

Impulse Control

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I rode my P.O.S. bike up to the rack. It was a blue *Motiv* called a “Smoothie” but it rode anything but. The bike rack sat in the darkness off the main path at Tempe Town Lake, near the Rio Salado and Mill Ave entrance. I jumped off, kicked down the stand, pulled the cable from the V-brake, removed the front rim and speed-walked into the fall night, wheel in tow.

I didn’t have a lock. I’d picked this spot for low visibility and remoteness. Ample weeds and a bushy tree obscured the rack in the already inky night. It would be hard to tell from the path if the bike was locked up. And if it got jacked, so be it.

As I hustled toward the lake and the cracking concrete underpass of the Mill Avenue Bridge, I scanned the surroundings, darting my head left to right. Somehow, in this busy college town, the park was empty at eleven thirty at night. Just me, the park, the smell of brackish, fishy water and the beautiful, black custom cruiser I rushed toward. Parked on a rise, the front end of the bike rested at a jaunty angle as though on display. It summoned me. I put the wheel from my bike in the cruiser’s front-mounted wire basket, got on and rode away. My veins swelled with adrenaline like a river in a Monsoon storm.

When I’d spotted the unlocked, unattended Cruiser on my second time around the south side of the lake I knew I had to have it. Somehow, thirty minutes later it still sat there, beckoning with beach-bike coolness. Who would be so careless to leave it like that? If it were mine, I’d triple lock the sucker, remove not only just the tires and seat but the handlebars, just to be sure.

I’d wanted a cruiser forever, since at least junior high, when a wolf pack of rich kids started riding them. Those days the cool kids were all decked out in surfer gear to boot: OP’s, Vans and Hang Ten shorts, even though we lived in the Desert. After spotting the bike in the park I could almost smell the sea and see big waves

crashing on a sandy beach. Once on the thing I again got lost in beach-cruiser revelry, narrowly avoiding a head-on with a concrete picnic table.

I was not a bike thief, just a guy out for some exercise, but when it seemed the bike was for the having, I hatched a simple plan. Stow *my* bike, do my best to deter its theft and ride the cruiser to the light rail station. Next I'd take the light rail home to Phoenix with the cruiser and drive back to Tempe in my truck to pick up my bike. It sounded good in my head, but once on the cruiser the poverty of my planning became clear. My stomach drew in and sickened, flabby muscles clenched and my mind sharpened in fight or flight. What in the hell had I done? Poor impulse control found me speeding away on someone else's bike in the opposite direction from my destination, exhilarated and out of my head.

I clamped down the endorphins enough to land back in my body, hauling ass on a one gear, steel-framed, extra long cruiser I'd just stolen, as amazed as anyone could be that I'd ripped it off. I navigated through the concrete grounds of an office complex plaza east of the bridge and headed south toward the light rail station on Mill. I weaved through waist-high cement pylons—the kind decoyed as decorative but placed to deter car bombs—as if getting points for not crashing into them in some video game.

The bike floated like a boat, the wide handlebars and steering more laid back (read: less responsive) than the bike I'd ditched. Also, I'd yet to slow down enough to try the disc brakes, a method I hadn't experienced since my BMX days thirty years in the rearview. I wondered why the bike had been seemingly abandoned. Was it falling apart like my "Smoothie" hoopty of a bike? A little late now to weigh the pros and cons. I stood up and pumped the crank, pedaling distance between me and the scene of the theft wondering what horrible prison sentence awaited for stealing the bike.

I sped through the industrial park and suddenly plunged onto the wide Rio Salado parkway with no bike lights, no confidence in braking and no recollection of how to hand-signal. Was I supposed to make a giant "L" or some other traffic-signal semaphore? Jazz Hands?

Traffic was mercifully light, so I swerved into the left turn lane, but not before cutting off a Prius unnoticed until after hearing its brakes skid behind me.

Heedless of signals, cars or streetlights, I barreled onto Mill Avenue, *not at all* attracting attention. After a little dodging and weaving in traffic in the dark on a black bike made for idling on the beach, I was able to jump the cruiser onto the sidewalk, my heart pumping faster than my legs, light rail station in sight.

A group of five college kids filled the sidewalk in front of me. "On your left!" I shouted. One kid crouched down and another jumped out of the way. The others variously scrambled and split apart allowing me passage, one craning back to let me know my heads-up was on the frantic side.

