob. I told myself he never really expected those socks back.

When it comes to a lifetime peppered with broken promises, you'd think the border between the country of guilt and rationalization would long ago have closed. Instead, I find myself hovering in a no-man's-land between the two more than I used to. Fifty years after that bike trip, the memory of my neglected promise to Bob has been forcing its way to the front of my brain like a soldier's piece of old shrapnel. Remorse and sorrow grow sharper and more painful whenever I spot an old three-speed bike at a garage sale, when I stare at a certain kind of bemused, dark-haired man scrambling eggs at a diner, when I walk along a country road thick with fog and rain, whether in Maine or Oregon.

In self-serving fantasies I imagine knitting Bob new socks from soft Scottish wool. I imagine searching for his unmarked road in central Vermont somewhere fifty miles northwest of Ludlow, to find the café. But if Bob is still alive he's old now, ten or fifteen years older than I am. His road has to be unrecognizable by now. It's impossible the café still exists, even more impossible that if it does, Bob would still be frying bacon behind its counter. I can hope he prospered, that others have entertained him with the stories he craved. Most of all, I hope that if he ever thinks back to the fall of 1956, time and a well-lived life have dulled the disappointment he must have felt when weeks, then months went by and no knobby package of Argyle socks appeared in his mailbox from the thoughtless “fellow adventurer” whose word he'd never doubted.

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