

Rolling into Host: A cross-county cycling trip raising awareness of America's affordable housing crisis

University of Wyoming Honors Program
International Studies & English
Courtney Kudara
Advisor: Diane Panozzo

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Courtney Kudera, Dr. Diane Panozzo
Honors Program
University of Wyoming
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Bicycling over four thousand miles promoting affordable housing, I witnessed the repercussions and efforts made concerning one of America's most concerning social and economic issues, affordable housing. As a Bike & Build participant, my team and I experienced and were able to directly discuss the issue as we crossed the southern United States. This creative project presents a portion of America's affordable housing struggles through a creative non-fiction narrative. While affordable housing is the focus, topics including cycling and communal living will also be addressed. Primarily, this creative non-fiction encourages discussion regarding affordable housing through an entertaining lens. Issues such as disaster relief, sustainability, temporary housing, as well as zero-waste construction will be discussed in their respective regions and states. First-hand experiences will be the primary focus; however, additional research-based information is also included regarding specific locations' affordable housing struggles. Characters will represent my teammates and our experiences as we crossed the country. This will include discussing interpersonal interactions with hosts, affordable housing affiliates, as well as other individuals met along the way. Each interaction and mention will highlight either communal living, cycling, or affordable housing. Stylistically inspired by Born to Run, the goal regarding this creative non-fiction is to be informative about an important issue while remaining entertaining.

Straining to hold my duffel bag, I walked up to her as she sent a message to me describing what she was wearing and where she was standing. She stood with her head down, in dressed in all black, with dark short hair under a beige Harvard ball cap.

“Kat,” I said uncertainly.

“Oh, thank god you’re here!” she exclaimed as she threw her arms around me. I caught my breath as I caught her; we had only chatted once or twice, but, in an instant, she made me her best friend. We loaded our duffle bags, and her bike into an Uber, to wait in a hotel room until Krista arrived.

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Morning streaked between the palm tree leaves into the hotel room after our last night in a bed for the summer. Our Uber drove us up and across bridges that elevated our nerves until we slowed in a lush, rich neighborhood. The houses loomed over us with flawless trim and shining tall windows. The lawns were cut from a magazine, clean and perfect. Each had a golf cart and spotless driveways. Taking turns pointing to the homes, we tapped the car windows as if it would make them ours.

We emptied our things onto the absurdly sparkling asphalt parking lot in a rich part of Jacksonville, near the water. Wondering the church, which had a strange number of confusing staircases, we searched for some resemblance of Bike and Build, praying it wasn’t a hoax.

“Paige?” she doubted with a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as we approached the picnic tables.

“Riley,” I answered with a grin.

She reached out to give my hand a shake.

“Call me Rye.”

I’d met Rye over a phone call several months back, when Bike and Build was the furthest thing from my mind, drowning in the college life stresses.

“Hey,” the other line echoed.

I stared at the lobby’s brick wall, attempting to remember why a Michigan number would be calling me.

“It’s Rye.”

The line sat silent.

“From Bike and Build,”

A blurry, in between classes, memory surfaced where I ensured that this was a good time to schedule a phone call. As a leader, she was responsible for checking on my fundraising as well as other pre-trip requirements. It was mandatory that each rider fundraised a minimum of five thousand dollars before we were allowed to ride. As a scholarship recipient, my fundraising was quite a bit different. The scholarship covered three thousand five hundred dollars of my fundraising requirement. On the phone, Rye reminded me that I still had a little over three hundred dollars left to fundraise. Dread had filled my stomach when she reminded me, as I had been reminding myself.

Less than a month later she stood before me. Wearing a blue button down fastened to the neck with paint speckled running shorts and Chaco’s, she tossed a sharpie my way, instructing write my label all my things. Regretfully, I unpacked my bursting duffle to scrawl Paige across everything.

“Paige!” Alice called, as her blonde chunk of hair fell over her eyes.

“Alice!” I cried, reaching across her bike to embrace her.

Fresh off a train from D.C., Alice and I stood, each a bit shocked. We met a year before studying in South America. A girl on our program, Kelly, had done Bike and Build a year and a half before. Inspired by Kelly, Alice and I had both signed up for Bike and Build without knowing the other applied. When the roster for the Southern route came out, I was pleasantly surprised to see her name.

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The alarm rang, six thirty had come to the east coast and earlier than what I was ready for. Awkwardly rolling off of my sleeping pad, I crawled forward to find my toothbrush and build day T-shirt. Dressed, I tunneled through a garbage bag to find a bagel to coat in peanut butter then stepped outside barefoot to chew it as the sky changed from purple to pink.

Our first build day was with Beaches Habitat for Humanity in Jacksonville. They were working on their 12th house in a community full of pastel duplexes. We gathered around a wooden picnic table that threatened to give a splinter to anyone who came too close. Under a sweat rag and hard hat, the site leader told us where to find tools and the first aid kit and stressing the sunscreen’s importance no matter how tan we were or wanted to be. Afterwards, our team set off to tackle different jobs, from roofing, to painting, and even installing doorknobs.

I was assigned blocking or installing portions of 2x4’s for cabinet installation. My tool belt hung around my waist with a hammer and nails bouncing as I marched up and down the stairs. Sawdust swirled in the construction site’s air, filling my nose with pine. I held a board in place and watched Emmy toenail, or hammer a nail in at an angle, with only a handful of swings.

Her braid obeyed, thick and blonde, stayed put together under her Kentucky ball cap. She would swing the hammer back from her elbow and hit the nail on the head every time. Seemed simple enough, and it was my turn now.

I swung my hammer, one, two, three, four, five...seventeen, eighteen... twenty-one, twenty-two... thirty-four times. Staring at my final product, a cock-eyed, crooked nail stared back at me. Not much changed throughout the rest of the afternoon, only the amount of sweat my shirt absorbed. I paid many compliments to Emmy, attempting to subdue my frustrations, praying that maybe I would miraculously improve over lunch.

After knocking our hard hats on the lunch tent frame, we gathered around the wooden tables with heaping plates of burgers, pasta salads, and sweets. The project coordinator shouted for our attention, introducing a thin woman in her mid-sixties.

“The house you all have been working on today is the house I will be moving into soon,” she announced.

“I just finished up my hours on Saturday. Now since I am older, I can’t do all the work that you have been doing today. They hardly trust me to swing a hammer,” she tittered.

“I couldn’t be more thankful for the opportunity to live in one of these homes. I remember going through the application process and receiving notice that I had been selected to live here. It was a very emotional time. I wasn’t expecting it.”

She explained that she was required to work three hundred sweat equity hours, or volunteer hours, at Beaches before she could move in. With the help of friends and co-workers, she was just about to reach her three hundred hours. Her explanation of the opportunities Beaches provided her didn’t stop there.

She went on to explain that a home is hard to hold without some education; Beaches strives for its residents to succeed in their homes. Through a series of workshops and classes, residents learn about home ownership, basic maintenance, green homeowner practices, predatory lending, how to write a will, home décor as well as several others.

Reaching down into her purse, she pulled out a stack of small, pocket sized pictures. “Now, I am a Grandma, and you know grandmas; they love showing pictures of their grandkids. This is my granddaughter, she’s six and she is the reason you all are building that home.”

The pictures circled the team, making their way to me. I held it in my palm to see a little girl with long brown hair, pink shoes, and a large, nervous smile. She was on the back of a pony gripping the horn of the saddle.

“Her mother, my daughter is a heroin addict, and I have had custody of her for a couple years now. After several court battles, I have been granted full custody and she lives with me now and will be living with me in this house. Now, what I love the most about what Beaches is doing is their scholarship program.”

Partnering with Beaches, the Scheidal Foundation provides two scholarship opportunities for residents. The first being a four-year scholarship to the University of Northern Florida covering the cost of campus housing, meal plan, tuition and books. By being a Beaches resident, her granddaughter will have to apply to the University of Northern Florida, be a Florida resident, complete a FASFA, live on-campus, and demonstrate a commitment to community service. There is also an opportunity through Florida State University in Jacksonville. This two-year scholarship can be obtained by Beaches residents as long as they complete a FASFA, are a Florida resident, pursue a degree, and maintain a 2.0 GPA in pursuit of an Associate degree or a 2.5 in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree.

Affordable housing became a problem in Jacksonville as it suffers from gentrification, or the process renovating or improving a housing district so that it conforms to middle class standards or higher. This concept may seem helpful; however, when a community, area, or city is gentrified it has a significant impact on the community previously living in the area. As more and more people move in, the area becomes more desirable, housing prices increase considerably. Individuals and families originally occupying the area may sell their house because it is worth more or leave rentals as rent increases due to increased property value. This ultimately pushes out the original community, replacing them with individuals and families of a higher class, changing the community and culture of the area, and displacing its former residents.

Gentrification does not only affect the housing market. As an area becomes gentrified, residents begin to move in with higher incomes and a willingness to renovate or build new homes. This initially brings more money into these communities, boosting their economies. As higher income residents move-in, they have more disposable money to spend at less expensive shops, restaurants, and other services. Eventually, as the area becomes more popular, prices begin to increase because residents can afford the higher prices, driving up the cost of living. This increase in cost of living also pushes out original residents, changing the dynamic and culture of the area.

In Jacksonville's case, gentrification had pushed many lower income residents away from the property closer to the shore. During our build day, the employees and volunteers with Beaches explained how impossible it is for lower income residents to live anywhere near the water. The shore is surrounded by homes that were far from affordable and had ran out past residents with the higher prices.

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The day finally came when we rode our bikes as a team for the first time. When we woke up we all dress in our kits, bike shorts, chamois (sham-mēs) and a bike jersey to meet in the parking lot for bike orientation. We had spent the morning doing practice drills. There was chalk outlining a pretend stop sign and possible obstacle on the road. The first fall happened to Danielle. She was practicing her look back and trying to call the number of fingers that Chris, who introduces himself as Cake, was holding up. In the midst of it her handle bars twisted, and her bike wobbled.

She wasn't the only one who fell either. Rye stood at the end of the stop sign drill. Skidding on her cleats, Jamie tipped over onto her already skinned knees. Blood dripped onto her shin as she went to the back of the line to try again.

During our shake down ride, a practice ride that took place that afternoon, someone yelled, "Get off the fucking road!" from the opposite side of a four-lane highway. Not everyone agreed with what we were doing, riding across the country or supporting the affordable housing cause, but if we had quit riding the first time someone did not want us there, we wouldn't have made it out of Jacksonville.

Rehearsal was over; the real show started, it was wheel dip day. That morning we began what would become a daily routine, up at 4 a.m., thirty minutes to pack the trailer, then breakfast, trash bagels specifically, overnight crew sweeping for anything left behind, a quick bike check, then we were off. We rode approximately two miles to Ponte Verde beach.

“My bike is so heavy,” I thought at I hoisted it onto my shoulder to walk to the water. The sun was shy that morning, only occasionally peeking out from behind a cloud. Both the water and the sky were gray, but we were all buzzing with excitement.

“Should we go in the water?” Kat solicited me, looking at the ocean.

“Our chamois will be wet all day, but it might be worth it,” I stared out at the blue. I was holding both our bikes since she had been off taking pictures.

“Let’s do it!” she exclaimed, running to the water leaving me immobile with our bikes occupying both my hands. At first, I thought I would be able to flip both bike by myself, leading me to shout for help as mine and Kat’s wheels tangled. Alice ran to my rescue, taking Kat’s bike while I flipped mine then hers.

I ran into the water, after taking off my jersey; I had chalk in the pockets I wasn’t ready to ruin. It was perfect temperature for a bath, even though I had showered the night before. At first, I was not going to get my hair wet, but soon changed my mind after watching Nathan and Carter play in the deeper water, tempting me to also go deeper. Natalie laughed watching them come out of the water, Nathan trudging through the powerful waves while Carter flipped his hair, pretending to not even feel the water.

Walking up the beach, bike back in hand, just as heavy as before, a woman came up to me as I sat attempting to get a better grip.

“What is this? What are you guys doing?” she asked in a thick Russian accent from behind her dark bug eye glasses.

“Well,” I started, struggling to conjure the exact words. “We are biking across the country advocating for affordable housing. We each raised five thousand dollars to go on this trip. A portion of it went towards programming the rest goes towards affordable housing. So, any donations, including food, is really important so we can give more to affordable housing.”

My cheeks blushed at my feeble attempt to explain what I was doing soaking wet in my full cycling kit, with sand in every place it shouldn't be, failing to put my cleats on or hold onto my bike.

“Did you guys just finish?” The woman asked excitedly.

“Oh no, no, no,” I replied, beating my socks against a wooden pole, nearly losing my balance. “Today is our first day.”

“You said you need food, here, here, take this,” she forced a grocery sack in my already full hands.

“Thank you so much,” I smiled back to her, officially losing my balance, giving up on the cleats. I took the sack, and bent down to grab my cleats, my bike dangling from my shoulder.

“We must go,” she grabbed the arm of the woman who had been standing next to her. “Good luck,” she bade good bye.

I stumbled, barefoot down to the concrete. Opening the bag, I found two ears of barbecued corn inside. I laughed, corn.

“I got corn!” I announced. I held the ear out for everyone to take at least one bite before we started.

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The rain lightly drizzled around us as we climbed our first large bridge. Luke, Thomas, Claire, and I rode into St. Augustine. Upon arrival, we played some pick-up basketball with some kids from the church, waiting for the doors to be opened. Once we were all settled I embarked on conning someone to help me change my tires; I had no idea how.

“Hey Luke,” I called to him from across the way. “Would you be able to help me change my tires?”

Since I had idiotically left my tires in my packed duffle when everyone else was changing theirs, I now faced the consequence, dragging Luke along with me. I hauled my bike to a grassy area behind the dumpster, and Luke met me there. The thing about tubeless tires is that they have sealant to allow them to be tubeless. If there is a puncture in the tire it is automatically filled by that sealant, convenient when you run over a staple, not when you want to change to tubes.

“What did you do before Bike and Build? Did you just graduate?” I asked.

“I studied architecture at Penn State; I just graduated,” Luke said in reply to my question. He ran his hand backwards through his thick, red hair trying to manage to put my new tire back on. My tires were absurdly difficult to take off and put back on; he later asked me if I could have possibly bought the wrong size, but eventually they went on.

“That’s what I thought, I don’t think I have ever met someone who studies, or studied I suppose, architecture,” I paused contemplating the concept of architecture. “Would you consider it an art or a science?”

“This is going to sound a bit clique, but it has to be both. That’s what’s so beautiful about it,” he replied as he squinted his small, light blue eyes to find the washer I had dropped in the grass. He described the its beauty and complexity, emphasizing its opportunity for sustainability. Architecture surrounds us all the time, yet it doesn’t seem to receive the credit or thought it should he explained as I watched him work. I had tried to help, but all I could really do was try and convince the tires to go on. Luke would twist and work the tire, then hand it off to me, taking turns using our hands, then tire levers, then back to hands. Finally, about an hour and a half later, my bike was ready to go with new tires.

“Oh, my goodness,” I said wiping sweat from my brow as Luke placed my tire into its spot, tightening the axle. “I cannot thank you enough; sorry you didn’t get to explore the city more.”

“Don’t even think about it. I had time. I wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t wanted to.”

Wondering into the youth house, I took the narrow stair to the second floor. The air conditioning was an incredible relief; it made the exhaustion slip away and made me feel as refreshed as I could be.

“It’s a shoe line. That’s how we know who is next,” Natalie explained the row of twenty-three bike cleats along the front of the couch.

“Ronnie is next,” she said pointing to the small framed, dark curly haired fairy that lay on the light couch in the corner, whose cleat with a circular cinch sat, 18th in line.

I put my cleat down five after her, making me sixth in line for a shower, a perfect opportunity for a quick nap. I woke to a laugh so joyous and infectious it seemed fake. It brought life to the room, causing me to open my eyes. Kurt sat, same as I was, jersey off on the couch next to mine laughing with John about something. Heather came out of the shower.

“Hey Ronnie, it’s your turn for the shower,” John said hesitantly from his end of the couch.

Her eyes popped open. “Yay!” she skipped to the shower, leaving us to laugh at how she woke up. After her quick shower behind the accordion blind it was my turn.

It was a dark room with a shower head that was about thirty years old and a bath mat soaked from too many wet soles, but the water was hot and clean. It washed away all the sand and salt from the ocean that morning and any road trash, or general sludge, my sticky body had picked up along the way.

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“Okay, thanks everyone for allowing us to arrange this last presentation for this afternoon. I am sure you guys are all tired, so just bear with me,” Natalie announced behind the projector light. She began to talk about affordable housing challenges from around the nation, and how Bike and Build was working to combat this problem. My eyelids drifted shut, but I snapped them back open, then my head began to bob.

Claire riding in front of me. Out of nowhere her rear tire made a large popping noise. My eyes snapped back open. Only one slide had changed, I was dreaming for only thirty seconds, stress dreams already.

The presentation lead into a discussion. At first, it was easy to talk about the challenges that people were facing as they searched for affordable housing, but the conversation began to morph. I watched as the same idea bounced between the same four people; I sat irritated and exhausted.

May: Jacksonville, FL -> St. Augustine, FL

Thomas and Taylor bounced back and forth, more of a conversation than a discussion. Privilege, privilege, privilege, I am privileged, you are privileged, we are privileged, thank you for recognizing your privilege. Hard work could solve this; anyone can work from the bottom. We can make a difference, we can pull them up.

What is privilege? Why are we complimenting each other on recognizing each other's privilege? Let's talk about making a difference that is invited and wanted. We do not hold all the solutions; let's talk to those struggling and provide them help that they may need. We can't know all the solutions, it's the nature of the beast we call society.

My hand shot into the air. I began to express these thoughts, but I sugarcoated them. I have to live with these guys for the rest of the summer.

The bridge struck white against the blue of the sky and the sun streaked across the water. My quads burned as I pushed the pedals down and around. A pelican with its large beak flew low, stretching to reach the next sand bar. The ocean seeped into our pores and saturated the crisp morning air fragrant with salt.

The shoulder was littered in debris, glittering against the pavement. Bottles, old tires, glass, and bungee cords were unavoidable. We were halfway across when I noticed something strange about Alex's back tire.

Almost instantaneously, Alex shouted, "I think I'm flat," over the morning traffic. There was no way we were going to be able to change the tire on the side of the bridge. The shoulder was only a few feet wide and there was lots of traffic zooming past. The only option was to walk the next three miles of the bridge.