Once past the students, I met another obstruction. A large blonde woman weaved in a Hoveround Personal Mobility Vehicle in front of me, blocking my path to the station. I slowed, stood on the pedals, timed the curve of her wobbly arc and sped past, nearly brushing her scooter. Would have been awesome to be arrested for knocking over a disabled person whilst in flight from a brazen bicycle theft.

After my getaway, I arrived at the light rail station just after midnight. Actually good timing, as a train was scheduled for 12:05. I dismounted, dropped the kickstand and sat on a metal station chair, bike beside me, acting nonchalant despite my thumping chest, shaking hands and shallow breathing, careful not to engage the two transit cops at the entrance to the station. All Mr. Cool & Casual, so what if my body trembled, I sweated profusely and a front rim from another bike sat in the basket of the cruiser. Nothing to see here, move along. I waited, awash in the inadequacies of my plan, slowly withdrawing from endorphins and adrenaline.

The trains are usually on time, so when 12:10 passed, I became worried. I took solace that the last train would arrive at 12:25. And for now the rail-pigs were busy hassling a man wearing armor, helmet and all, made entirely of tin can pop-tops.

Without knowing what to do I played *Words with Friends* and sent a couple of texts, thinking it better to *actually* do something on the phone, rather than *pretend* to do something. Better than doing some pantomime transparent to all law

enforcement, some fat-fingered dumb-show, like when you notice a cop behind you at a stoplight and start to really get into twirling the knobs on the stereo.

I amused myself with the notion of taking a photo of myself with the cruiser and posting my feat to Facebook, but remembered I was not a complete idiot. Despite knowing I'd be thrown in solitary and beaten daily for what I'd done, I still couldn't help but gaze at my prize. The strong curve of the cross bar, the elegance of the extra long frame. If I could somehow get home with the beaut, it would be a pleasure to cruise.

Lost in thought about future bike rides, I didn't see the pair of rail-stooges approach until they were upon me, eyeing the bike and me. The guy in the lead was stocky, flat-topped and short, the other athletic and tan, a bright tattooed sleeve on his right arm. The classic tragi-comic pair.

"You know you didn't make it, right?" Flattop said, staring at the bike, then me. I swallowed hard.

'Didn't make it?'"

"You didn't make it tonight," said Sleeved, looking away from me into the middle distance. I hoped I understood.

"The last one's sposed to be at 12:25."

"You're outta luck, brah," said Sleeved, obviously put on the college beat for his command of slang.

"Uh, I mean, what do you mean?" I said.

"OK. Lemme explain the situation." Flattop said and paused, thumbs hooked in his utility belt. "Yer *kinda* in a JAM."

"Oh?" I said, feeling weak.

"Yeah, we have to do something about it," chimed Sleeved. "Can't stand it. It happens all the time, guys like you come down here and get trapped."

"I called 'em, more than once about this. Supposed to respond," he said.

"I'm in a jam? I looked up the schedule."

"It's wrong. We called 'em about it," said Flattop. "They're supposed to respond."

"Respond? . . ." I said, my head thumping.

“Yeah to change the schedule online. Last train Westbound weekdays is at 10.19.”

“Ahhh,” I said, exhaling the word as I got to my feet, grabbed the handlebars and kicked up the stand. “Well that sucks.”

“Yeah, sorry man, at least you got the bike.” Offered Sleeved.

“In. . . In. . . deed,” I stammered, side-stepped onto the bike and pumped away north until I found a tall building behind the station. Near a low brick wall out of sight from the station I absently dismounted the bike and tried to breath, tried to think, failed at both.

What an Asswaffle. Why had I indulged this stupid stunt? Criminal mastermind I was not. What now? Ditch the cruiser, conspicuously walk back to the park, put my bike together and ride the twenty miles home? Or ride home on this heavy single gear cruiser? It was doubtful the trek was even possible. Neither bike was suited for long distances, even if they were, I sure as hell wasn't.

I couldn't think of anyone to call, didn't have a retinue of desperados on speed dial. My worst act before this had been in the realm of shooting out a street light with a BB gun in junior high, some years later doing an unsuccessful beer run, or buying a little weed in college.

Thinking of who to call provided two possible solutions. Suddenly, I knew what to do.

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Hours before, on the light rail ride out to Tempe, I'd watched my blue *Motiv* “Smoothie” bicycle sway from an industrial bike-hook. Its heavy pendulum movements were ungainly next to the other beauties hanging from the rack. The others appeared nearly animated, as if lightly touched by phantom wind. I'd purchased the janky, bike-like object on Craigslist for forty bucks, later finding out it was originally sold at friggin' Cosco. The “Smoothie” was a placeholder anyway, a temp. But what a hunk-o-junk.

