

## “The Skeleton Rider”

by T.D. Smith

I stopped my bike on the side of the path just to look at the gorgeous sunset. The light refracted in splendid waves of amber and gold and red as the sun’s waning light caressed the great lake’s ripples. Standing with one foot on the ground and the other on a bike pedal, my hands still gripping the handlebars, I breathed in the autumn air deeply, and took in the Fall scents that intermingled with the freshwater breeze. Boats went back and forth on the horizon and gulls drifted and darted this way and that in the air, basking in the last rays of daylight before the weather turned cold overnight.

“Pretty, ain’t it?” a rickety, aged sounding voice interrupted.

Whirling around, I beheld an old man. He stood five feet and some inches tall. His skin was deeply wrinkled and weathered. He wore small sized jeans that were still too large for him and appeared baggy on his slim frame. A short sleeved white t-shirt (also baggy looking) covered his torso. On his head was a fisher’s cap made from burlap, wide rimmed, for keeping the sunlight of midday off his face. He was quite skinny and appeared to be in exquisite physical condition for one so aged as he. His leg muscles were quite defined bursting with evidence of being exercised regularly. The man was obscenely skinny and clutching his own bike handles between his fists, smiled a toothy, though gapped at some intervals, grin, nearly as wide as his hat’s rim.

“I remember long ago, here...” the man continued. “The canal didn’t always exist, you know? Used to be the traders would have to get off the boats, carry the crates some odd miles on land, then load ‘em onto the next boat one lake over!”

“Yeah, I think I’ve heard about that in history class.” I offered.

The man chuckled, apparently unaware of himself doing so aloud. Was he chuckling at me? The fact I learned it in history class? I did not know, but I found the behavior odd and off-putting.

“Used to look different, this place...there was a time when teepees filled this landscape. Took up the whole shoreline, they did. Canoes, galore! Oh, my how the canoes went. Hundreds of thousands of natives occupied these lands. Then, little by little, they were removed or moved themselves. The land traded wigwams for smoke stacks, steamboats for the canoes.”

I listened to him and was uncomfortable. His story made sense, but he told it as if he knew these things from experience. I met the old man’s dark, brown eyes and nodded in agreement with the historical details. Looking at him, I tried to see underneath the surface, to understand him, to try to figure out what his game was.

The last glimmer of sunlight was reflecting off his pale white skin. As the setting sun passed behind his head, becoming eclipsed from my angle, he appeared almost transparent to me. I squinted and saw him clearer. He was atop a bike like myself, perched on one foot, facing away from the sun, talking to me. His bike looked like an antique, of a style and variety with which I was unfamiliar.

“World was different back then. I remember when a coach came riding through here on his bike. Had the first high school girls’ team come running through here. After those girls’ first competition, the coach excitedly went to his supervisor and showed him the trophy they had won. He was then informed,

by his rather baffled boss, that their school did not, in fact, have any girls' sports. The coach looked at him and told his supervisor he would just let him call all their parents and tell them so!

The man cackled, rearing his head back. Apparently he took great pleasure in this fact and found it hilarious.

"Well, turns out the coach came back later that day to his supervisor. The boss tells him he had had a talk with the superintendent and school board, then says to him, he says, 'congratulations sir, you are now the new head coach of the first high school girls' team!'

The man cackled, quite amused by his own tale, again.

"Course, I remember when the women couldn't even so much as vote! Not too far from here, a little ways South was another set of lakes, big, long things, and deep, too. The women protested not far from there and eventually got suffrage."

"Uh-huh." I nodded, politely. I peered at the man. What was this strange man's game? Why was he speaking to me about these things, like this? I couldn't place his accent, his gestures, to any specific time period or geographical region, yet I knew he had to have grown up in a bygone era, judging by the way he moved and spoke.

"Oh, those lakes look like a gigantic bear swiped deep fissures out of the land with his claw, from space they do! Maybe one did... Course, when it comes to the *Great Lakes*, mind you, my dad always told me stories about watching the glaciers drift down from the icecap in the thaw-out months, claims he saw the big ice cubes rip through the land then gradually fill with water. I still think it was a giant bear, if you ask me!"

My head was spinning. Squinting harder at the man now in the fast fading twilight, I could hardly make him out. How ancient was this tattered geriatric person? He evidently had vast knowledge from across many eras, but told them as if they were part of his own history. How old could he be, if his father claims to have seen the formation of those enormous bodies of water that lie along the Northern boundary of the lower 48? Surely, he was jesting.

Gaining courage, overcoming my surprise, I asked him, "Just how old are you, anyway?"

The man reared back his laugh and cackled again. Then, stopping almost abruptly, turned stony faced, and, leaning over his handlebars spoke close, quiet, and sternly to me, making direct contact.

"Eh-heh-heh-heh! Well, let's just say I've been riding this old thing for a long, long time." He patted his bicycle confidently. When he did so, rust flakes fluttered off it and onto the ground. He picked up his head and laughed once again, a veritable howl.

As he howled, the moon rose. Its light flooded across the lake and illuminated the scene once more.

As its light engulfed us, at once the man's flesh and bone disappeared, and nothing but long, pale white bones, a skull atop them with missing teeth, and his fisher's hat remained sitting on that bicycle!

“Beware, boy!” the man chortled, “don’t end up like me! Stop your riding and pay attention to people in your life once in a while, or it will pass you by and they will leave. You’ll be all alone and cold and have nothing but to keep on riding your bicycle, forever! One day you may even have died and never realized it!”

A chill shot down my spine and an ominous feeling sunk hard in my gut.

The skeleton continued cackling. He pressed down hard on his bike pedal and gaining momentum, pulled his other boney collection of phalanges and metatarsals onto the opposite pedal, and pushed to propel his bike forward. Down the sloping hill he went, and onward toward the lake, until he had left my presence entirely, disappearing into the night and presumably, eventually, over the horizon.

Squinting, I thought I made out a fleeting figure, spindly, possibly emaciated, and of monumental height, with incredibly long arms, dancing on the horizon. Straining my eyes and shaking my head, the figure vanished. Confused, I stood transfixed for a few long moments.

I could still hear the skeleton’s cackle for a bit, gradually fading from my ears long after the sight of him had disappeared from my eyes. I turned and sped away from that sound as quickly as my poor little bike could muster.

Shivering, quivering, I rode on at once as fast as I could, scared out of my wits, not stopping or speaking or comprehending anything until I was safely home and had slammed and locked the door. Only then did I rest my weary crown next to warm, safe home and hearth.

Many years have passed between now and then. I still recall the skeletal rider at times, but usually in the dead of night when I am alone. I have never dared recant the tale, and it is only now that I have gained enough gumption to even write it. That haunting advice of his, that relationships, family, and the like are more important than personal fancies, such trivial pursuits we often put above others, I have done my utmost to heed; there has been many a time I have left work until tomorrow when still more I could accomplish, or foregone a workout to spend time with my family, for fear of the skeleton’s words.

I know not from where the ghostly man came nor how long he had done so, but my imagination and intuition tell me he had ridden long and far before he met me on that unnerving, chilling night and for many generations, and after our encounter, he just kept right on riding, on and on forever.

The End