"A parking lot," Eli pointed and shouted. Eli, Alex, Claire, and I made our way over to the visitor's center parking lot. Alex began to deflate and unseat her tire. A small ridge runs along the edge of all bike tires, sealing them tight when the tire is filled with air. When you deflate the tire, the seal remains until you press the ridge out of its places to remove the tire. Pressing with her thumbs, she twisted and turned trying to get her tire off the rim. When the tire finally fell off several blackened dollar bills fluttered to the ground.

Ian, our program director, had advised us that you can patch a tire with a dollar bill. Often it was difficult if not impossible to find the hole in the tire. It will usually be a small slit that can only be found by turning the tire inside out, running your fingers along the inside of the tire, and closely watching the rubber for any imperfections. Alex found the hole in her tube, decided that it already had too many patches, and replaced it with a new tube.

We sat on the curb as we waited, attempting to listen to music off my phone, but the traffic was far too loud.

Claire sat on the curb rubbing Biofreeze on her knee. Recently, it had begun to hurt her when she rode. She claimed it would click and was painful whenever she bent it, especially when she pulled up on her pedals. This morning was no exception.

“I don’t know if I should call the van or not,” she pondered.

“I don’t mess with knees,” I contributed.

“If you’re hurting,” Alex mentioned with the turn of her head. “You should call the van. It’s there to help you if you’re hurt.”

Alex returned to attempting to reseat her tire. She twisted and curled her long fingers around the tire. Sweating, she continued to hold the tire against her hip and twist and turn to try and get to back on the rim.

“Here, let me try,” I offered to Alex.

I proceeded to attempt the same technique as her. Twisting and turning, even praying, that the tire would go on.

“I’ll give it a go,” Eli took the tire from me.

I watched as he continued the same routine attempted by all of us. His ambition lasted far longer than mine. He worked on the tire for the following fifteen minutes until finally, it snapped into place.

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May: Gulf Breeze, FL -> Coden, AL

“We’re cruising,” I smiled glancing at my computer to see we were going 19 mph. We were pedaling along the water. It was a light blue with white sand surrounding us on all sides. It was as if we were daring the sand to change to ocean. Attempting to catch up with everyone else, we examined the faded chalk and compared it to the cue sheet. Turning left and right, we wondered around until we became lost. Our stomachs were growling, as were our attitudes, when we finally found lunch at a local church that had opened its doors to us.

“We’ll try to make it to the ferry,” Eli and Alex nodded at Carli and Nate. We were supposed to take a ferry across the bay or drive over an hour to get to host by the land route. While we attempted to make it to the ferry on our bikes, the heat held us back. I tried to push Alex and Eli to come faster but we couldn’t keep the quick pace we had held earlier. Alex was dropping back. Eli rode alongside her the entire way. I pulled off at a small boat dock with rocks that lead to the shore next to it.

“I don’t think we’re going to make it,” Eli started.

“That’s okay,” I said, though I was clearly disappointed. I had this obsession with finishing. I was always looking to ride for as long as I could. My ambitions made me insensitive.

Now, I don’t know if Eli and Alex saw my disappointment; I can’t speak for them. I tried to make the best of it. The water was beautiful, and I knew it would be one of the last times we’d see the ocean before we reached the Pacific.

After removing our tires so the bikes were ready to be loaded, we hopped in the water. A small hermit crab came scuttling through the sand as the tide went in and out. Having never seen a hermit crab before, I shouted at Eli and Alex on the shore.

“Guys, guys, it’s a hermit crab!”

“Wait really,” Eli responded. His eyes drew a question mark across his forehead. He pulled off his cleats and long socks, that ended half way up his calves, and sauntered down the rocks, hopping into the water right next to me.

“You pick it up,” I squealed.

He grabbed it and put it on the log in front of us. Alex watched us examining the crab crawl across the log from the shore. She rubbed sunscreen into her pale skin, that matched her short, curly, red hair. When the crab reached the end of the log, it fell off and plopped into the water, happy to escape our curious eyes.

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“We’ve been looking for a beach,” Carli said as she scrolled down on her phone with her dark curls blowing back out of her face from the A/C. “They all seem to be private, but I say we go to this one.”

All the homes were on stilts, painted pastel colors with huge areas for cars. They stared down at us with their updated exteriors. We had a little over an hour until the next ferry, so we pulled into a house with a relator’s sign stuck in the sand.

“They said no one has been here in over two weeks,” Nate said after asking the neighbors if we were allowed to be here. “They told me we should go for it.”

Stripping our jerseys, we ran into the water. It splashed, then crawled against our legs; it was full of thick green algae. Carli swam next to me and she ducked under a wave that I had choose to jump. She came back out of the water with her hair down over her face going, “Ow, ow, ow.”

Shaking her head and hands she ran to the sand, sat down, and pulled her hair back.

“It had to be a jellyfish,” she said as her skin began to swell. The red of the sting could be seen through her tan. She had stings on her shoulder, back, and forehead.

Nate looked at sting across her back.

“Must’ve been a loose tentacle because they don’t look too bad.”

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That evening we stayed in a crisis relief center; these now litter the shoreline post-Katrina. It is obvious that the disaster had and still has a significant impact on the people of these communities. Upon opening the doors, the scent of popcorn filled our noses and welcomed us to the snack bar along the back wall.

“Here follow me,” John said as I enquired about his chocolate milk. We all began to mingle and compare daily stories as we munched on peaches, waiting for dinner time.

Two women ensured that we were taken care of, with help from their church. They introduced us to one of their daughters. She had just recently graduated high school. Thin pride could be heard as they talked about the cake they had at her graduation.

Our humanity is evident in every second. There, it was recognized for what it was, battered, tired, stung, and hungry. I never became accustomed to this, living in others’ generosity.

May: Coden, AL -> Latimer, MS -> Pearlinton, MS

We sailed across and down the busy bridge. Our tires bowed to our miniscule handlebar adjustments, praying we didn't miss and end up sprawled across the asphalt, because, in Mississippi, small raised square reflectors live on bridge shoulders.

To keep the route safe, we twisted and turned through the residential streets, passing a Denny's, and gas stations. That morning included a few short detours. The first being a light house. Before we arrived, I was picturing a red and white striped light house along some rocks that broke the waves. Instead, we crept past a large dead fish to cross a concrete bridge that was missing half of its railing to reveal a hurricane battered light house. It was covered in graffiti as high as an arm could reach and all the way around the base. "BBSUS18" was already scrawled in big letters across the front with a perfect square of everyone's initials, all twenty-eight.

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Pulling over, Rye began to search on her phone for a coffee shop. While stopped, a man, working outside on his garage, came up to us. Only his bell-shaped hat, that looked like it was made of sod, made him seem more like a fairy rather than a middle-aged man.

"Good morning!" he greeted us, walking towards us gayly.

Thomas answered him with a toothy grin and enthusiasm. Keeping his interest on Kurt and Thomas, Rye and I watched as he spun a few stories for them.

"Yeah, those are nice bikes, but I have myself a little one speed bike over here. And man, it is just perfect, I ride it to work, to the grocery store," he paused pondering another location, "and the hardware store. It's nothing fancy but it works."

May: Coden, AL -> Latimer, MS -> Pearlinton, MS

“Yeah, I can imagine; the bike doesn’t have to be fancy to be useful and important,” Kurt said in a soft presentation voice, addressing him as if he were his professor.

“Oh, but you know, I really must be going. Can’t talk out here all day!” he said, turning to leave before any of us could object.

We all exchanged glances and grins.

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B & B was written in the middle of the street pointing to a home. It was definitely us, there was easily 10 bikes flipped in the front lawn of the house on the corner. Standing on the corner was a man, waving to us as if we were his child’s friends coming over for an afternoon. His red t-shirt, cargo shorts, and ball cap fit perfectly in his Dad role. We unclipped, joining him on the lawn.

Welcomes were had through introductions, handshakes, nods, and smiles as we added our bikes to the pile and began to walk across the lawn.

“My daughter Katy did Bike and Build in 2014,” he said, with a cloud discoloring regular discussion.

“How cool!” I exclaimed. Hearing and learning about alums always made me excited.

He turned his shoulder to begin walking back to the house.

“Unfortunately, she took her own life last year.”

His sorrow washed over us like the constant rain in Florida; it drenched us in an instant. His daughter.

May: Coden, AL -> Latimer, MS -> Pearlinton, MS

When we came inside we saw all sorts of smiling, familiar faces. A few were sipping on Gatorades while other popped grapes into their mouths. Ann, his wife, stood in the dining room with them, laughing about their stories.

“We’d only come here for a few days. We usually rent out the place when we’re not around and it’s been rented out for the past two weeks and the next rental begins in a few days.”

The home was beautiful. Painted a light blue on the inside with beachy décor. Paintings lived on the walls along with pictures. As it turns out, Ann is an artist and painted all the artwork in the home. It was all nautically themed with muted tones, simple, and elegant.

Over my right shoulder there were pictures of a wedding amongst all the others. I figured it must be their son from how they’d spoken about their family. There was one photo merely laying on the kitchen counter. Her eyelashes were frozen and her eyes themselves dominated the shot. It was evident that she had been skiing or snowboarding as you could see a hint of her goggles in the bottom of the frame.

We crowded around the table as Scott brought out a book. It was thick with a picture of a Bike and Builder on the front. Katy was holding her bike over her head at the Grand Canyon. Along the side in white letters and it read “What Katy Did”.

Alex picked it up and I read over her shoulder. My heart filled with anguish and my eyes with tears as I skimmed the first chapter over her shoulder.

Katy had been battling that lion that was always there, though sometimes sleeping. Scott talked with our team about his career as a writer while I read. He told them how he worked for a small newspaper, landed a better job, then his career really took off. After Katy’s death, he decided to write a memoir about her

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The morning crept closer to noon as groups began to file out. Lunch was only a few miles away.

“Can I ride with you to lunch?” Scott said with his helmet in his hand.

“Of course,” Cake replied.

Scott rode with them to lunch while Ann gave the few groups that were left a tour of the house.

It was beautiful. It seemed as if the rooms had been torn directly out of a Better Homes & Gardens Magazine. Just as we were about to walk outside I noticed a small figurine at the top of the lamp. A hummingbird flew frozen, drinking from a small shower that would never wilt.

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Kurt and I raced down with Ronnie and Rye at our heels, to make it to the water. We jumped in the water.

Kurt and I stood in thigh deep water with our chamois pulled high on our waists.

“You two look like the Ocean Spray guys,” Ronnie observed.

We leaned our shoulders back and began to laugh at the accuracy of the comment.

The skies began to darken and purpled with warning of a thunder storm. Everyone was ushered out of lunch to continue on. Since we were one of the last groups to arrive, we were one to the last to leave.

“We want to let you guys finish so make sure you hustle to avoid the storm,” Ronnie encouraged as we put on our helmets and gloves. Bike and Build has two safety rules that were

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working against us, waiting 30 minutes every time you see a lightning strike and being in to host by 4 p.m.

The horizon was bruised. Water quaked back and forth underneath the bridge. We turned left at the bottom of a lengthy bridge and the wind ate at our skin. The ocean became more and more animated. Some rain sprinkled our shoulders. We could feel the storm creeping along the shore and we pulled to make it to the next road, in-land.

The last 20 miles was covered in greenery but was absolutely straight with a bit of a head wind. This meant we had to ride in a straight line to break the wind for one another. The wind roared through our ears.

...

“The jumbilia is cooking and should be ready for y’all here in a few hours,” Grady greeted us with a big smile, chuckling a bit. His belly shook with his hand and his boots seemed to sit a bit skewed under his legs.

It was a clean building with clear windows and white walls with visible cables. Luke was walking around the building, looking every which way with a huge smile on his face.

“This is beautiful, just beautiful,” he shook a cable. “Nothing could move this.”

That evening we were staying a Disaster Relief Center. These centers have become scattered across the south after hurricane Katrina. The buffet line was bountiful. Multiple trays of pasta salad and mac and cheese along with potatoes. At the end of line was the giant pot of jumbilia.

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I lumped a huge portion onto my plate. I wish I could list exactly what was in the jumbilia. I have no idea what was in it, but I do know it ate three large servings.

“My name is Paige Hedges and I am from Encampment, Wyoming,” I said in front of everyone in the early evening sunshine. I made eye contact with Rye. She grinned, causing my own smile to spread.

Once the entire team had been introduced, Pastor Ellen stood, “I think it would be best if we also went around and introduced ourselves.”

The other half of the room took turns standing to give their names, who was married to who and how old the kids were.

“Hey,” he waved his hand then adjusted his hat. “My name is Tristan. Uhhh, I’m her son,” pointing at his mom across the table. “I’m fourteen.” He quickly sat back down with red cheeks.

After dinner, Tristan stood by his small truck. Pearlinton is quite a small town, with some dirt roads and a large lake with large homes hidden on its shores.

Kurt and Carter stood talking with him. I couldn’t hear them as I approached. They began to laugh then turned to welcome me to the conversation.

“He’s going to show us some gators,” Carter said with excitement.

He seemed almost boy-like. He stood in his jeans and Carhartt shirt with popular country playing from his phone. Usually Carter seemed cold, insisting on sleeping by himself and wore sunglasses that were dark with a thick plastic furrowed brow. He always seemed to have a straight face when riding. Every once in a while, a glimpse of goofiness would shine through.

“Sure.” I agreed. We gathered everyone and hopped in the back. Three people sat on the bench seat inside the truck, the other nine of us sat in the back of the truck.

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“I couldn’t believe this,” Kat said with a nervous laugh.

“Yeah in the back of a truck going down a dirt road with a 14-year-old driving,” said Bash with a laugh.

“Wait, you’ve never don’t this before,” they all stared back at me.

I couldn’t count the times I had ridden in the back of a truck. Now, I couldn’t say a fourteen-year-old was typically driving, but when I was a teenager I rode with underage drivers relatively often. Town was not too far wary and there may not even be cops. What was the big difference between 14 and 16? Everything would be fine, but don’t go over the speed limit.

I knew better than to sit of the edge or the tailgate, especially the tailgate. One bump and you’re falling out onto the road.

“True country,” Carter said with a grin on his face. He was eating this up.

A Ford crossover pulled up next to us with the windows rolled down, country music filling the air, with a cross and ribbons hanging from the rear-view mirror. Tristan’s parents sat inside and moved next to the driver’s window of the truck.

“Don’t go over 30 Tristan,” Cindy, Tristan’s mom, shouted at him.

“I won’t,” he shouted back, ensuring he was being careful.

We stopped at the river and his parents pulled up next to us. The river was wide and the water calm. Hardly a rippled disturbed its surface. Trees lined it banks drooping with so much foliage they threaten to take a dip into the water.

Tristan hopped down on a concrete block that had been dumped on the bank. His dad leapt to be next to him. They motioned to us to be quiet.

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Both of them began to make a gulping noise in the back of their throats. We stood in anticipation. One small head popped up, disturbing the quiet water. A gator! We all released hushed oos and ahhs along with gasps. Another head broke through the water and lily pads.

Several minutes passed and no more gators came to the call; however, the toads had begun to sing.

“You should’ve seen it,” Cindy started. “We were at this zoo when he first did that. He had all the gators around him,” she laughed as she watched Tristan jump off the concrete block, walking closer to the lily pads. Cindy’s eyes followed her son.

“There’s a fresh water spring,” she said pointing to our left, near Tristan. A pipe stuck out of the ground about three feet. Water continually rushed out.

“Grady actually found it, oh and thank good he did,” she continued.

“Yeah,” Alex responded encouragingly.

“During Katrina, we used it every day. Used it to drink and cook, it’s fresh water,” she laughed but her voice had a bit of a catch in it as she continued.

“Tristan!” she shouted, “You better not be harassing those frogs!” Tristan dropped the rocks he’s been tossing into the lily pads.

“You know, we even used it for showering.”

“Wait you guys didn’t have access to shower?” Eli asked.

“No, we lived in a tent for three weeks you know. And Tristan was like four at that time.”

“Does Katrina still have an effect on the community?” Alex asked with her head cocked.

“Oh, yeah many houses took a long time to rebuild, if they were rebuilt at all.”

“Tristan!” Cindy shouted. He had continued to toss rocks in the lily pads; she started to walk toward him. He quickly dropped his rocks, but he was already pronounced guilty.

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I turned to watch the sun sink lower along the water, turning the sky and water orange and pink. Eli and Alex's silhouettes cut through the color, her head on his shoulder with her curls haloing her.

"I can't believe this. They didn't have to do this; it is so special. I forget how much Katrina did," Alex said loud enough for me to hear even if it wasn't intended for my ears.

We loaded back into the truck and began to drive back to the disaster relief center. The road and trees glittered in the headlights. Big trees with Spanish moss created a tunnel over the road. If you watched closely enough, you could catch a glimpse of lightning bugs playing in the grass.

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I walked into the bathroom to brush my teeth that evening to find Jamie wiping her eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, I'm not upset, just amazed."

I looked at her a bit confused.

"Those people, that family. They're all so amazing. They not only fed complete strangers but they took us to show us around. How? You know? They didn't even know us, but they took us with them to this beautiful place. They spent the whole evening with us, showing us their town. They didn't even have to."

She wiped her tears with a paper towel.

"Are you okay?" I asked, hugging her before she could respond. She wiped her tears with a smile, responding, "Couldn't be better."

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I laid on my sleeping pad that night, zipped into my purple sleeping bag. I listened to my team give into sleep. With Cake, Alice, and John all with in an arm's reach I thought about Jamie. She was right. We were lucky to have any of this generosity. We were lucky enough to run into something beautiful along the way.

May: Pearlinton, MS -> New Orleans, Louisiana

Rye and Cake had each done a Bike and Build trip before. On the first day, they encouraged us try to ride with everyone on the team. Into New Orleans, I had three new group mates, Kat, Danielle, and Natalie.

“This year we had a lot of struggles, I had lost two people that were really important in my upbringing.” I listened to Kat explain losing her great aunt and uncle, my heart broke for her. Danielle and Kat’s banter grew increasingly different from the reality I knew.

“I went to Penn state because it is the best school I go into,” Kat’s voice floated back to me, turning my attitude bitter and cold.

Trying to ignore their banter, I grew angrier. Envy churned in my stomach and up my throat. I clenched my teeth, holding it back as best I could. Natalie commented on my silence. I squeaked an, “I’m doing good,” praying no one else said anything.