I'd found myself in the market for a bike when I left the gym one night, exhausted and covered in sweat, to find my trusty Fuji disappeared from where I'd locked it. The Fuji had also been just a bike, a crappy one at that, itself another placeholder, but that didn't stop a sense of momentary helplessness taking over as I stood, bike-free, outside the gym. I knew I'd never see the bicycle again, but still went infantile for a moment, wishing only to close my eyes, open them and find it there, ready to ferry my sweaty ass home.

The violation of the theft snowballed into memories of other things that had been stolen from me. The time my childhood home had been burglarized, the thieves tearing my cheap little all-in-one stereo from the wall. Or recently having an 80-gig iPod, jam packed with custom ripped music and carefully selected playlists, stolen.

But the Fuji's theft primarily triggered the memory of having a tricked out Mongoose BMX bike ripped off from my inner child the day after Christmas in 1980. There is a Polaroid of me, feather-haired and track-suited on the Christmas of my ninth year, standing behind the gleaming chrome Mongoose with killer yellow Motomag rims, beaming. The caption might have read: "Cusping the 80's, a boy and his bike, complete."

Sadly, it was that same Polaroid my mother waved out the windows at pedestrians as the family canvassed the neighborhood in our rusty green station wagon. My mother, top half of her hanging out the front window yelled in a frantic, high-pitched voice: "Have you seen this bike!" The block by block sweep did not yield the Mongoose and there wasn't money to replace it.

So after the Fuji got ripped off, and after an uncomfortable, unexpected walk home following a heavy workout, what little energy remained was naturally channeled into angry, compensatory Craigslist bike hunting. After all, I'd purchased the Fuji on Craigslist and it would likely be sold there again.

Minutes later, my purpose distilled into something constructive. I started looking for a suitable replacement. A while after that, I'd settled on the *Motiv*

“Smoothie.” It was cheap, had a swooping, curved frame as well as dual suspension, and seemed fairly new from the pics.

When I met with the owner the next day, a square shouldered, teenaged relative of Paul Bunyan, I didn’t ask where it had come from, or why he was selling it so cheaply. Instead I took it for a token spin, talked him down twenty, forked over forty bones and loaded the thing into the back of the Scout, having a twinge of buyer’s remorse when I strained to get it in the truck bed.

Watching the mechanical dead-weight sway on the train’s bike-hook, I wondered if the “Smoothie” had been worth it. Riding it was like wading through mud. The gears didn’t shift properly, the seat-post clamp constantly came loose and the neck wobbled, making for comical, sometimes dangerous mishaps worthy of tramps in silent films.

But who cared if it was too heavy and sucked to ride? I was going to Tempe Town Lake for exercise, and everybody knows you can’t have fun while doing that. I pride myself on not being materialistic, except for items that contain experience: books, records, movies. Bullshit, I know. Just another justification to collect stuff, but watching the other hanging, nearly syncopated bikes sway, I coveted.

I was so tired of having shitty stuff. Tired of telling myself my poverty was only temporary. On some level, I know material things weigh us down, know desiring new and shiny things is an empty pursuit. But man, I was tired of my rattle-trap truck banging and wheezing up to stop lights, squealing and clanging away once the light went green. Tired of eating Spam instead of steak, tired of looking down at my scuffed and holey shoes, tired of the holes in my socks. Tired of the husk of this second hand life.

Being poor is hard work, let no one tell you differently.

On the light rail, I dreamed of walking into one of those gourmet bike shops, plunking down six bills for a bitchin’ bike that could fly, ride on water, and give your balls a nice massage.

That, or maybe at the next stop I could grab one of the nice ones on the hooks and make a daring, non-comical escape.

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The cab I'd called from behind the light rail station pulled up near the wall where I waited. I saw the driver before he saw me, my vision eagle-eyed by the specter of a life sentence for bike theft. I'd distanced myself from both Cruiser and extra rim, placing each nearby, but far enough for plausible deniability. The wait had been agony, loitering within view of the scene of the crime, thumb placed firmly in ass.

The twenty minutes it took the taxi to show had been a season of coming down, having shed the exhilaration of risk for the heaviness of guilt. I may as well have stolen a car or robbed a bank: I was a bad, bad bike thief and felt the gravity of my act. Perhaps someone should spank me?