“Then we were robbed,” Kat sighed, enacting pity from me. What an invasion of privacy. I cringed at the thought of someone running through my things with unknown hands; it made me sick.

“We know who it was,” she confirmed, confident. “It was our maids.”

Instantly, my pity turned hard and heavy, a stone in my chest. Maids. My mind instantly imagined a huge multi-million-dollar mansion with clean walls, sparkling dark wood floors, and kitchen appliances that could make any housewife jealous. Imagining that day, her maids morphed into the cartoon characters of Robin Hood. With a fox as their leader, they ransacked her house of all the jewels they’d been dusting for years.

I grew green and sick. I wished I could understand or relate.

...

“Do you think you could do my hair in braids like Kendrick Lamar?” Kat asked enthusiastically as she danced around the gas station parking lot waiting of Nat to return from the bathroom.

“Sure,” I said with a smile, covering up my thoughts from earlier. No need to cause trouble. “Who is she?”

Judging by the gasps and open jawed stares, I had said something wrong.

“You don’t know who Kendrick Lamar is,” they, Kat and Danielle, repeated in chorus. Honestly, I didn’t know a majority of the artists my teammates played. The theatrics continued, I blinked and watched. Danielle and Kat were stunned, taking turns in shock. I had no response but to wait until the surprise ended. Natalie came to the rescue, confused by the parking lot scene.

“I don’t know who Kendrik Lamar is,” I told her, admitting defeat.

My emotions seeped through my attempts to disguise them. I felt outed and unrelatable. Natalie helped by asking them who Aaron Watson is, siding with me, pushing them to understand. It helped but didn’t solve the struggle I faced. I wasn’t so different; I knew it, but I ached to explain why not.

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Our hosts were commonly churches, but our leaders insisted there was a surprise in New Orleans. It was a playground when we walked in; honestly, if I had been 12 years younger, the colors and wildly decorated interior would not have scared me.

In New Orleans, we stayed in an artist's collective called the Elephant Collective. It was an old warehouse with some leaks, questionable sinks, and an adult-size jungle gym. We all dispersed among the couches, hammocks, and jungle gym. We went about claiming small areas for our sleeping bags and pads. We had full reign. Rarely were we allowed such liberty and we took full advantage.

Afternoon trickled to evening, after an attempt to get everyone showered, we all stood gathered by the front doors. Building on the surprise all day. Natalie ensured me it would lift my spirits. We all bustled around the entrance until a small bus pulled up and the driver stepped out.

We rushed with excitement, embracing the bus's darkness. My thighs clung to the leather seats. John had claimed the chair next to me, swinging around the headrest. Shotgun houses swirled past in all colors as we gossiped, frivolously trying to decode any information about tonight's events.

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"Pidge, come here," Carter said. He had become goofy, if not a touch sweet, throughout the evening. He grabbed my face with both of his palms.

"You belong here Pidge," he said without looking away. "Pidge, Pidge, everyone loves you and are so happy that you are here and a part of this team. You deserve to be here." Tears grew hot under my closed eyelids, then they spilled down my cheeks.

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“Rye and I talked about this a lot on our ride the other day. People can be mean and make you feel like you shouldn’t be here. But fuck them.”

“But, I, I,” I stammered. Carter pressed his forehead to mine and I lay still under his hands. He pulled me into his shoulder.

“Come on, let’s go to Bourbon street,” he said wrapping his arm around my shoulder. Not long after, John swung around my other shoulder.

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“Rye!”

“Pidgeon!” she shouted with a laugh and I wrapped her in a hug. Our groups, six and eight, joined creating a parade. We took off down the street. I quickly found two teammate’s empty hands, Carli and Luke.

New Orleans streets swung and danced. Following the music, we entered a bar, small and crowded. On the stage, a woman danced while her voice moved us to dance. Our hips swayed while she shimmied her shoulders, enticing her partner, the microphone. Her curls tripped and whirled around her face and shoulders. Her dark skin glistened with sweat as she stomped along.

“Mmm, get it girl,” she said as she pointed to me. I automatically blushed when she motioned me, but I kept dancing attempting to mimic her moves. Who are we if we don’t keep dancing.

When I turned back we were leaving. I grabbed John’s hand and we rushed to keep up with everyone. Grabbing Taylor’s hand in the crowded street, she smiled when she saw it was

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me. We moved forward in the chain, in a mission to return to the Elephant Collective. We stopped to call Uber, then realized we couldn't find Carter or Jamie.

After standing about, asking one another if we should try to find them or move forward, we decided that they'd be okay.

"They're adults and Jamie's traveled a ton. I'm sure they'll be fine," Taylor reassured us. We requested two vans through Uber XL, one from Taylor's phone and one from Danielle's. I piled into Danielle's van, the driver a bit aghast at our recklessness. He started to try and ask us to be careful with the seats, attempting to reach back and move the seat we were crawling over.

"I'm paying you to drive me around; I don't know why you are yelling at me," Danielle shouted, silencing the ride home

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John walked next to me as we re-entered the Elephant Collective. We each gathered out sleeping bags and pillows, beginning the search for a sleeping spot.

"Here this way," he said motioning with his head. He began climbing the adult-size jungle gym. He turned back with a grin, waiting for me to join him.

"Come on."

There was only one rule at the Elephant Collective, don't go on the jungle gym intoxicated.

"We're not supposed to," I whisper yelled at him again. He didn't listen to me and I felt I had no choice but to climb. We stepped over Kurt and Ronnie moving towards the netting connecting the different portions of the jungle gym.

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Ronnie had pulled me aside earlier that evening.

“I gotta ask you,” said Ronnie a bit nervously looking at her shoes, then her eyes looked up and locked on mine.

“Do you like Kurt?”

“Ahhh,” I stumbled. I hadn’t thought much of it. I liked a lot of people on the trip. I thought of Kurt, Ronnie, and myself as a team. A smaller family within my bigger Bike and Build family.

“I haven’t thought about it, but, no, not really,” I chose after my thoughts ran through my mind.

I paused, “Do you like Kurt?” I asked with wide eyes.

“Well,” she began, “we have a lot in common. He makes me laugh and makes me happy.” She continued on about her feelings for Kurt. The response was obvious.

“Go for it my love,” I said, grabbing her hand, small and thin in mine with long feminine nails, nearly swallowed by my large ones.

“You think so,” she said with excitement in her voice.

“Of course! I love you and I love Kurt. If you guys will be happy, why the hell not. Just promise you won’t make me a child of a divorce.”

“Friends first,” she said then bounded away.

I smiled as I stepped over their sleeping bodies. His arm across her shoulders.

The sun chased dust particles down from the open windows. I looked down from our perch, I could spot Carter and Jamie. I sighed with relief. With twenty-eight people and two bathrooms, we lined out the bathroom waiting to brush out teeth. I demanded that Carter tell me what happened. He explained his night in a patchwork of short stories. They had gotten separated from the team when they had stopped to pet a dog. When they stood from where they were sitting, petting the dog, the entire team vanished. They had each other though; they had wondered around until they called it a night, trekking back to the Elephant Collective.

...

Our vans stopped in front of the light blue shotgun house.

“Welcome to Uncommon,” Kelsey announced slapping her hands-on her dirty pants.

Uncommon Construction is an affordable housing non-profit combining an interactive classroom and apprenticeship program for high school students. Construction sites enable students to learn soft leadership skills and hard labor skills necessary to succeed in the New Orleans prevalent construction market. As evidence, school room posters were staked into the ground demonstrating best words to use when instructing crew members or advice to tackle a leadership role. Student apprentices are hired and paid to work at UnCommon under the school’s and UnCommon’s supervision. Apprentices earned experience, money, and school credit all at once.

“Today’s apprentices are Terry and Clarence,” Kelsey motioned to two boys nearest her. Neither could pass for more than 150 pounds but had to be older than 16. Each shyly introduced themselves, Terry from behind short dreads and Clarence from under a head of tight curls.

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Our task for the day was to paint the house's exterior. We were applying the second coat, redundantly painting light blue over light blue.

I crawled a top a ladder on the West side of the house, in the morning shade. Paint cup and brush in hand, I repeatedly went up and down and up and down the side of the house, inching my way across the top of the siding ensuring I didn't over stretch my reach and risk falling.

"Where did you guys get your booksacks?" Terry asked me as I took a drink from my hydro pack. The water was gritty, grinding between my molars, and made me feel a bit light headed, but I needed a lot of water. I felt selfish trying to fill my 3-liter bladder with water bottles so, against everyone's advice, I filled my bladder with tap water. I fully understood why now.

"We all got them from different places. I got mine from Sierra Trading Post." Terry looked at me with Clarence behind him. Sierra Trading Post did not offer them any help.

"Like," I pondered, "we got them from different outdoor gear stores."

"Ahh," said Terry with clarity. "Those booksacks would sure be nice. You guys all have them straws."

"Yeah, having the hose sure is nice. We use them when riding and on build sites, gotta stay hydrated," I laughed clipping my hose to its magnet, so it pulled across my chest.

"Do y'all fill them with just water?"

“Usually,” I said with a laugh, remembering Rye’s story about the time she accidentally filled hers with lemonade. “They would get kinda gross if you filled them with anything else.”

“I’d put lemonade in mine,” Terry responded as if he’s heard me thinking about Rye’s story. “Do you fill yours with tap water?”

“Yeah.”

“And it don’t taste funny or make you feel funny?”

“Well, kinda,” I admitted, swaying.

“I don’t drink the tap water here. It makes me sick. My head hurts, and I get all dizzy,” he added with a shake of his dreads.

I crouched to get the spots to leave my vision, understanding the warnings.

“One of those booksacks would be great for this job,” Terry continued to Clarence as Max rounded the corner.

“Hey, need any help over here?” Max said in his voice that was already as casual as a Sunday afternoon.

“Sure,” Terry answered happily from his perch on a ladder.

“So, I ah,” Max began. “I heard about your house man. I just wanted to say how sorry I am. That’s got to be rough.”

The site leaders told us that Terry lost his house in a fire, less than a week ago, leaving he and his family to live in a hotel. Max said what I was begging myself to find the courage to utter all morning.

“It’s not the worst thing. It’s alright. We’re in a hotel now,” answered Terry nonchalantly.

Not the worst rang over in my mind as I climbed my ladder once more.

Max asked, “Well, then what was the worst?”

“Hmm,” pondered Terry with a smack of his lips. “I’ve been shot at, and once one scraped my side.”

“What? No way man,” said Max, as surprised as I was.

“Yeah once when I was eleven and another two years ago; I was fourteen.”

Eleven, fourteen.

“I’ve been shot at too. Never hit though,” added Clarence.

“It’s not that weird,” assured Clarence and Terry gave a nod of agreement.

I was flabbergasted, as was Max. Clarence and Terry acted as if it were nothing too out of the ordinary.

I climbed down from my ladder; I needed more paint.

...

Stephanie came bouncing up on an older black bike. Her dress was half covered with an UnCommon Construction orange T-shirt. She managed to perch herself in tights, and clogs on a bike.

“Hello,” she greeted with a smile as she unbuckled her helmet.

“Stephanie?” Rye asked with a grin and arms half way outstretched, asking if a hug would be okay.

“Rye! It’s so nice to actually meet you instead of our phone conversations, while I loved them just the same,” she said over Rye’s shoulder, accepting the hug.

Stephanie worked two jobs, one at UnCommon Construction and one at a local bakery. She had gotten off her other job, explaining her tardiness.

“Stephanie was a Bike and Builder in 2012....” Rye questioned the year, as we began to pull pizza slices onto plates.

...

The afternoon ran down. Our tired bodies warmed in the Louisianan heat and humidity. We all had moved inside to paint trim and door jams. The sight, and smell, of us begged for a shower.

“Hustle, hustle, hustle, 20 second showers and I am not kidding,” shouted Rye as we sped walked behind Stephanie towards the Tulane University dormitories. We were supposed to be showering at host homes that night, but the build day ran later than expected. There was no way we were going to make it all the way across town, shower, and return in less than an hour.

Stephanie opened her dorm and had convinced a friend to as well. We followed Stephanie up, past security, to the elevators, through the hallway and twenty-eight people up in to two dorms.

We formed a line, and no one spent more than two minutes in the shower. It came my turn. I was lucky enough to have warm water flow over me and it ran dark from my toes.

A knock came to the door as I was drying off. Wrapped in my quick dry, robin’s egg blue towel, I stepped out into the living room full of my teammates, my hair dripping onto the carpet.

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Half of the team had already made it to dinner when we arrived at the Blue Bike share warehouse. Surrounded by bikes, we fell into line to make our own tacos with cookies and Capri Sun or La Croix for dessert, a well appreciated treat.

“Where’d you get that shirt?” I laughed pinching the shoulder of Carter’s pink T-shirt that had a large sprinkle donut on the back with ‘I’m a Daddy’s Girl’ written in bold black letters across his shoulders.

“When I opened my bag after the shower I didn’t have my shirt, so I was walking around shirtless. This girl saw me standing in the hall, because the dorm room crowded, and asked why I didn’t have one. I explained the whole Bike and Build thing and she told me to follow her. Kurt came with me, she went into her bottom drawer, picked out this shirt, and threw it at me. She told me to put it on, and here we are,” he said with a big grin, his fingers pinching the shoulders of the shirt.

...

We quickly sat down in the chairs, on coolers, or the floor because we could see the panel discussion was about to begin. Four of them sat in front of us, one older man then three younger people. The older gentleman began, in his hiking shorts and hat with thick seams running along the sides. He explained that he was originally from Montana; my heart gave a flutter of excitement, maybe he would be able to relate.

I felt that western states, especially those like Wyoming and Montana, tended to lack a large bike culture; however, it does seem to be growing. Ironically, these are the states that

would benefit the most from a cycling or bike culture because they tend to suffer from urban sprawl. Instead of cities growing up, with taller buildings creating a higher population density as can be found in coastal cities due to minimal coastline, western cities tend to grow out causing urban sprawl. A city will have a lower population density but cover a larger area geographically. This can lead to difficulties in transportation as a car is essential to navigate them due to the sheer distance between destinations. Public transit is sometimes available in these areas, but usually could use significant improvements. Bike shares have started to appear in these cities as a good way to combat this issue.

After his brief explanation of who he was, and his role at Blue Bikes, the next person in the panel began. With hair cropped short and an outfit ready to enjoy summer days, they explained the benefits and requirements of Blue Bikes.

New Orleans suffers from faults in its public transportation system. While there are buses and other means of public transit, it is not as readily available to all neighborhoods making traveling to work, usually away from residential areas, nearly impossible without a car or ride to the public transit stops. For example, a 20-minute walk from a worker's home to a bus stop, another 20-minute bus ride and possibly more walking after that to arrive to work, creates huge commutes, and is not uncommon. The bike share is meant to combat this issue by providing rental stations near bus stops, considerably reducing commute times.

The share works like this: you rent a bike for a small fare, ride it wherever you need to go, it will automatically lock once you are done, then you can either use the same bike or any other bike for a return trip at another small fare. The bikes have locking mechanisms that allow them to lock to their own back tire when they are not in use; therefore, you must buy a ride

through the app on your phone. This significantly cuts commute time, while it is still a fee to ride, bike shares create an eco-friendly, convenient, and affordable options to navigate the city.

“I just went around to gather the lose bike to return them to the stations. We have this little bike and trailer set-up that allows you to load them bike onto the trailer. I just locate them using the GPS system, load them up, and bike them to the next station to be unloaded.”

Bike theft is what the next woman discussed. When we first arrived in New Orleans it was the first thing our host warned us about. We had been sitting on the concrete floor in the Elephant Collective, conducting our family meeting, when our hosts had stepped into the room.

Politely they said, “Before you all get started, y’all should know that bike theft is the top crime in New Orleans. It’s no joke. I’ve had four,” he stopped and thought, “no five bikes stolen, several of them had cut locks but one time I bought a ‘theft proof’ lock. So, you couldn’t cut it with bolt cutters. I locked it up and when I came back the lock was still there but my bike was gone. They had used a torch to cut the frame of my bike.”

Therefore, bike theft would be quite a concern for Blue Bikes. She pointed out that the marker board behind her said that 463 bikes were missing. It did alarm us all when we walked in, but she explained. That was the number of bikes that weren’t in stations, but their GPS locators were still intact and could be located. It was just a matter of moving them to the correct stations. Since their establishment, only four bikes had had their locators disabled, a pretty good ratio considering they had thousands of bikes throughout the city.

Excitedly, they began to introduce the next person in the panel. She sat at the far-right end of the table with blonde dread locks tied half back, with a red shirt showing her thin waist and fit arms.

“She is our first urban planning engineer hired by Blue Bikes. She sits on the city council and discusses the opportunities for the city. I’ll let her explain,” the older gentleman said, moving his arms in her direction.

She began, poised, to explain the challenges she faces when she talks to the city council. Roads throughout New Orleans are being renovated. The push for bike lanes is difficult for a city that continues to rebuild. A community that is fighting for proper sidewalks has a hard time understanding the need for bike lanes. Families in these communities may not even be able to afford a bike; why should they care about bike lanes?

With bike lanes, it allows people to move freely through the city. They don’t have to worry about where bikes go, sidewalks or on the street. While bikes should be ridden on the street, the general population does not always understand if bikes should be considered as cars or pedestrians. Bike lanes show the population where bikes should be, and what direction they should be moving. A picture of a cyclist along with an arrow directs cyclists to move with traffic. She explained that even if these bike lanes are used incorrectly, by riding against traffic for example, it still liberates people to use them and bike around the city, allowing the city to be more accessible for all residents. New Orleans does have a cycling culture proper infrastructure and education are the next steps to a safe and accessible cycling lifestyle for all.

After the panel, I walked up to the older gentleman.

“You’re from Montana right,” I began nervously.

“Yeah, Yeah, I’ve lived in New Orleans for several years now.”

“I’m from Wyoming. Something I’ve noticed is a negative attitude towards cyclists; therefore, we lose the opportunity to move forward. You know, to have bike shares or bike lanes

or educational classes. So, what do you thinking about cycling culture and the movement in the West?" I fumble out, more of a thought that a statement.

"You're absolutely right it is difficult in the West. There is higher urban sprawl, but a lack of developing in the cycling world."

"Do you think there is any way we might be able to change this?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I've been away for so long that it's hard for me to say."

I nodded in agreement. Development of the bike lanes and making bikes accessible to everyone seemed like a daunting challenge to me.

"I've actually have got to run, but it was nice to chat with you," he said as he walked towards the door, leaving me to ponder alone.

...

"See all these drips, you can easily sand them with just your finger and a bit of sand paper," Kelsey explained to me.

Eli was my dedicated sanding on your hands and knees all day assistant.

"Are you very religious?" Eli asked me as I described my upbringing in rural Wyoming.

"This may sound like the most hippie dippie thing I could possibly say," I always begin my religious discussions like this, to warn my listener about what they are about to hear. He looked at me with anxious eyes.

"Well, I was raised Christian. But fell away from it as did my family as I had started middle school. We quit going to church, but I think my parents and sister are still pretty religious," I foreshadowed.

“I find the most power in the natural world. I can barely put words to it. It overwhelms me. I feel it in my chest looking across a landscape. It holds you close to show your insignificance. I know I have to do whatever I can to protect it. To save it.”

“Don’t worry. That’s not too crazy. I think it’s cool you can find solace like that.”

“What do you think about religion or creation or existence?” I cough from brushing away the sawdust I’d created from sanding a stubborn paint stain.

Eli began to talk about what he had come to believe about existence. Covering in warning about what he was able to say, he explained perspective as a foundation to his argument. He started by using an ant as an example.

“An ant can crawl in and around and, down right? But they can only see on one field,” he demonstrated holding his hand flat in front of his nose. “They cannot see that I am Eli or that you are Paige. They can only see us as these huge, slow objects. That being said, their reality is just as much a reality as yours or mine, even though we do not exist in their reality.”

We took a few steps further down the rabbit hole, discussing the concept of multiple realities lead to the idea of multiple dimensions.

Deep in the rabbit hole, I was attempting to hang onto every word Eli said, as to not twist an ankle in the hypothetical world.

He went on to describe that if we are able to agree there are different realities those realities must exist somewhere. He displayed that there may be a reality where I had not decided to wear a hat. Or one that I decided to wear a green hat. That each reality must exist somewhere in another dimension.

“So, essentially,” his eyes widened, “you can try to access reality of dimensions.”

My head was still spinning a bit at the end of the day during the traditional group picture. Max ran in late, munching on a bag of rap chips. A brand of chips I had never seen until I had stepped into the corner store. One I had to navigate cracked sidewalk or non-existence ones, through dirt and onto the street.

He laid across the front of the group, one leg bent with his head propped on his hand. Of course, his bucket hat sat atop his head with risk of falling off if there was a large gust of wind. They snapped a picture of us, dirty, paint covered, and sweaty.

“Alrighty, well I need to take a short video of you guys. Only if you all are okay with it,” said Kelsey holding her phone sideways. “We just found out our little UnCommon Construction received a grant from J & J Johnson. They asked us to send a short video saying thank you to them”

“1...2...3”

We all shouted thank you J & J Johnson as she put down her last finger.

...

We sleepily gathered back in the vans. To combat the shower circumstances of the two days prior, our leaders brought us to homes that had been arranged before.

I sat at the back of the van relatively sleepily, knowing I'd be one of the last one to get to a shower. Bash dropped off half the van at one house and we rounded the corner where he parked the van. We all crawled out to be welcomed by a woman with blonde hair, tan skin, a silver necklace, and one of those dresses from Toad & Co.

Crawling up the wooden stairs we saw a beautiful home open before us. Bikes hung along the wall. Excitement rushed through me as I saw them. I couldn't wait to talk to about cycling. We'd been off the bike for several days and were itching to discuss frames, routes, tires, brands, and whether or not you should use chamois butter. That is a cream you put on your sit bones, with frequent cycling cyclists tend to get saddle sores. It is a small pimple-like sore you get on your sit bones. Chamois butter helps reduce the pain or general discomfort of continued riding.

"We thought you all were coming yesterday, but we're so glad to have you now," she said in a happy voice after she explained that we also had access to her neighbor's shower one newly renovated with the ability to adjust the temperature with multiple shower heads.

I stayed in the apartment and ran to use the bathroom before the showers began.

"Don't you come out of there Pidgeon," shouted Carter as he saw me beginning to open the door.

"You're going first," he pushed my towel and green pencil bag, holding my soap, into my arms through a half-opened door.

"Go!" he shouted as he pushed the door shut.

"Don't make me come in there," he added as I listened to his footsteps disappear down the hall.

The bathroom stood white before me with a big tub and tiled shower. A pedestal sink with small porcelain knobs and a small white trimmed mirror reflected my red, freckled face. My eyes gleamed blue, agreeing with the color of my ball cap, that my messy braid escaped from.

First, I tossed my hat into the sink. Peeling off my dark blue, paint speckled Bike and Build T-shirt, denim shorts, and dirty white cycling socks, leaving a ring of dirt around my ankle. I stared in the mirror, for the first time in a long time.

Blinking back at me stood a young woman, dirty. Her eyes bled down into the dark circles that gathered around her nose. Just below, her cheeks sat red, girl-like, that were nearly the color of her mouth. Wavy auburn, hair ran down across her shoulders. She stood stark against the background, as if she were cut from a picture and was pasted into a magazine.

I quickly stepped away from the mirror. I put my toes into the tub, and watched the dirty footprints materialize in the bottom of it. Scrubbing my body watching the dirt and the sweat wash away with the water, but witnessing the muscles and tan lines resist.

I laid on the couch, allowing it to swallow me, running a comb through my hair. I stood and shuffled to the well-lit kitchen to find Danielle chatting with the woman's husband. I reached for the Arnold Palmer on the counter in between them.

"Oh yeah," the man remembered pushing off the counter, "We bought some frozen pizzas for you guys."

Danielle immediately stepped forward.

"Do you mind if I bake them? I love to cook and haven't been able to in the past three weeks," she explained as she took the pizzas from his open hands.

A smile grew across my face as I walked barefoot across the kitchen back to the living room; my clean soles feeling fresh against the scrubbed hard wood flooring. I sat on the edge of the couch, careful with my drink searching once again for my comb to finish raking through my soaking wet hair.

The living room began to regain life as everyone came back from their turn in the shower. We learned that the wife is an active cyclist. She told us stories about her rides, how her mom always supports her, and the concept of a cross-country ride with four women total. A trip that ended with only three because one woman left the trip, annoyed with the other three.

Attitude is the trickiest thing to control on a trip.

“Pizza is ready to eat,” Danielle said from the kitchen doorway.

She had to be as exhausted as we were, yet she stayed in the kitchen to bake the pizza. Then she gave us the first opportunity at the pizza, yet she was hungry as we were.

I held onto that.

...

Our vans rolled over several bridges that took us far away from our Elephant Collective. The landscape played with sunset, inviting night. We continued with heads that bobbed and eyes that fell, also battling the temptation of night.

Rolling to a stop, the doors were swung open and the one seatbelt that was always in the way, was pushed back time and time again. Our feet were met gravel, dirt, and the overgrowth of an empty lot. Looking around, there were more empty lots than occupied ones. A portion of the team stood on the porch of a purple house with “Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum” painted along the attached awning, shading the porch. They were chatting with an old woman and young boy on the porch.

One of the women from the bike share also stood in the doorway. Our leaders told us we would be meeting back up with them today, but not a one of us knew the exact nature until we stepped out of the vans.

The porch creaked and whined under my weight as I reached for the doorknob to stepped inside. A few shirts tacked to the wall in the foyer, a smaller folding table, printer, crayons, and things found in a child's homework corner.

I was motioned to move into the next room. History circled me; in the form of pictures and captions, some peeling from the wall, marking monumental moments. Culture clung with tape, narrating New Orleans' story. Desegregation, the history of the Lower Ninth Ward, language, and festivals revealed themselves.

After circling the room, I followed the sound of a fan. The room was small and a stained white. Doors on each side slid, disappearing into the wall. I took the open spot at the end of a make shift bench next to Harlow.

It was apparent she had been sucked into the film, her shoulder length curls blew back from the fan. Her eyes swirled the colors of blue and green with thick lashes to protect them but stood shining with tears.

The projector showed images from various 2008 newscasts. Water welled up in neighborhoods throughout New Orleans. Trees struggled in the wind and people became lost in the gray of roofs and water.

I was eight years old again. Laying on my stomach in our living room. My mom is browning some hamburger for spaghetti for diner. On the TV screen those images flashed along with charts discussing the rise of oil prices, but we turned it off before we sat down for dinner.

I slid the door closed, my eyes saturated with those images. I wondered in to the next room to follow the photography around the room. The blurbs reached with every letter to explain the tragedy that continued.

“Pretty!” shouted a boy as he entered the room. He ran directly for Ronnie, settling his fingers on her curls that ran down her back. The bottom several inches were dyed a dark purple, pretty indeed.

A woman followed him, responding, “Did you ask her to touch her hair?”

“Can I touch your hair?” the boy asked, quickly correcting himself.

“Oh of course,” Ronnie replied with her Minnie Mouse voice.

The boy ran his hands across her curls a few more times before the woman came and grabbed his hand to lead him back to the homework room.

Roads were full and impossible to cross. Katrina was only supposed to be tropical storm. Katrina quickly gathered strength, becoming a hurricane almost overnight. People attempted to flee, but many couldn't. They may not have known as only a television warning was given out. People watched as the water filled their neighborhood.

Those who were able to seek refuge in the Superdome. Facilities were not available, and the Superdome grew hot and dirty. The stench began to sting the noses and eyes of everyone there. Death soon followed, with elderly falling. Others chose to take their own lives.

I saw the memory of these people. Their ghosts watched as we walked across the porch, silent back to the vans. They whispered in the grass of the vacant lots, of those who fled and never returned. Of those who never had the opportunity to return. Left to walk the streets in their memory of the Lower Ninth Ward.

Clambering back into the vans, sorrow ran across all of our faces, with or without tears.

May: New Orleans, LA -> Plaquemine, LA

Our second scheduled century laid before us, but I wasn't wearing my jersey and chams or kit. I leaned against Meatloaf, the lunch van, as my team began to ride away in groups, towards a coffee shop, set to open in twenty minutes.

It was a late start, three days of building and exploring New Orleans sucked our energy. Attempting to hustle people along, we watched Eli and Harlow roll out as sweep.

The Elephant Collective fell into the rearview, without a water spout, so our back seat was full of empty coolers. Arriving at a small bakery, Stephanie, the alum from UnCommon Construction opened the front door and showed us to the spout. Filling the water jugs, Ronnie and I reloaded them into the seats, straining under their weight. The black and white tiled doorstep to the bakery invited us inside.

"I used to come here when I lived her! I knew it was familiar," realized Ronnie distantly. Ronnie participated in an AmeriCorps program, a volunteer opportunity, then worked in New Orleans afterwards at the St. Bernard Project, working to combat the affordable housing crisis facing New Orleans since Katrina.

With a garbage bag of day olds, bagels, breads, and other goodies that could no longer be sold, a cake and a coffee we waved goodbye to Stephanie, then wound through New Orleans, searching for the bike path the team was supposed to be following.

...

Gravel screamed in the bridges' acoustics. I laid in the shade, guarding the destination for second lunch. Ronnie had left, shuttling one group, because Krista exhaustedly put herself in the van after riding into headwinds all morning.

May: New Orleans, LA -> Plaquemine, LA

‘I’m vanning myself,’ she sat in the middle row of the van. ‘I know I’ll just get upset. I can’t ride. It’s almost 2; there’s no way we’re going to finish.’

Krista could’ve kept going she explained with sweat dripping down her face. The head wind slowed her group to a pace was nowhere near fast enough to make it in time. Slow speeds and screaming winds thinned her patience.

‘I can feel my attitude. And I don’t want to yell at anyone. I might yell if I keep going. It’s not worth it.’

Claire also needed to take the van, due to her knee. She had been trying to make it as far as she could on rides, but often took the van half way through the day.

Laying under the bridge, we finally saw a few of the last group approaching. Alex had joined sweep with Eli and Harlow.

Harlow was barely able to climb the small hill to get from the road to the lunch spot. Falling exhausted in the grass, they reached for anything they could eat, munching to the harsh melody of the gravel pit. Harlow was pushing to make it through the day, no matter how many bites of cake it took. She pushed to continue, leaving with Eli as Ronnie came back, her white van gleaming in the sunlight. Alex had decided she needed to ride in the van; it was not safe for her to ride anymore. Eli and Harlow only had an hour left but wanted to try their best to finish the ride, or what they could of the ride.

We loaded Alex’s bike and left to begin vanning the rest of the team. There were a few groups close to host that needed to be picked up. Both vans were making trips back and ensuring everyone safely made it to host.

Arriving at host, we unloaded several of our teammates and began to plan. Connie, Kurt, Eli, and Harlow were still on the road. They had all pulled off to the side of the road to wait for

us to pick them up. We were not allowed to ride past 4 p.m. especially in populous areas; it was dangerous with the traffic and heat.

“You guys go,” I motioned to my team.

Bash began to act as if he were going to try and join, even though they had already ridden all day.

“No, I didn’t ride today. I’ll go. I’m safety navigator anyway.”

...

Under a huge tree, we found Harlow and Eli asleep. Their skin was marred with grease, sunscreen and bug bits. Ronnie and I pushed them into the air-conditioned filled van. Her and I lifted each of their bikes in their sports on the rack. Eli and Harlow were laying across two of the benches inside.

My indie music calmly pulsed through the speakers. “Follow the sun” sang the radio, as we pulled up on Kurt and Ronnie at a small post office. Its’ doors were closed, leaving them to sit on the concrete steps outside its tin walls.

Kurt looked towards the van, jersey completely unzipped, dividing the red Bike and Build logo in half. His hairy chest sat exposed to the setting sun. His cycling cap had its bill turned up and all its colors stood out against the beige of the post office, almost as contrasting as the beige bandage against this brown skin running along the outer ring of his right eye.

Ronnie sat with her braid laying in her lap. It was so long, ending near her belly button. Her braid was nearly an inch wide, and the right side of her head was shaved. Her eyes sat tired

beneath her hooded eyelids. Her eyelashes threatened to meet one another and close her eyes for the night.

“Dude,” I began.

“I know, I got caught in my clip. Was so tired and toppled over,” he touched the bandage. “Luckily the woman in the post office had a first aid kit and I was with nurse Connie.”

We were continually lucky to have nurse Connie. She had left her job as a nurse to do Bike and Build. She had been working of several years. Now she was between jobs and planned to return after the summer.

Ronnie gave me a smile as I took her bike from her, rolling it towards the bike rack. She closed her eyes and leaned her head on my shoulder as I began to walk away. I paused, the dirt crunching under my Chaco’s, leaning my head down onto hers.

Kurt had plugged his phone into the aux cord and was now playing New York music. It grooved into our air, holding our exhaustion in its beat and rhythm.

“We were there for like 2 hours” Kurt then leaned forward, “which is by no means your fault. Gave us time to talk with the woman who worked there. She sat and talked with us for, I don’t know” he looked at Connie. She shook her head completing his sentences with, “an hour forty-five minutes.”

“Yeah, she sat with us for quite some time. She just asked us about Bike and Build. We told her everything. You know, the biking across the country for affordable housing where we stay, food, and grants. After giving her this whole explanation, she reached in to her pocket and gave us \$200.”

...

The gym smelled as if it'd been fermenting for about 30 years. The wood had soaked in the humidity and sweat. Wooden bleachers loomed high above us with exposed rafters. Nate and Carter both had hammocks set up and were already relaxing in the warmer temperatures of the gym's rafters. I found most everyone in the kitchen. Dinner was not provided by host, so leftovers lay out across the counters of the kitchen.

I quickly found the mac and cheese from Pearlington. It was hiding in the corner. I didn't bother heating it up; rather I began taking bites straight from the container.

"No! No! Stop!" Natalie ran near me, her long hair whipping, "There's mold on that. I'd set it aside to be thrown away. There's veg sandwiches over there. Go, go have yours," she ushered me towards the table in the middle of the room.

Harlow was returning with an empty plate. There was only one full sandwich left. I took half of mine and put it on her plate.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course," I smiled. "I didn't even ride today."

I supplemented my half sandwich with some cereal, then joined the last crew to go to the fire station for showers. Where we chatted lounged and dozed in the leather couches. NCIS, a crime TV show, played on the older TV in a hotel room wooden entertainment stand with double doors the rolled forward then closed shut.

...

May: New Orleans, LA -> Plaquemine, LA

Back at the gym, I pulled my pillow and sleeping bag from my duffel. I spread it out on the floor, near Rye, with John quickly laying his bag next to mine as I began to braid Rye's hair.

I was finally able to talk to her. Earlier I had seen a story, a short collection of timed pictures, on her Instagram. When taking a break while riding, she'd put her head in a fire ant's nest. They had crawled all over her head, and one had stung her eyelid. Her left eye was swollen shut.

"Oh, my goodness," I started.

"You should see the other guy," she interrupted with a laugh that was bit forced. She'd already talked to her dad about it. He was going to be sending her medicine to the next mail drop. She wouldn't be able to ride for a while. Clearly, she was exhausted. She only briefly talked to me before rolling over and falling asleep.

I laid on my stomach writing in my journal next to John. I was barely about to write the words "New Orleans" before the lights were turned out.

"Looks like we're done journaling," said John and the click of his pen and the closing of his notebook. I followed suit and was quickly asleep, after adjusting my sleeping mat, causing it to squeak against the waxed hardwood floor.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

“Alright, and today for town facts is Pidgeon,” Cake sang at route meeting.

Originally, Erik had bestowed me the nickname Ols. I had written it on my bright orange tape that was stuck to all my lights and charging blocks, but when Rye began calling me Pidgeon, it stuck.

“Well, we are going to the tiny town of Morganza. Louisiana,” I called in my best radio voice. Morganza is a town of about 600 people, much like my hometown. After giving the average income, for both males and females, I informed them there seems to be one gas station/restaurant, the excitement of the town.

...

It was a shorter day; when we arrived, we laid in the shade of the little white church, waiting for the door to be unlocked. Once opened, we began to unload the trailer.

Cake reached in to the trailer and pulled out of our yellow lidded bins. He tore the top open to reveal food leftover from the first week. Irritation grew as he gave out apples, and other perishable foods to any open arms. Turns out, it was mostly dry breakfast foods, forgotten at the back of the trailer when chore groups changed.