I jumped up, waved manically at the driver, gathered rim and cruiser and cycled to the cab, signaling him to pop the trunk. I jostled the oversized, heavy cruiser into the trunk, the frame and rear end sticking several feet out on the right side. Fortunately the driver had a bungee cord at the ready.

"That's a big one," the moon-faced driver said with a belly laugh as he hopped in, car shocks shaking some.

"Yeah, a beast." I slid into the back. "Okay. We need to go across the street to the park and pick up another bike."

"Okay, but there's nowhere to park."

"Well, how would you feel about putting your cautions on and idling at the bus pull-in over there? I'll hustle up, should take like two minutes."

"Okay chief. What'll do is go on ahead an circle the block an then wait for ya there!" He beamed in the rear view.

"Sounds good!" I said, tone matching. He pulled up to the bus stop. I jumped from the backseat, grabbed the rim from the trunk and ran off into the park, free arm pumping as I booked. The bike was still there. I rigged the rim onto the forks

and rode back to the bus stop on Rio Salado. The driver was not there. Figures, I thought, why would he come back, just like me he saw his opportunity and took it. I began internally ticking off all the incomp moves I'd made that night, when the happy cab driver pulled up and pointed his beaming moonface in my direction.

I allowed myself a heavy sigh, sucked in a new breath and dismounted. Opening the trunk, I awkwardly mingled the two frames, crunching together pedals and forks until the two machines merged into something angular and sculptural, tied down the trunk and hopped in the backseat. I wanted to say "Phoenix town, and step on it!" or some other silliness, but instead instructed him to find his way to a Phoenix-bound freeway.

A little distance and time away from the locus of my criminality, I unpuckered some. I half listened to dude tell about how he owned a Corvette and only did this job for fun. I grunted in the affirmative. I looked in the side mirrors anticipating a screaming posse of 70's trucker-movie cops who were sure to come blaring around the corner, but only saw the trunk flap up and down like a toothless trash compactor. The night was peaceful, the rolled down window tunneling air and the scent of creosote, contrasting the stale cigarette smell of the cab.

"Why you got two bikes?" asked the jolly, apparently retired, Corvette-owning cab driver. I swear his eyes twinkled in the rearview. I was prepared. In the time waiting for the cab I'd cooked up a six-year back-story.

"Yeah. My buddy and I were riding and he got an emergency call and had to leave his bike in the park. He asked me to bring it home in a cab 'cause I took the light rail out here." There was a pause as I prepared for more questions. Instead the driver continued to itemize his impressive personal holdings.

"I got two bikes, too. Ones for racin', ones for toolin' around. Got a quad too n' a Toy Hauler. Love to race them bikes!" His cheap cologne barely masked his sweaty old man smell and despite the rolled down windows, the vehicle reeked of recent cigarettes. An athlete, for sure.

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I worked out a deal with the driver, since he didn't need the money and all, for a flat rate of twenty dollars to get home, off the meter, plus a coupla bucks I could dig out of my change jar once home. Twenty bucks was all I had in my wallet, and I wasn't sure the ATM would consent to me having more. And anyway, it was more than the quote I'd gotten from the taxi dispatcher. Hey, if I'm anything I'm frugal, even in a spiritual crisis. He agreed. *Not too shabby, a deluxe cruiser for twenty bucks*, I thought, not a little sadly.

Once home I ran inside and scrounged up his change-based tip. Couldn't be helped that two of the quarters were stuck together with what appeared to be Big Red gum. I awkwardly poured the coins into his cupped hands and at once apologized and thanked him. After that, I untangled the bicycles, again thanked the driver, whose other car was a Corvette, and walked the bikes back one at a time to my garage.

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I rode the cruiser a couple times, to the store cause, you know, *basket*, and then once around my hood, but was always freaked out, could never enjoy riding it. I felt like it was obviously not my bike and everyone could tell. Felt like a crook, a bad guy. Knew it was inevitable that someday the pissed-off owner would screech up in an old black Caddy, cut me off, lasso me from the back seat and reclaim the bike, but not before grinding my face into the asphalt with the heel of her cowboy boot.

The cruiser became a black albatross circling my detached garage, so one day I rode it to my former gym, parked it at a rakish angle and walked the two miles home.

A couple of months later the blue piece of shit *Motiv* "Smoothie" was stolen out of the back of my Scout as I slumbered in a South Tucson hotel room, the truck not eight feet from my bed.