The church had no showers, so we used the hose. Taylor laughed as she held the hose for me and Harlow. The water glinted in the sunlight, pretending to be warm, but as it splashed on my skin goosebumps rose. My hair had fallen in from of my eyes from the weight of the water. I turned around to rinse the shampoo down my back. When I turned back, Taylor flicked the hose splashing the water in my face.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

I spat, then looked up to see her grinning wide. Her shoulders shook with laughter; her big blue eyes sparkling like the hose water in the summertime sun. Her hair pulled back into a ponytail still dripped water from its ends.

I took one lung at her. She quickly stepped back with a little yelp. I brought my foot forward, the saturated green grass squishing beneath my toes.

“No, no, no!” she hopped back. I stepped back, grabbed my towel and began to make my way back to the church. The air conditioning nearly knocked me over as I slipped on the hardwood. I dug through my bag, searching for my dress, attempting to not drip hair water all over my books and journals.

...

Gravel crunched under my sandals, Natalie and I walked in stride together. The roads were dirt and whispers from the past echoed with every footstep as we moved past the abandoned high school. We crossed the train tracks that ran parallel to the highway road, the town’s only paved road.

A blue awning shaded the gas station’s warm concrete. We walked in through a glass door into the attached restaurant that served a little bit of everything. I went directly for the fries and a cold drink.

“You have to go over there,” the clerk point through the other glass door, “if you want something to drink. Go pick it out and bring it over here and Ill ring ya up,” she pushed a menu closer to us with her thin hand, her ponytail waving behind her.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

The bell rang when I returned to the restaurant from the convince store. Placing a peach lemonade on the counter, the woman was missing, I leaned to one side around the counter looking for her. The plastic strips slapped close as she reappeared from the back of the hybrid restaurant and store.

“So, what are y’all doing here?” she asked, reaching for my drink. I gave the usual conversation about the nature of our trip. How long we’d been on the road. Where we stay. How far we go each day. How much we have left.

“Wow, that’s crazy,” she widened her eyes. They seemed nearly buggish against her thin face.

The booth was open on both sides. I slid in next to Claire, her red hair flamed in the dark restaurant ambiance. Fries steamed in the middle of the table, begging to be ate.

“Oh, I love doing this,” Natalie pulled out her phone. She opened the GroupMe to look at everyone on the team. We had been talking about who we thought would make cute couples, mainly because we were all surprised it hadn’t happened yet.

The day before Natalie had been chatting in the van with several others about who would end up together. As there were far more girls on the team than guys, they matched everyone with a guy and a girl. Natalie had teased me for being a ‘hot commodity’.

In our matching game, we included everyone on the team even those in a relationship; it was innocent anyhow. Luke had been matched with Danielle, both architects with red hair. Cake was put with Alice and Bash with Harlow. Bash and Harlow had gone to a psychic together in New Orleans, both seeking to have their palms read. The psychic assumed they were a couple saying they would have a long happy relationship, leaving them to always be pinned together.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

“Now, Pidgeon,” Natalie said with another scroll.

“Carter,” Bash said barely allowing Natalie to finish my name.

“No, no,” responded Natalie. “John for sure.”

“Neither is going to happen” I shook my head, laughing to deter any conflict, “Carter likes Rye and John has a girlfriend.”

We walked back in the buggy twilight after everyone was matched and the fries were long gone.

“I bet you and John are going to admit you have feelings for each other but the end of the trip,” Natalie predicted.

“He has a girlfriend, but he is one of my best friends on the trip so far,” I admitted.

“Maybe Carter is more likely, but I don’t think so.”

“I can’t say I think it’d ever get psychical with you and John, but I definitely think you guys will admit some sort of feelings. I can just see it,” she shook her hair as we lined up for dinner.

...

“Yeah, we’re riding across the country advocating, raising money, and volunteering for the affordable housing cause,” I explained in a relatively dirty gas station as Max and Taylor skated across the linoleum, searching for snacks.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

Max was one of the youngest and palest on the team. His face was often smeared with sunscreen so thick his facial complexion would be significantly lighter than his arms. “I don’t mess with sunburns,” he’d repeat to us when we’d tease him.

The owner of the gas station overheard me talking and quickly walked over to ask more. Under a dirty ball cap and behind a dolly that held boxes of bottled Gatorade, his excitement grew and grew as I continued to explain.

“You’ve got to talk to my brother-in-law; you’ve got to talk to my brother-in-law,” he repeated, fishing his phone from his front pocket. Stepping back outside I heard him begin to say, “Hey Bill, there’s these cyclists,” leaving me to wait in the air conditioning.

Moments later he returned, pressing the dirty brick phone into my hand. I spoke to the voice on the other side of the line. I gave him the usual quick speech about Bike and Build. I told him where we were staying so he could meet us if he wished.

Lines from the corduroy couch scarred across my face, from my afternoon nap, as I spoke to Bill’s brother-in-law Jared. I led him to our leader Bash.

I watched their conversation occasionally as I went to and from the counter they were working at for snacks in between naps.

They were pouring over google maps. Clicking back and forth, checking different bike paths, and every once in a while, Jared would step outside to take a phone call. In the end, Bash explained that with Jared’s help, we were going to have news coverage, a police escort, and cut two hours off our route, according to google maps.

...

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

That evening we gathered in the hall where our bikes sat flipped. Their tires pointed to the ceiling, as if they were sleeping from their long day of rolling over asphalt.

Thomas spun a wheel for the TV crew to record its spokes. The crew then moved to record our leader Cake, his shoulder length braids trailing out from under his green hat. His mustache had begun to grow blond from the sun; his large blue eyes stared forward at the camera lens, sure to capture the attention of anyone who may glance in their direction.

I finished two heaping plates of rice and beans, along with salad and ice cream. All that was left for the evening was to re-organize my duffle with freshly washed clothes then fall asleep.

“Host said to be sure to pull your clothes inside, and make sure all the doors are locked,” I read in the Group Me as I stepped outside.

The pavement was warm under my bare toes. My clothes were still a bit damp, but only Brett’s clothes were left on the line. Crickets sang to fill the air, thick with humidity, several different groups of strangers walked past, some hollering, asking us what we were doing. Others lost in their own conversations.

Returning to the A/C I began to reorganize my bag. It was like cleaning your room once a week, afterwards I always felt a tad more in control. Carter pushed to convince me to go out with him and Rye, while Rye was pushing Kurt to finish his journal as she could post it.

Each teammate was expected to finish about four blog posts for the entire summer in rotation. Rye sometimes had to threaten to pull teeth to have completed journal entries, but she made sure the journal was always updated.

Evening turned to night and tiredness switched to exhaustion. We never made it past the front door for the evening. I had not chosen a spot to sleep. I was wondering around the youth

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

center, searching of an open spot on the floor. I chose one at Heather's feet near a plug-in that had not yet been claimed by a phone or light charger. I quickly fell asleep, dreaming of riding.

...

Morning light tip-toed through the windows, after cleaning, which there much to do, we walked, in socks, as we were not allowed to wear out cleats inside hosts, to the other building across the street. A table had been set up, a buffet of cereals, milk, and breakfast pastries shone. Thankfully, I added a cheese Danish to my hydro pack for later.

We waited in the courtyard. Jared had arrived, wearing his Texas cycling socks. The police had arranged several road closures. One police car led us, and one followed us, as we set off across town. A huge intersection laid in front of us. Rye road on my left, her purple handlebars navigating the potholes in the road. We wove and cut across the street.

We looked back as it had grown quiet behind us. I couldn't hear a single teammate calling out cars or holes, or tires rolling on asphalt. I began to hear a whirling; Thomas was catching up with us.

"Someone crashed, but I don't know who," he spat.

We pulled over and laid in the grass as anxiety rose from our chests. I counted and re-counted estimating it was more likely a guy had crashed. A small guilty part of me hoped it was a guy. I felt as if they could bounce back better. Most of them had been riding longer than any of the girls, excluding Rye. Scared for whomever it may be, we laid in wait.

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Natalie sat red faced in the van.; she had crashed. Thomas, who had been in front of her, called out a hole. Since we weren't at all methodical in our police escort, Natalie had not heard him.

Her front tire went into the hole, which was about four or five inches in diameter and deep. Wedged into the hole, her tire stuck causing the rest of her bike to cartwheel, sending her forward, leaving her to catch herself with her arms. Now, her left hand was pulled tight to her chest, but other than that she was okay. She took shelter in the van, leading us the rest of the day.

...

Brett, Carter, Rye, and I were one of the last to leave. I rode alongside Rye as we passed acres and acres of pecan trees.

"Do you ever want a family?" Rye asked me.

"I'm not sure. I'm so young right now. I haven't given it much thought other than I don't want any of it right now. Plus, I have to convince someone to fall in love with me first," I stumbled, the question had nearly knocked me off my bike.

Rye's eyes grew distant. Gliding next to me. I watched her go somewhere else. She talked about a family one day with children.

"Sometimes, you know, just because the way life has gone I wonder," she paused, "if I am unlovable."

Unlovable, that's impossible. She is so far from unlovable. No one is unlovable especially not Rye. I rode, floated, speechless. I could never unlove her, never unlovable.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

Our cue led us down a winding highway. Gentle turns revealed homes of blue and green, with white trim and front porches that grew from the rich soil. The river played hide and seek behind groups of trees and fields. More homes began to show, and the river ran alongside us. Shade from the trees kept our energy from dwindling in the summer sun. Leaning to the left and right I drank the colors of the landscape and skated through the small section of heaven on Earth. It led to a small boat dock that burned the bottom of our bare feet, encouraging us to jump in.

“The sign says swimming is strictly prohibited, and that. It’s under 24/7 surveillance,” I pointed out, shaking my dripping hair back.

“Not like they can tell who we are anyhow’ we’re on bikes,” Kat reassured me.

Our groups had met at the dock. Rye sat with Carli on the dock. Somehow managing the docks skillet like heat against their skin.

Carter swerved in the lane then back to the right side of the white line. We hadn’t seen a car in a long time, but my heart leapt a little each time he moved further into the lane. Anxiety radiated off of Rye riding behind me: I could feel it shift to rage.

Brett turned quickly to go into the post office, leaving Rye and I to seek refuge in the shade of a nearby tree.

“I hate that. I hate it,” she unclipped hand swung her leg over her seat. The saddle was lime green with purple lettering that matched her purple bar tape. She stretched her chin forward to unclip her black helmet, holding it by the straps on her fingertips. She led her bike into the grass, held the handle bars and sat across the cross bar.

“You mean going to the past office?” I played dumb.

She held her mouth in a line.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

“I can tell Brett that I didn’t like that. It wasn’t safe. If I tell him that he’ll fix it. I have no doubt,” she looked over towards the post office.

“Riding in the middle of the road like that, she shook her head, “Selfish. He put himself and all of us at risk. He needs to think of everyone. I can’t ask him to fix selfishness.”

...

That night we sat in a huge circle under the greenish light of the gym, conducting our weekly family meeting. I raised my hand to speak. During the ride into town I realized something I should’ve shared with my team far sooner. Morganza was the first time it truly struck me.

“I thought of this today but really should have told you guys this when I was introducing that town,” I paused, conscious of my stammering, “but I bet people in Morganza don’t lock their cars. I am from a place like that. No one locked their cars. No one locks their homes. And we are strangers, guests, invited to this town. They don’t know us.” I felt passion catching in my throat. “They don’t know who we are or what we are doing. We can see that when our hosts ask about us. We need to remember that we are not entitled to anything. We are guests, “I finished seeing Rye nod across the circle.

“We also need to be reaching out more to our hosts,” Bash began. “I think I speak for all of us when I say Pearlington was an amazing and memorable host. I think we could have more hosts like that if we reached out more.”

The idea popcorned around the circle. Agreement murmured out of everyone’s lips.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

“I think a big difference with Pearlinton was they introduced themselves. I really think that broke the barrier. I think we should continue that,” Brett clearly explained with his manager voice, the one he used when addressing a crowd.

That was a huge change. We began having our hosts introducing themselves at every place, as long as we remember. Beginning 45 minutes later we met two men from Bike Natchitoches.

Bash was over chatting with them as we stood in line, shuffling from our half Subway sandwiches, chips, and miniature Gatorades. Filing in around several different circular tables Carter, Bash, John and Brett found chairs around my table.

Bash stood from his chair, remaining in his spot, cleared his throat.

“Hey guys, I had the chance to talk to these lovely gentlemen,” he motioned to the two standing by the sandwiches, “and I wanted to give them the opportunity to introduce themselves and their organization. Both were active cyclists and added in founding the organization that shone at us from their lime green t-shirts, Bike Natchitoches.

I looked across out table to notice Bash had the same shirt folded into his palm. He looked forward at the gentlemen in front of us. The beamed about their group and the hope for acceptance of cycling culture throughout Louisiana.

“Here,” the man plopped down a Big cardboard box onto the table that wined beneath its weight. “We’ve had a few extras. Sorry, I’m sure we’re running low on mediums.”

...

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

“Go shower quick. You have like four minutes,” Kurt shouted as I ran to the women’s bathroom. Dinner had finished up and everyone was itching to go explore the town. Hastily combing my hair, I joined Kurt along with everyone else. We marched in a parade to the downtown.

Twenty young people with sandaled feet and bright green shirts, crowded into a bar and restaurant near the river. It was quiet, with couples and families wearing their Sunday clothes. We tilted the atmosphere off its axis with our rowdiness and complaints about expensive drinks.

My phone buzzed on the grated outdoor table. The blonde woman had just finished her song and the guitar rang in the courtyard.

“Where are you?”

It was John. My stomach turned. I clicked the screen, so it turned black. Jamie walked up to the table.

“We’re going to try this other place across the street. Want to come?”

I hopped up and followed her across the street. Nate and John were already sitting at the bar. They turned to look at us.

“Hey,” John sang, and Nate added, “What’s up?” to the chorus.

I ordered a cider. Sweet on my lips, I stood between them. We talked a bit about their day. Who they road with and how the grilled gator was. Harlow, Danielle, and Luke stood together, committed to a debate I wasn’t ready to become a part of, so I stayed where I was.

The door rang, and this spot began to fill with my teammates once again. Apparently, the water’s edge had grown a bit dull and the drinks and snacks a bit too expensive.

A seat lay vacant in front of Carli. Her curls giggled as I sat down in the chair. It held my back and shoulders, releasing the tension from extended time in the saddle.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

I don't know where the thought had come from, but I remember a rumor I'd read online. Probably one of those articles you find scrolling through Facebook when you are unable to fall asleep.

"You know they say if you stare into someone's eyes for four minutes you'll both fall in love," I opened.

Carli leaned forward on the table enthusiastic about our new game, "Let's do it!"

"What's the worst that could happen?" I shrugged.

It looked as strange as you many imagine. Her curls adjusted to the influence of the fan. Her eyes are dark pools reflecting the light from the ceiling and her smile spread across her jaw. The corners of her eyes would wrinkle with each time she squinted from her laughter. We were becoming silly with laughter. Calling and responding over our strange behavior to our curious friends, but not breaking eye contact.

Her timer went off. I reached forward and grabbed her hand.

"I think we're in love now," I half-joked.

...

Our train of hippies began the walk home. I glanced back as we rounded the corner to find home. I saw Nate grab Taylor's arm and they fell back.

In the gym, the lights continue to buzz with a portion of our team sleeping in the light. I laid my bag out near Rye and Carli. I felt a tap on my shoulder.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

“Can we go for a walk?” It was John. He stood in his gray sweater. The golden “M” took up the majority of his chest with “swim and dive” written across the top. The air seemed heavy with whatever he wanted to talk about.

“After I set-up my things.”

...

The sidewalk sat orange under the outdoor light. Ants crawled in and out of the cracks in the sidewalk, working through the night. I choose my spot next to them.

Nerves swirled thought my mind all the way to my fingertips. I felt it coming

Beginning easy, he talked about all the trouble he was having. She’d lost interest, wanted to do her own thing. He’d decided that this may be the best time for him to have a summer fling he’d always wanted.

I leaned my head back on the brick. I wanted to know why he thought this.

I began to dig. Why? Why have you never had a summer thing?

The explanation began brief but grew, as stories often do. Beginning with discussion of exes, he came to one that obviously rang differently.

“Who is Stephanie?”

“She is one I owe my life to. I put that girl through so much shit. It was part of my asshole phase.”

My eyebrows creased. “Asshole phase?” I’d seen John become frustrated occasionally, but I wouldn’t call him an asshole.

Over the murmur of Bash and Carter talking behind the trailer John explained.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

I stared at the ants crawling up and down the curb. Lines back and forth to help the colony grow, it was hard to swallow.

I couldn't do what I wanted to; I only grew more irritated. I couldn't help him nor was I going to be his summer fling.

Slinking past us, Nate and Taylor went inside. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back in exhaustion. I could only tell him one thing.

"I wouldn't play something like that. I suggest you figure it out or walk away entirely. I understand you don't want to end a two-year relationship over the phone, but if it is what is right. It is what is right."

We continued to debate about what was right.

I confronted him, "Do you want your summer thing to be me?"

"Well, I didn't necessarily have you in mind, but I also wouldn't say no."

I concluded our discussion by insisting my exhaustion and going back inside.

...

"Will you braid my hair?" Taylor bounced up to me as soon as she saw me.

"Of course," I said with a weary smile, hoping that none of our sleeping teammates woke to me pulling the door shut.

I sat in the chair placed near the half-court and Taylor plopped down between my knees, handing me her brush and hair ties over her shoulder.

June: Plaquimine, La -> Morganza, La-> Nachitoses, LA

I ran the brush through the hair, blonde and silky with a darker under side. Squirring and giggling she apologized, "I'm just on cloud nine right now." I could see her ears turn red. Nate must've pulled her aside to sneak a kiss before the evening turned to night.

I tossed her braid back over her shoulder, "There you go babe." She smiled and walked away towards her bag near Nate.

"Is it okay if I sleep here?" John said, he arms cradling his sleeping bag and pillow.

"Of course," I responded, zipping myself into my bag, to fall asleep and continually wake up due to the light being permanently on.

June: Natchitoches, LA -> Carthage, TX

The hills pushed us forward. We pedaled quickly into Texas, feeling the cool morning air against our cheeks. Max and Claire rode with me.

Claire had been trying to pedal further, but she could rarely make it past first lunch.

“My knee is clicking,” we pulled off at a donut shop. The sign in the door said they were open the other location that day. Disappointed, Claire and I found seats on the curb while Max ran over to the family dollar, his bright pink socks fluorescent against the dark asphalt.

“I wish I knew what was wrong,” Claire said as she rubbed Biofreeze on her knee. “I just want to ride across one border. Just one.”

“You haven’t ridden over a single border?” I asked, amazed.

“No, I’ve been in the van for every single one.”

Her voice dripped with frustration.

Max returned, and we began to discuss calling the van, but the border wasn’t that far away.

“We’re going to walk it. We are less than a mile way,” I decided.

We put our hands on our seat and pushed our bikes forward, to Texas.

“I am just so annoyed. I just want to ride. I signed up to bike across the country, not van,” Claire complained. She had been in the van for weeks, only able to ride for a short time before her knee started hurting so badly she had to call the van. It was clear she wanted to ride but wasn’t getting anywhere. I held onto my patience; I knew how upset I’d be if I had to van as often as she did. She was walking in front of Max. I saw Max clench his jaw in annoyance.

Earlier that day as we were getting our bikes ready, Max and I were talking. Claire had joined our date ride.

June: Natchitoches, LA -> Carthage, TX

“I don’t want to be mean,” he’d started, “but I sometimes wonder if she is hurt or if she doesn’t want to ride or something. She talks about it all the time and it kind of drives me crazy.”

“You know I’ve wondered the same,” I hesitantly began. I wasn’t sure how to proceed to not make Max feel bad, but also be honest. “I know that I want to ride. I love riding. I would hate if I couldn’t ride; it’s what I always want to do. If I couldn’t I think I would complain a lot too.” I hoped that maybe my comment helped but anticipated that it did nothing.

As we continued to walk, Max clicked his teeth. “You know, everyone has their thing,” he shook his head, his helmet lime green in the morning light. “My thing is depression, mental health. Maybe yours is knee pain.”

I will always admire Max’s transparency about his mental health. At nineteen, he had taken a gap year between high school and college. He would openly discuss his challenges. He would question how he could be sad if he had a roof over his head and food in his stomach.

“I don’t know man,” he continued. “We’ve all got different struggles.

...

We made it to the border. Claire excitedly jumped onto the older sign. It was shaped like Texas and was made of white stone. She sat in the Western corner near the panhandle.

“I want to look like what? I made it to Texas?”

She shrugged her shoulders and squinted her face, her hands held upward; obviously confused by her presence in Texas.

Not too far down the road, Texas’s newer huge sign hung saying “Drive safely, the Texas way.” It was about eight times the size of the typical state line sign.

“I bet I could climb that,” Jamie walked to the edge of the sign. She put her arms on either side of the poles holding up the sign. In a matter of seconds, she’d made it up the side of the sign and was hanging from it, her hand below “safely”.

She dropped, about six feet, down to the grass. The sign quickly filled with others climbing to hang from its edges.

I put my right arm out, to signal the upcoming turn. I unclipped my cleats and added my bike to the collection of those flipped outside the donut shop.

I choose a chocolate milk and a rainbow sprinkles chocolate frosted glazed donut. I smiled as I placed it next to John’s, the man behind the counter smiled back.

Our chatter had filled the shop and even the model tractors seemed to grin at our joy. The man grabbed my milk and scanned it, doubling John’s order. The man’s dark hair was partially covered by a paper hat that looked like a boat sailing atop a head of hair, popular in donut shops and burger joints. John swiped his card to purchase our treats. I smiled and tried to remember to pay him back in the future.

Before I made it to the booths, the man behind the counter caught my attention. While John and I had been talking he’d filled a box with an assortment of different donuts.

“You guys are doing a great thing. Y’all should have these,” he smiled, outreaching his arm with the box.

I delivered the box to everyone else.

“Look what just happened.”

“It’s that smile,” Danielle said as she aided Cake in putting the donuts in his backpack. She smiled at Luke who nodded in agreement.

“Don’t forget to save one for Nate,” Taylor requested.

...

I watched Carter's group turn on to a dirt road canopied with trees. They didn't chalk the turn either. It is the responsibility of the first group to chalk the direction for the rest of the team. We did it for them, annoyed.

It was a great house hidden in the trees with big pillars holding up a roof that shaded the porch. Ducks quacked near our bikes. A porch swing and rocking chairs, old milk jugs and coolers rested on the porch, as well as a noisy Bash and Carter, laughing about who knows what.

"That cooler," Carter pointed. I flipped open the lid to see small shining personal sized Gatorades. I grabbed a yellow one and drank its entirety in one breath. I flipped open the next cooler, dark brown bottles sat in the ice, full of Shiner, my next drink of choice.

"I need to clean my bike too," I shouted after Thomas. Someone had already set up the bike stand. Thomas clamped his bike into the stand. His rear rim was permanently bent. If you rode behind him, you would see it wobble between his brake pads.

The needle of the degreaser can clicked along his chain as he turned the pedals twice around. This was important to ensure that the degreaser made it to every link in the chain. Pinching the dirty chain with a rag, he ran the chain through time and time again, staining nearly half the rag. Chains must be properly lubed and cleaned to keep the life of the cassette, the gears and crank, working for a long time, but you can get away with riding across the U.S. without ever cleaning it, like Jamie, you'll have to replace the cassette afterwards though.

"I feel like I don't know all that much about you," I started watching Thomas begin to take his rear wheel off.

“What do you want to know?”

“Anything, I’m here to listen.”

He talked about his family. His dad left, leaving him and his sisters to live with his mom. His dad is high up in Kellogg like his grandpa. His grandpa had worked hard to find his place there.

Thomas told me about working at Kellogg and about how sweet tons of Lucky Charms smell. He enthusiastically showed a video of him watching cereal swirled pass. He explained how his Toyota Camry was white and a complete grandpa car, but he ran the wheels off of it.

He began to floss between his gears. Little bit of degreaser and a rag, in hand he plopped down into the grass, leaning the tire against his thin bare chest. He ran the rag through each gear until the grease left, leaving the gears shining all the way down to the smallest one.

He put the tire back on. He put the nozzle of the dry lube on the chain and ran the pedals while I clicked through the gears on his handlebars. His derailleur clicked the chain up, up, up and down, down, down through the gears, He loosened the bike stand arm, releasing his bike and put mine in its place.

“Yeah, my mom and my siblings and I lived in a small guest house for a time while I was in high school. My mom was working and going to school so we all took turns making dinner.”

He talked about how his life changed after his dad left. When I gave him a sympathetic look, he assured me that while it wasn’t ideal, he easily survived.

He pushed my pedal and it swung all the way around. John approached, “Oh, that’s sexy,” pushing his bike towards us.

“It was nice hearing a bit of your story,” I smiled as Thomas walked away.

“I’m going to have to learn more about yours sometime,” he called back, heading towards the house.

I watched John put his bike up on the stand. We were goofing around, and I said, “I think I’m going to go shower.”

“Ah, I just came from there, there’s two shower head. Let me know if you want company.”

I laughed uncomfortably as I walked away.

“I wouldn’t say no,” he added before I was out of earshot.

I walked up to the house feeling weird.

...

With wet hair, a tank top that displayed my extreme tan lines, I stepped off the porch to take a phone call. While I was aimlessly walking around the front yard, Russell, the goose had found me in my escapades.

Each time I turned my back he would begin to charge at me with his wings down and neck arched. As soon as I turned around he would pretend to peck the ground. We played this game several times, back and forth. Until one time I turned around and there was Russel in all his glory, wings outspread, honking, and charging me.

My first instinct was to use my phone as a sword. I swung it left and right, yet Russel was fearless. That wasn’t working. Instead I flapped my arms right back at Russel. He began to back up and eventually turned away. I took the opportunity to run to the porch, to seek refuge in the laughter and amazement of my teammates.

June: Natchitoches, LA -> Carthage, TX

Dinner was ready soon afterward. Rick had prepared a feast with chicken, potatoes, and bread. With full bellies, we all found a soft place to fall amongst the well maintained but dated couches of the den. Some slept while other watched Ghostbusters and Mama Mia.

I wandered into the kitchen rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I'd unintentionally napped for several hours in the den alongside John.

Eli was chatting with Rick, but they were welcoming me. The light was warm, bouncing off the oak cabinets and light-colored countertops. It was clear that sometime, over ten years ago, his wife had spent a lot of time, and a lot of money, to renovate the entire home.

The kitchen began to rumble as the week's dinner crew entered and began to clean. I joined. After gathering silverware and filing the dishwasher, I partnered with Thomas to clean the stove. It was black with a glass top.

Armed with sponges, Thomas played his country music on the loud speaker. We sang along to Tim McGraw's "Live like I was Dying". I was eight years old again. Singing with my sister while cleaning in the kitchen. Our voices followed the harmony while our hands searched for spots.

I finished brushing my teeth and gathered my sleeping pad, sleeping bag, and pillow in my arms. I came upstairs and struggle to find a spot to lay. Finally, I decided on a relatively crowded but welcoming room.

Natalie, Ronnie, and Kurt laid on the enormous king size bed.

"I can't sleep if I'm touched," Natalie said barricading herself with a blanket, denying any hopeful fourth a spot on the mattress.

Connie was already snoring on the left-hand side of the bed. She couldn't be seen, only heard.

Eli and Alex were chatting in one another arms at the right side of the bed with John at the foot. I pushed the door shut, reluctant against the carpet. Pumping my sleeping pad, I listened to everyone haggle about their sleep spot over Connie's snoring.

"I think we could move over and you could sleep here Pidgeon," Alex offered.

I laid down, zipping myself into my sleeping bag.

"Don't worry, I'll just sleep at your feet," I paused, "like a peasant."

The room re-awoke with laughter. I rolled to place my pillow between my head and hands. John stood to turn off the lights.

Usually I'd fall asleep as soon as the lights were turned out. That night I rolled left and right, trying to find the sleep I had slipped into during my nap. I could hear John rustling as well. The snoring had turned from one to a chorus I let out a giggle. John lifted his head.

"You're awake too?"

"Yeah," I watched how close our hands were on the carpet. Less than an inch buzzed between our knuckles.

"I can't sleep; that nap worked a little too well on me," I explained, but John couldn't hear me. I repeated myself several times until I caved, moving to the spot next to him looking at his sleepy eyes.

"You know I've been looking for a make-out buddy," he suggested. I looked at him. His hair had grown long enough that you could tell it was dark. His tan lines were only become more and more distinct with each passing day.

Instead I replied, "That's not me, you'll have to find someone else."

I contemplated, then gathered my courage. "You know what you said to me earlier by the bike stand?" I asked.

June: Natchitoches, LA -> Carthage, TX

After he had said that I gathered Kurt and Ronnie. I didn't know what to do. It wasn't that I wasn't interested in John, but he was off limits. Also, I did not like the direct sexual suggestion; it made me feel weird. I knew I needed to keep me distance from him, but I didn't want to sacrifice our friendship. I explained this to them.

Sitting under the trees Kurt said, "Just tell him that. Be honest."

"Yeah, if you can't be honest with him what is it worth?" Ronnie added.

I choked over my words for a few more minutes while they patiently waited. I contemplated what the future could hold and John's complicated situation, how I didn't want to get in the middle of that.

"Look, if you aren't honest, then he will never actually know how it made you feel. Then he may do it again. You gotta tell him." Kurt explained.

Here we were.

"What I said about the two shower heads?" He pondered.

"Yeah, I couldn't tell if you were joking. I know we joke like that all the time, but it made me feel weird. I couldn't tell if you were joking or serious. I didn't know how to react," I fumbled.

"Well, I guess technically it was a joke, but kind of serious. I wouldn't say no," he explained.

"I'm okay with joking, but just know what you said made me feel a bit weird. Look I care about you, but don't want to get involved. I don't want to cause you any complications," I convinced myself.

"That's okay. Now I know that was too far, and it won't happen again. Best friends, okay?" he held out his pinky. I took it with mine.

June: Carthage, TX -> Athens, TX -> Dallas, TX

Russell, the goose, chased us as we rode away from Carthage. Brett, Kurt, and I were flying. Originally, we had all wanted to ride with Carter, Bash, and Thomas. Our group kept growing, added me, then Kurt. Brett had been left without a group, so we adopted him to our group, but it put us six. It wasn't safe to ride in such a large group, so we spilt into two.

We waited for everyone, aside from sweep, to leave, so we could fly. Kurt, Brett, and I took off leaving Carter, Bash, and Thomas to follow.

We zoomed forwarding, rolling hills were nothing. We could hear Carter, Bash, and Thomas approaching. I looked at my computer; we were going twenty-eight miles an hour.

I was following Brett and Kurt was behind me. Brett moved to push himself faster. My pedals pushed my tires forward, trying to keep the spacing between myself and Brett. We were going too fast.

I turned to my left. We were right in pace with them. Bash hung right next to me. They were trying to pass. The rumble bars separated us, leaving Bash's group in the lane.

Bash, Carter, and Thomas were three feet into the road. We were in the shoulder. They should've passed us several seconds ago. Brett only pushed faster, and I tried to keep up as he pushed faster and faster.

Bash, Carter, and Thomas found their speed. They pulled past us. I looked at my computer and thirty-two stared back at me.

Our pedals spun at incredible speed all day. We bounced on chip seal. In Texas, since it is so hot, they do not use regular asphalt to save money. Chip seal has rocks mixed with a layer of asphalt. The heat of the day mixed with the weight of cars, smooths the lanes, but in the shoulders, it was rough.

June: Carthage, TX -> Athens, TX -> Dallas, TX

Following Brett, we saw Bash's group pulled off at a gas station. Brett took this opportunity to push even faster. We were approaching a hill that looked like smooth freshly laid asphalt.

My arms were shaking holding onto the handle bars. It was not smooth. It was rougher than the chip seal.

"This feels like I'm riding on a flat," Kurt's voice shook.

"Wait," he flipped his head back to look at his rear tire. "I do have flat."

Brett was so far way.

"I'll go get Brett," I shouted as he nodded and pulled off.

We sat in the gravel. Brett played his music, some rap by Eminem with Kurt sitting, twisting and turning to get his tire off. All the groups took turns passing us, but once we had gotten back onto the road we took our turn passing everyone. Krista's group were deep in the ditch, with grass past their hips. Carter's entire pedal had come off and was stuck to his cleat. The morning had been a rough start.

We flew, continued down the road through the rolling hills. Brett continued to pedal fast, then slow, fast then slow. He couldn't keep a consistent pace; I couldn't keep a consistent space.

The rolling hills had come back, but this time it as creeping up upon noon. The traffic had increased with cars and mini-vans rolling alongside us.

Brett had been trying to hit 50 mph for weeks now. He clicked into this highest gear and pedaled faster and faster away down a hill. I began to shout at him, trying to tell him I couldn't keep up.

Kurt was even further behind me. I began to grow nervous. I could feel my jitters set in. I whipped my head forward and backward, shouting to Kurt and Brett.

June: Carthage, TX -> Athens, TX -> Dallas, TX

Brett grew further and further away I shouted louder, even though I knew he probably couldn't hear me. I couldn't hear Kurt. I decided to split the difference in the space.

Spacing is important while riding. You should be no more than one bike length apart. If there is more than that cars may thinking they can go between you and your teammate. If this were to happen, you and your teammate would be in trouble because you are less visible, more likely to be harmed or involved in an accident.

Brett was easily over 300 meters away. I couldn't close the gap, but I was going to try. I focused and began to pedal, faster, and faster, I went to shout again, but my voice was drowned.

Less than an arm's length way a back, early 2000's SUV sped past me, towards Brett. My eyes grew wide, consuming most of my face. I couldn't shout. I couldn't do anything, I stared.

"I will never ride with him again," I sat angry in the shade of the Dairy Queen with Kurt.

"I saw it, I knew you were mad," he comforted me.

"Just worry about you and me."

We grew quiet again as Brett came out of the restaurant. He folded his feet under himself with his arms full of treats.

"I can't eat all these popsicles myself," he said melting my attitude with a bomb pop place some fries in the center of our circle.

The rain clouds began to form over head as we entered town. The usual roughness from the chip seal turned worse in a construction zone. The rocks were loose, making it difficult to steer as the rocks pulled my handlebars left and right. Our lunches jumbled in our stomachs. We pulled off at a gas station.

Kurt sat down on the rickety wooden bench and I joined him. Brett went inside. A woman, assumingly the store clerk, stepped outside to light a cigarette.

June: Carthage, TX -> Athens, TX -> Dallas, TX

“Some of your friends came through here earlier,” she flicked her lighter her gelled, decades old, curls jumped in sync.

“I think what y’all are doing is awesome. I know how hard it is to get a home,” she explained after Kurt smiled, giving our speech while I turned my shoulders to show her our route line on the back of my jersey.

“Lost my home in a tornado years ago. I had to live in this make-do shelter the government gave us. After that I moved into a trailer. I’ve lived there ever since,” she put her cigarette to her lips and took another drag, as if to numb whatever pain she may be feeling as she recounted her loss.

“We mainly work with Habitat for Humanity,” Kurt leaned forward on his knees. “I don’t know if there is a one in Athens, but I know there is one in or around Dallas. You can apply, you’ll have to show that you need to have or use affordable housing. Then you have to do some sweat equity. It depends on the Habitat how many hours you must do but usually its anywhere from 300-500 hours.”

The woman continued to listen bobbing her head with her cigarette.

“Now that sounds like a lot of hours, but your family, co-workers, anyone can help you obtain those hours usually,” I added when the leather belt with bells attached jingled as Brett came out of the gas station, already eating his cliff bar.

“I’ll lead,” I said as we left the woman, her blonde hair contrasting against the dark stormy sky. Lead was my favorite, and this would be the first time I’d led all day. Brett took off before I was able to clip in and even when I tried to regain my position at the traffic light he wouldn’t let me pass.

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I kicked off my cleats and lifted my bike onto my shoulder.

“I’m never riding with him again.”

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The next morning, I saw I was assigned to sweep into Dallas with Luke. I was excited as we always had good conversation and a similar pace.

“We, the non-existent fun committee, have brought some fun,” Cake announced as he reached into his large pack and pulled out twelve colorful tubes, passing them around the circle. Everyone claimed one, and mine was yellow. Filled with bubbles, we each had our own identical bubbles. As the team left that morning bubbles bounced in between everyone’s shoulders.

The stormy skies continue from the day before. A lightning strike lit the sky at nearly the same time we saw the chalk indication Rye’s group was at the gas station. We joined them across the road at a Texaco. It sat surrounded by grasslands dancing in the stormy wind. The bars along the windows was comical as the bubbles we blew popped against them.

I laughed, “Welcome to Texaco,” I sang to the truck driver who began to walk inside. Luke joined in as Carli, Cake, Max and Rye sang a chorus of “Welcome to Texaco” in the stormy tunnel.

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We turned onto a two-lane highway. The storm had blown away and the golden blade of June heat contrasted against the now clear blue sky. The heat of the day began to settle in and I knew I was growing hungry.

“You know, Northern is passing right past my grandma’s home,” Luke said over his shoulder at me.

“Whoa that’s awesome”

“I always loved my grandma’s house. It is a magical place. I can just remember going there when I was little. Not only was my whole family there, but her house was always so warm and huge. The carpets are thick and comfy. Honestly, the house isn’t that far from my parents’ home.”

“Would you ever see if she could host? You could help her.”

“Really, it’d be big enough,” he contemplated.

“Didn’t Ronnie put on the GroupMe that they would be at this gas station,” I switched the conversation to discuss lunch.

We pulled off into a blue and yellow gas station. Dark black flies crawled across the flipped bike and pumps. We leaned our bikes against the others and joined everyone inside.

“The woman at the cash register was kind enough to let us set up lunch here and fill our water bottles, but she told us to lock the bikes,” Ronnie explained, a happy giggle playing in her voice.

The gas station was as dispirited as Danielle, Harlow, and John. Only half of the building had shelves and some of the freezers were converted into storage for cardboard boxes. John sat with a blank expression, his hand resting in the biscuit crumbs on the gray table. Danielle and

June: Carthage, TX -> Athens, TX -> Dallas, TX

Harlow had already decided, they were in the van for the rest of the day. John had to decide to either come with us or ride in the van.

As he talked with Luke, I ate two biscuits with jelly. There wasn't much left. The van was going to grab groceries after first lunch. John grabbed his helmet and fastened it.

"I can always call the van or get in at second lunch," he stated decidedly.

The afternoon was warm and full of banter, but as time wore on so did my spirits.

"It says to turn here" Luke consulted his computer. We stared down the rough road. There were more potholes than anything else. Dodging left and right around sometimes through potholes under the hot Texas sun, the rough pavement turned to dirt.

We slid and slipped across the way, attempting to follow the tire marks of our teammates. The dirt road turned into washboards. Washboards are made from poor driving over dirt roads. It shook you. It twists your skin back and forth, attempting to tear it away.

I had thought my arms were extremely sunburnt, even though I had just bathed in sunscreen. As soon as we hit smooth road again, I realized it was from the jarring of the washboards.

Going into Dallas there was a huge daunting hill. I watched as Luke and John zoomed further and further away from me.

Hills will always be my weakness. I had trained on hills at a high elevation, but still I struggled up the hill, in lower gear and a quick cadence.

4:00 p.m. was approaching. We were about ten miles away. Nate and Bash blared music from the van. The air was thick and hot. My sunglasses slipped from my nose.

"There's a pool!" Nate shouted from the van, encouraging me to ride into host.

"You can jump in as soon as you get there."

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An RV, red mustang, and motorcycles line the driveway. I removed my sunglasses and blinked, who was host.

“What flavor of milkshake would you like dear? Vanilla or chocolate?” Sally asked.

“Uhhh, chocolate,” I replied blinking at the wonder an abundance of the mansion where I found my sweaty self-standing. Candy bars, snacks, muffins, chocolate covered almonds, peanut and M &M’s sparkled in the light that snuck through the windows. Hand-made quilts were draped over the balcony, displaying every color imaginable.

Sally put a plastic boot, heaping with chocolate milkshake into my hand. Greedily I drank.

“Hey,” Kurt tapped my shoulder, “I’ve got a present for sweep.

He took Luke and I out to the front porch where John was already standing.

“Ah hahaha,” he boomed with laughter before pulling three Smirnoff Ices out of his back pack.

“Get those jersey’s off, you’ve bee ICED!”

Unzipping and forgetting our jerseys on the ground, Luke, John, and I took a knee and began to drink our strawberry drinks. We had to take off our jerseys because there is a strict rule that you can’t buy or consume alcohol in our jerseys or anything that says Bike and Build.

Sallyland earned its name because of its lavish nature, an oasis in the desert. The water of the pools reflected the twinkling yard lights. The 2017 Southern United States team had run into a crisis when their host fell through. Sally was very active in the Sunnyvale Habitat for Humanity. She offered up her home that evening and for so many years afterwards.

No expense we spared. That night we shuffled around the kitchen island filling our paper plates full of ribs, corn, as well as a bounty of pasta salad and fresh fruit.

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I flipped of the lid of one of our coolers. Melted ice and floating leftovers glared back at me with an agitating stench. Carli walked around the corner.

“Oh no, it’s just what I thought,” Carli said dipping her hand into the cooler to retrieve the gross left-over lasagna. Scott, Sally’s son pulled up next to us. Lowering the tail gate, he revealed a pile of bagged ice.

“Can I help?” Carli asked, as I stood behind her.

“Well, sure, if you want to,” he responded as we each took a bag of ice.

We were standing in what I referred to as cooler ally. On each side of the aisle there was about four coolers. All were full of water, juice, beer and wine coolers.

Scott was refilling all the coolers. “Yeah, if y’all don’t drink it I don’t know what we’ll do with it.”

Generosity followed us wherever we went. I could never get used to it. Sally’s was a whole different level. I was in shock every time someone opened their spaces to us to stay in, fed us, as well as offered their company. I couldn’t help but feel undeserving.

“Okay,” Sally clapped her hands in front of us.

“We have a couple different projects for y’all today. They’re smaller so we’re going to break y’all up into groups. One will stay here, one will go to the Rockwall Habitat for Humanity, and one will work on cleaning a lot.”

A common misconception is that we build an entire house in each city we stop. While we would love to do this, it was never the case. We did whatever worked an affordable housing

affiliate need. Twenty-eight pairs of hands could have a huge impact on a housing project. In this case, we weren't even building. None of us picked up a hammer that day.

The Habitat for Humanity Restore can be found in conjuncture with any Habitat for Humanity. The Restore is a big part of Habitat for Humanity. The stores accept donations of household items and construction supplies. Any leftover supplies from a build may also be sold in the Restore. Profits from the Restore are essential to fund future builds.

“Okay,” Scott began as we filed into the truck.

“We have a bin that desperately needs organized and a section of old fence and concrete that needs to come out.”

We split up and began to tackle our two projects. Dirty and dusty, we pulled through the morning until the early afternoon when we were brought back together.

“D.Q. or Whattaburger?” Scott asked everyone in the truck. Whattaburger had an overwhelming majority. We munched until our bellies were full, crossing our fingers that we would not be sick from the grease.

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Evening came, Sally wasn't done with her surprises. In the convertible, truck, excursion, and van we shuffled from the house to a large lake closer to the city center.

A cart jangled, and Carter rounded the corner, pushing Jamie who was sitting on top of the coolers.

“Coming through!” Jamie hollered.

A boat bobbed up to the dock. The water rippled swirling the sunsets colors on its surface. I stepped onto the rocking boat, taking my seat next to John.

“I missed you this afternoon,” he leaned against me. We sailed around, drunk on the ambiance and wine coolers until it was time to go home.

I jumped into the back of the mustang, which Sally was driving, along with Tanya. Sally sped faster as we neared the city’s edge. Our hair swirled around us. We shook our hair with our hands, allowing it to become only more of a mess.

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“Now that I’ve seen where you’re from, I’m sorry I laughed at you for no knowing Kendrick Lamar,” Kat said from across the table at the Dairy Queen. She swirled her blizzard absentmindedly as she continued to play with Google maps.

All around my hometown is green and blues and brown indicating its relative isolation. I pulled the screen to show the highway we must take to get groceries.

“You gotta drive for forty minutes to get groceries,” I showed Kat as she gasped.

This began to be fun. I revealed to her how I went to the same building for all my schooling, elementary, middle, and high school, or how all the roads aside from the state-funded highways are dirt.

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“Oh my god you did it,” I gasped as I touched Rye’s now shaved head. Before we’d split to work Rye had talked about shaving more of her hair. She had a side shave, by she wanted to shave all the way around her head, leaving only a small portion at the top of her head.

She held up her ponytail.

“I’m going to mail this to my mom without any warning,” she laughed. When she returned home she planned to donate it. Rye has some of the most beautiful hair I’ve ever seen, before or since. It is long, thick, and a deep brown. Whenever someone complimented her one it she would simply say, “I’m Greek.”

We left, thirty minutes later, in the truck full of everyone considering a new piercing.

The doorbell rang as we entered, all six of us came into the air-conditioned shop. I hid behind my army of a teammates. I was so nervous.

“So, ah, how much for a nose ring?” Cake asked the tattooed man behind the counter. It seemed a bit strange as Cake already had a gleaming nose ring in his left nostril.

“Twenty,” he replied quickly. Now I couldn’t say no. I’d told myself I could spend forty dollars total. I’d thought that was cheap. Twenty was what Rye owed me for some tubes. I wouldn’t even be losing money from my account, I told myself.

The leather stuck to the back of my thighs and the small white oscillating fan in the corner blew my hair back, rustled the posters on the wall, and adjusted the loose sketches that artist had covering her desk.

“Okay take a breath in,” she instructed inches from my face.

I filled my lungs and as they reached capacity she pushed the needle through my nose. It didn't hurt as first, then she began to pull the needle through my nose and the ring that followed. That hurt.

Teary eyed, I turned and faced my team, to be received with smiles and encouragements. I walked to the bathroom; it was painted an awful orange red that reflected off itself. When I closed the door, it locked me into a room that made it seem as if my eyes had gone haywire. I leaned close to the mirror and touched my nose. I wondered what my parents would say. I turned my head from side to side. It was perfect.

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I had nearly forgotten what my Heidi looked like. I checked the tires and turned the pedals, all seemed to be working alright.

That morning had the crisp quality of early fall. The clouds allowed the sun to hide behind them, shy about bringing the day.

Arranging and re-arranging the trailer, we shifted all the food to try to fit it all. Sally had adorned us each with at least two new shirts and was going to fill our bellies for at least the next three weeks.

“Let’s make sure we are strategic about our packing This is a lot of food and one of it should go bad because we’re careless,” Cake reminded us at route meeting.

Our goodbye was prolonged with twenty-eight hugs to Sally, Scott and Sally’s mother. Pictures and handshakes filled the time as groups began to roll away from our oasis.

Navigating Dallas and the surrounding area required a complexity of twists and turns. Rolling through the traffic, Harlow, Thomas, and I would pull out our bubbles at stoplights. Commuters would smile at our childish behavior, some even laughed.

“Grab your bubbles, look there’s a school bus,” Harlow pointed excitedly. Thomas reached his thin arm around to pull his bubbles from the outer picket of his hydro pack.

His breaths filled our surrounding air with bubbles. Harlow and I awaited the school children’s reaction.

“He’s flipping us off!” whined Harlow, offended.

A small middle finger stared through the glass at us. We put our babbles away.

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“What’s going on with Carli?” I asked Luke as we stepped into the coffee shop that soothed our warm bodies with air-conditioning.

Carli seemed stressed, pacing outside on phone. During Bike and Build its easier to enjoy the Bike and Build bubble. This bubble bursts with every phone call. Carli made phone calls nearly every day.

“She hasn’t really told me anything, but I think it’s something back home. I’m not sure if we can do much to help.”

I watched her pace through the coffee shop window, worried.

I sat at the wire table with Harlow, Thomas, and Max. The new earrings shone in Max’s ears, with his hair dyed lighter through the holes in his helmet, making them and significantly lighter than the rest his hair, resembling a 1990’s boy band member.

“Max, what are you eating?” Harlow enquired.

“A steak,” he revealed the steak from behind his back. The table erupted with laughter.

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We twisted and turned through the homes of the Dallas surrounding area. Trees shaded our path. A woman walked her golden retriever and Harlow gooped over it. We even took a break to pet it.

Nate’s group passed us when we stopped to chalk a difficult turn. We shouted at them to turn right. Bash, Nate, Luke, Carli, and Taylor rolled past us.

We waited, to give them enough space.

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A black jeep crossover sat with its hazard lights flashing. Five bikes laid abandoned on the side of the road. It all began to run through my head. No, no, why does the jeep have its lights on. No, no. Adding our bikes to the pile, Harlow, Thomas, and I left them in a heap.

“What happened?” Thomas demanded at Nate.

His walk had taken on a business pace and his eyes pierced the situation through his sunglasses.

“Her front tire got caught in my back tire, against the frame and the disc brakes. We stopped, the light was yellow. It was an accident,” Nate stammered.

Carli laid on the pavement in front of the Jeep. Taylor crouched next to her. Her blue helmet matching her blue lenses; her blonde braid escaped down her back.

“Can I take off your helmet?” Taylor asked, gently. She’d just graduated from the University of North Carolina with some sort of professional nursing degree.

Carli nodded, allowing Taylor to carefully unbuckle her helmet, replacing it with a Styrofoam piece from Bash’s hydro pack. Carli wasn’t ready to stand up yet.

I reminded myself I wouldn’t be much help hovering over Taylor and Carli. I decided to join Harlow on the grass by the bikes.

“Has anyone called the van?” Thomas demanded.

Bash explained that the van is coming, but they were a while away, caught in traffic. Before the van could even arrive, an ambulance pulled up. Taylor stepped back, allowing the paramedics to take over. They asked Carli if she was ready to stand up, then helped her to her

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feet and into the ambulance. Taylor joined her, and they drove way. It left the rest of us to try and figure out what to do next.

Luke was white. His face wrinkled, stressed. He aged years in a matter of hours. Bash insisted Harlow, Thomas, and I continue forward. Thomas agreed, and we set off. Carli's group was going to wait for the van and make sure she was okay.

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Our route took us through a park on a winding bike path. Harlow's shoulder's tensed and her worried spilled from her mouth.

"That was so scary. To just see her laying on the ground. Then the ambulance. And I couldn't do anything. And I want to be a nurse. But what if I can't because I couldn't even handle that Taylor was so calm," she shook her head.

"It's okay Remember Taylor is a lot older than you. She has had a lot more schooling, so of course she's going to be better at these types of things," I assured.

"Yeah, and you aren't going to personally know everyone who walks into the emergency room. It is far different when you are dealing with someone you know. Most hospital won't even allow you to operate or work with someone you know," Thomas added.

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Talking and spacing was nearly perfect as we wove our way through the rest of the city.

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Our wide bike lane dissolved to a shoulder and eventually, vanished forcing us to ride in the 1/3 most right side of the lane.

“Car back,” I shrieked. I was the end on in our pace line. Harlow was leading with Thomas in the middle. I felt my face burn red from embarrassment. My nerves burned red hot in my fingertips and shoulders.

“Whoa,” Thomas commented. A truck passed a little too close for comfort for the fortieth time that afternoon.

“I’m a bit on edge,” I excused myself. “I had a close call the other day, then Carli today.” I called.

Harlow put her right hand out and turned in to a little pull off in the road. Most our team sat under the shade of the willows with the van doors wide open; Luke walked to fill his hydro pack.

I let my bike fall next to Ronnie’s. I plopped down next to her., pulling the bag of salty, rippled chips closer to my greedy hands.

“How’s the ride?” I asked, exhausted.

“Well, we have two broken bikes. Alex’s rear derailleur snapped when we were climbing earlier. So, they came to pick us up. My bike is also being funny. I think it is something to do with the rear derailleur as well. So, I’m in the van the rest of today,” she said, her voice trilling higher as she finished her explanation.

I laid back on my hydro pack, resting my eyes, attempting to extinguish my stress.

“Damn,” I began hoping I could add something but, “rough day,” was all I could manage.

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The flies buzzed lazily along the wooden bench I was resting my heels on. I was lying flat on my back, with my head turned to the side. My cheek resting on the cool concrete. We hadn't made it far after second lunch. The heat and stress of the day beat down on us, pounding down on our shoulders.

Mental strength as becoming more important than the quad muscles or calves we'd developed. No matter how long you're been cycling, the monotony of the daily life and the stress of riding alongside of huge vehicles adds up. The worry of Carli and the heat of the sun, ate at us.

We lay waiting for the van. Rye had put out a message insisting everyone to stay where they were. That it was 4 p.m. and the traffic was bad. We needed to keep off the road. Leaving a majority of the team to lay in wait along the side of the road. Two groups had taken refuge at the gas station. While there were tables inside, and we had purchased some snacks. Mainly ice cream, we preferred to be outside, in the dirt and shade.

I chuckled to myself. We spent all day outside. Every day off were usually spent working outside. Yet, we usually choose to be outside. As long as we could find some shade, we would lay on grass, dirt, asphalt, concrete, really anything. It didn't matter the surface, we only needed to be able to rest.

Tires crunched the gravel of the parking lot. I lifted my head to see the van reflecting the bright afternoon sun. Relief spread through my body as I pulled my legs down from the bench placing them underneath myself, standing up.

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The driver's door opened. Rye stepped out, her mouth in a line, and she didn't make a sound. Kurt followed her. His cheerful air melted some of Rye's apparent annoyance, but it was clear something had gone wrong. The other van joined us at the gas station.

"Just take your tire off!" Claire shouted at Brett. It was the first time I'd heard anyone on the team yell at another teammate. Her red hair orbited her head and shook back from the shock of her shout. Brett continued to argue. She turned on her heel and walked away. Her hair streaking behind her, contrasting against her gray "Virginia Gymnastics" sweatshirt. Both walked away, equally upset.

Carter silently took the bikes to load them into the van. I followed suit, passing my tires to Kurt, who slid them under the seats and placed the frame in the last bench seat. I found a spot for myself in the second bench. I leaned my head back, allowing my hair to fall from its bun to cascade across the stained upholstery.

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We were late for dinner, and I admired Thomas's enthusiasm as he chatted with a couple people from host. With my Styrofoam plate heavy with pasta, I choose to sit with Danielle, rather than at the other empty table. Gray-haired and smiling through his glasses, a man from host took a seat at our table.

"So, what do you guys do to take care of your bikes? Surely, they need some sort of maintenance with the amount of miles you are putting on them," he seriously requested.

Danielle and I competed for his attention. Barging into one another's sentences to describe cleaning our bikes, changing tires, gear troubles as well as bike shop visits. Cleaning my

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plate, I forfeited my place in the conversation, allowing Danielle to take over. I set up my spot on the floor.

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Barefooted and wincing from the pebbles in the gravel, I traversed to the trailer to retrieve my forgotten sleeping bag.

Kurt, Carter, Kat, and Jamie sat in a circle with Cake, Rye, Natalie, and Bash, all the leaders. Kurt's face sat blank, his lime green hood pulled over his head. His knees were pulled close to his chest, his dark hairy arms cradling them, with his eyes staring blankly at the ground. I quickly glanced at the rest of the circle, before my eyes were caught, to see Kat's eyes turned red and Jamie's swollen, both had been crying.

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The carpet was short and hard. It had lines taped on it that mocked a sort of basketball court. Around its center circle we gathered. Worn and tired faces stared back at me, a bit worried of what was to come. The anxiety hung about our heads, a cloud threatening a storm.

Luke had been staring at the center of the circle, nearly unblinkingly. His leg was bent and tucked under his crossed arms. The Penn State written in blue across his chest was the exact same shade of dark blue as his shorts. His skin gave way to his red hair and general fairness with its constant red tinge, no matter how much sunscreen he applied.

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“Today, today was hard,” he began when it came his turn to say his highs and lows for the week. “Carli really shook me. I didn’t know how to help. And I continually thought about what I could’ve done differently. I wanted to help but didn’t know what to do,” he rambled, tears welling in his eyes. His voice cracked, and he took a minute to gather himself. His rambling started up again in a whirlwind of gratitude.

“And Paige inspired me to try and host North next year and I am just so happy. We really did have a great ride into Dallas with John. It was good to talk, and we just had a good time,” his statement seemed to slap me in the face. I never thought my words had such an impact. Nor did I expect him to call me out in front of everyone, I grabbed the ends of my flannel and pulled my arms tight around my legs, feeling my face flush and eyes water.

I checked out of family meeting, running my fingers across my braid, letting my fingertips bounce along the twists of hair. I was floating. My words meant something, and I got to witness it.

Thomas interrupted my self-thought, his voice booming and urgent, “Today was scary. We can agree with that. But an ambulance should’ve been called far sooner,” his eyes widened in urgency, willing everyone to listen. “An ambulance should’ve been called after a minute and a half of being in the road. I know we all don’t want to have to call an ambulance but that is what needed to be done. Now, I don’t think we called the ambulance. Someone passing by called the ambulance. Especially since we were worried about Carli’s head. I never want to regret not calling an ambulance. It is always better to be safe than sorry,” he turned his head and motioned his thin hand at Carli. “I am so glad you are okay,” his eyes softened.

Jamie’s hair hung long and dark around her face. It wobbled along with her voice, its waves shaking as she spoke. “If you don’t already know, me, Kat, Kurt, and Carter were so far

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behind the group. This morning, at Sally's, Kat and I were like you know let's just go slow. We were leisurely. You know, a few road side naps and just chilling. This in turn made Kurt and Carter slow. We were like ten to fifteen miles behind the team. This put the van far back and everything that happened today it wasn't safe," she dried her eyes with her short fingers. "So, I think I speak for all four of us when I say I'm sorry. I didn't think about it. I should've given more thought into what we were doing," Kurt continued to stare at the ground, the same way he had been earlier when I walked past their meeting. There was something I didn't know.

Cake sat, legs tucked underneath himself and his braids pulled over his shoulders to frame his face. His eyes were not there in Texas with us. They traveled two years back, to his first Bike and Build trip.

"When the death happened on our trip it changed everything I wouldn't wish that on anyone. I want us to not have to experience that. Carli, I am glad you're okay. But we need to remember Anne throughout everything."

I first met Anne on top of Vinicuña, or Rainbow mountain, in Peru. Kelly tore a page from her journal she'd carried to the top. I watched her scratch 23 in dark ink across the page. She stood, her curls spread across her shoulders, her arm thrusting the sheet of paper in the air. It would've been Anne's 23rd birthday in 2017.

...

Words spilled from my mouth when it came my turn to talk.

"I promised Luke I'd remember this. It was the highlight of my week. It was after first lunch going into Dallas. He reached into his pack and pulled out his bubbles, letting them blow

in the breeze. It was a lovely moment,” I paused remember the crisp blue-green of the bubbles against Luke’s jersey.

“Riding up on Carli today was a nightmare in the daylight. I never wanted to see that. And I never want to see it again,” I pleaded to my team. I could feel my tears catch in my throat and my voice crack. I swallowed attempting to subdue the reaction.

I shook my head, as if it would clear my emotions like an etch-a-sketch. “Regardless, we are one. We are a team. And when one of us falls we all fall because we are a family. We are all we have for one another. Carli,” I turned my head toward her, “I am so glad you are okay.” I felt a tear run hot down my cheek. I quickly wiped it nodding to Nate, indicating it was his turn to speak.

“I think we’ve all talked a lot about Carli falling today. Bash and I made a quick stop. Carli didn’t see that we had stopped, and she was rushing to make it through the yellow light. But we’d stopped. She couldn’t see that we had stopped her front tire got caught between my frame and my disc brakes. This is what caused her to fall. That has been the worst part. Low of the week. I’m so sorry, Carli,” he took off his hand, running his hand through his hair that was pin straight and trying to grow it all summer. He turned and put his arm across Carli’s shoulders, careful to not aggravate her tender shoulder. Their shirts matched with a US map and the southern route scrawled across the nation. A bike and cyclist were grossly large holding a cowboy hat over his head with “JSE X SUS” across the bottom, only the spacing was too tight so it looked like “JSEXSUS”.

Carli sat. She seemed a bit surprised yet remained composed. “I’m okay,” she jokingly said smiling to everyone. She clapped her hands on her thighs and rocked back on her legs.

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“I’ve never realized how much we all effect one another,” she began, blinking her eyes.

“I never thought about how much my crash would change or impact the team. I think we need to acknowledge that we are all one in this. We’re doing this together. I love you all and I couldn’t ask for a better team.”

...

“Well, it looks like we’re dating,” I clipped in waiting for Carter to follow me. The same thing had happened the other day. A group of three had frown from three to six, we slit up into four and two. We sped off.

As one of the last ones to leave, I wanted to fly. Going fast isn’t always as easy as you may think. If there’s wind, at you back it’ll help, but going into the wind you’ll usually have to work twice as hard to go the normal speed, but sweat will be whisked away in the wind, to be forgotten before it could exist.

We were incredibly lucky for the warm sunlight, rolling along Texas’ golden rolling hills.

“Tell me about your tattoos,” I began riding alongside him on the sleepy road. I wasn’t supposed to be right next to him, but I cherish any moments I can have one-on-one with someone. I already knew Carter well, but I wanted to know more of his story.

“Well,” he started, guarded by his dark sunglasses that gave him a faux angry brow. “My first tattoo was this one,” he lifted his left hand, the one closest to me, to reveal his inner wrist. A sunflower with yellow petals, a dark center, which was almost as dark as his arms, with a green stem that had matching leaves on either side. Along with cursive letter reading, “I told you to be Patient, Fine, Balanced, Kind,” all were listed down the stem of his flower in black ink.

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I was always fascinated by his flower on his forearm. He always seemed so distant, masculine, and moody. It was a contradiction to his attitude.

“I was in Germany. I had spontaneously gone to this other city. I had bought the ticket and took the train by myself. I took the train to Hamburg. Do you know Bon Iver?”

I shook my head, uncertain. I recognized the artist but couldn't place him.

“Skinny Love?” he prompted.

“Oh yeah,” it hit me. I love Bon Iver; I just pronounced his name differently.

“That song played; nothing has ever spoken to me like that before. I blew me away to experience those emotions. I didn't even know him or anyone at the concert, but I could understand everyone's emotions in the moment. I may not be the same, but it's experiencing it. That next week I decided to get this tattoo right here on my arm,” He slapped his tattoo with a laugh.

“What'd your parents think?” I asked.

“Well,” he began again, “it wasn't like I could hide it from my mom or parents. It's right here, so obvious. She said, ‘It's there forever. You better like it,’ I told her that I did.”

“What about your umbrella?” I continued.

He paused, adding, “That entire album, For Emma, really spoke to me. I listened to it on loop for nearly a year. I am an engineer, so I have a mind that works in a technical mechanical way, but I like being about to continue to be creative. That's part of the reason being my umbrella tattoo.”

Along his side, from his stomach to his ribs, a black umbrella with red flowers, and a quote circled the top as well as underneath, while the letter were clean, I never knew exactly

what they said. His arm often swung in such a way that you couldn't entirely read what it said. I could only guess it was something to do with love.

"I actually drew it. I worked on it for a long time. I worked pretty closely with the artist to ensure it was exactly what I wanted. The umbrella is to be symbolic of your own protection from the rain. The quote is more important though."

The gravel rolled under our tires. We had slowed for a stop sign. We were supposed to unclip and come to a complete stop no matter what. We didn't. We simply followed the chalk and turned right, letting the rules of safety slip for the sake of conversation; also recognizing we hadn't seen a single car in hours.

For a moment only the wind whistled in my ears, as the silence from the end of the explanation stretched the few feet between us.

"And the one on your arm," I referred to the graphic style mountain on the back of his arm.

"That one is for me and my brothers. There's three of us and I am the oldest. So, I have the single mountain. It's kind of funny. My dad and brother called me one day. I was working that day and they were all together. My dad was like, 'We're all getting tattoos together! You need one too.' I almost went and got it that day, but I waited. I actually drew this on. So, like six months after my brothers. It's a little bit different style but it is what I wanted."

A honk finally found its way to my absent ears. I turned to see the lunch van behind us. I automatically felt my cheeks blush. Just a few days ago I preached about the importance of safe, attentive riding. I was caught red handed.

...

A few miles after first lunch we saw a set of bikes flipped outside a community center.

We allowed our bike to join the others, tires up.

“Heather!” I shouted. She turned around and waved at me as she followed Connie into someone’s front yard, closing the gate behind her.

“Let’s go check it out,” I motioned to Carter to follow me as my cleats clicked across the Texas chip seal to the gate.

“there’s baby pigs!” Connie cheered over the chain link fence.

Slipping through the mud, I followed them.

“Watch out for the electric fence,” a woman in a ball cap and a tank top shouted from her bent position as she attempted to bring the baby pigs into my teammates anxious hands.

Rosie, the black pot-bellied pig, had just had a litter. There were several small oinking piglets running in and around our ankles. Connie was crouched down, scratching the head and face of one of them. He rolled and loved the scratching laying on his back to allow her to scratch his belly. She giggled as she tickled the piglet’s sides. I bent down next to her, to scratch the side of the piglet’s jealous siblings.

The woman with help from her husband, who stood in the mud with tall black rubber boots and a gray ponytail, mixing the styles of a biker and a farmer. Carter shook his hand introducing himself.

“Yeah, we used to live in downtown Dallas up until six months ago, the man explained as I inserted myself in their conversation. “The neighbors are great, but sometimes laugh at us as we try to manage our little farm. We have a few small crops and animals.”

June: Dallas, TX -> Decatur, TX -> Wichita Falls, TX

“What made y’all want to move out here?” Carter asked, crossing his arms across his chest and leaning backwards, resting on an imaginary wall.

“I used to work in the tech industry, but it all became too much. It was all money and the next newest thing. When I married Delilah, we decided to come out here with the boys. We were both married before, but now we have three boys, two from Delilah’s former marriage and the youngest one from mine. We wanted the boys to be able to grow up out here, away from all that,” he led us as we were talking away from the pigs nearer the small amount of corn, next to the goats.

Skipping and hopping in their field, the goats’ ears pricked up when the man reached down to tear some sweet grass out of the dirt. The biggest goat, with small horns that curled back, butted his head against the fence. After satisfying his need to butt his head, the goat tipped his chin up to take a few nibbles of grass from the man’s hand. Mimicking his strategy, I also tore some grass to feed the goat. Hearing my grass, he bound over to me, pushing his nose and teeth through the squares of chicken wire.

“Here, let me help you out,” I reached my hand over the fence to feed him the grass. Connie appeared by my side.

“Tear some grass, that’s what he wants,” I watched as she tore her own handful of grass from the Earth.

She put her hand over the chicken wire, while it held her braid from suffering the same fate as her grass.

Losing interest in the Goat, I wondered off to the rabbit cages. Near the cages was a long propane tank. I noticed some movement in it. Stepping towards the movement, I saw a small

June: Dallas, TX -> Decatur, TX -> Wichita Falls, TX

chicken with black feathers hiding under the tank. I crept towards it, praying I may be able to keep it from flight by pinning its wings with my long, gloved fingers.

As I was attempting to capture it, the chicken scurried out from under the tank. It was peculiar as the chicken never fully straightening its neck, rather it sat as if it were constantly crooking its neck sideways to pass through a short door frame. I chased it only long enough to recognize its neck truly remained that way, instead of finding a more natural position in-time with its head.

I turned my attention back to the rabbit cages. The man came back over. “Could I hold one of your rabbits?” I asked.

“Sure thing! Just don’t let them get away,” he granted permission, pulling a cage open. I reached in and cuddled a rabbit, being sure to support its legs entirely.

“What’s going on with the chicken with a funny neck?” I asked petting the rabbit.

“Oh, well her neck has always been that way. The vet said she’d be fine, so we feed and treat her the same as the other chickens,” he answered, becoming distracted by the new set of teammates at the fence.

...

Wichita falls is an eerily vacant town. We moved into the top floor of the YMCA, filling the fish tank of a room with duffle bags and food bins.

“Okay, listen up,” Bash shouted in the middle of the room. “Spread the word, a group of cyclists have volunteered to buy our dinner at a local place. This means you can get a sandwich and a shake. They’ll be here in an hour and half, so make sure you’re showered and ready to go.”

June: Dallas, TX -> Decatur, TX -> Wichita Falls, TX

Lying across a wooden pew, I rested my head full of wet hair on its hard surface, closed eyes, with my toes leaning against the side of John's legs. Something plastic bounced on my stomach. I squinted one eye open to mind a comb and Taylor's wide eyes and grin.

"Will you braid my hair?" I twisted so my knees bent at the end of the seat, sitting straight up. She plopped down between my knees and I parted her hair, folding it in and out to create wet double blonde braids.

"Let's go," I patted her shoulder and tapped John.

Hustling down the stairs, we breathed in the stale air of the YMCA. Pressing through the glass doors, to the beige brick entryway, a bus sat waiting for us, with a man in a ballcap an old woman, and woman with a red shirt the said, "I support the NRA," in bold white block letters.

I read her shirt. I still felt my stomach clench with nerves. I knew many of my teammates would not agree with her. Regardless, hands were shook, and smiles were exchanged. Generosity has is warm hearted in nature, no matter the circumstances.

Inside of the bus, it became obvious that it was used to bring children to school. The ceiling and walls were white and the seats grey. The air stood warm and thick, hanging the scent of plastic in the air molecules between us. John helped me pinch the plastic levers in the window to lower it, allowing the odor to escape as the bus began to roll.

It only took a few turns, left and right, through the non-existent traffic, we arrived at a small dinner.

Entering through glass doors once again, we were transported back in time at least thirty years. Checkered floors, gray tables with black leather chairs, and a bar to match decorated the room. I took my spot between Brett and Carter at the bar.

June: Dallas, TX -> Decatur, TX -> Wichita Falls, TX

“What would you like sweetheart?” she asked me through a lip sticked smile, fluffy bleached blonde hair, and a large chest with a Texas accent.

“A cheeseburger and chocolate shake,” I responded as energetically as I could. I ate it just as quickly as she was able to produce it. Drinking the milkshake until the straw popped against the bottom of the glass, begging for more.

I folded my arms, resting my head on the counter. My breathing slowed, until I fell asleep with a full belly. I awoke to the flash of a camera. The local newspaper had come to write an article about us coming through town. Brett had his wide toothy smile painted on as my sleepy eyes floated in the picture’s background.

Before I had much time to think about my possible feature, the same man from in front of the bus called for our attention at the front of the restaurant.

“If I could have y’all’s attention please,” he paused, his air of authority filling his surrounding space, waiting.” I would like to first thank Pam. Pam wave your hand,” the same woman with the fluffy blond hair and lipstick swung her hand in the air, a fry between her forefinger and thumb. She along with the other waitresses were now beginning to eat.

“Without her and her awesome team we would all still be very hungry,” he laughed and we all joined in. I glanced at her, hoping she could see the gratefulness in my eyes considering they’d been closed the majority of the time we were there. He clapped his hand bring me back to reality.

“Anyhow, we think what y’all are doing is incredible, biking across the country is, is not an easy thing. I know I applaud you and from everyone here I’d like to offer you all an opportunity to compete and participate in our annual Hotter than Hell. It’s a century we put on every year in August. This year it’ll be on August 28th and if there are any of you that are still

June: Dallas, TX -> Decatur, TX -> Wichita Falls, TX

willing to bike, we are waiving your registration fee. We're passing around the magazine now. If you flip to the middle, you'll see the application form Just write Bike and Build in the name line along with your name. When you send it in I'll know exactly who y'all are and I'll waive your fee."

Carter turned, passing me my magazine. I tore through it admiring the pictures and layout. Reaching the middle, I laid it on the table. I was ready to sign-up right then I stared at the pen on the waitress's pad. I opened my mouth to ask for it several times, but ultimately decided to wait.

...

"It says the brewery is right over here," Taylor navigated as Nate, John, Bash, Kat and I followed behind her, hopping in and out of gutter and onto sidewalks. The town looked absolutely abandoned. Nearly every shop window we passed was empty, the streets were undeniably empty, and the sidewalks were abandoned apparat from our sandals slapping against it's concrete. It was as if everyone had left on vacation five years ago and forgot to come home. Most things though vacant, weren't broken. The entire city was breathing the same stale air in and out, waiting for something to happen.

The brewery glittered, the first thing that seemed alive in the entire town, cars pulled up, reflecting its store front light in their windshields. In nearly matching button-down collared blue checkered shirts, two men tossed bean bags in a game of corn hole outside, welcoming us with the familiar thud against the boards.

June: Dallas, TX -> Decatur, TX -> Wichita Falls, TX

The cold gray concrete was lit with bare light bulbs, hanging from back conduit, shimmering a second and third time in the reflection in the class exterior walls that revealed tables outside as the sun began to set.

“Which is dark,” Kat asked peering around my shoulder to glance at the menu in my hands, unintentionally tickling my forearm with the ends of her hair.

“I’ll ask, is that what you want?”

“And one of these stickers,” she placed in front of the cashier who had been listening to us, half-heartedly.

“Oh, grab one for me too,” I said to Kat.

“Okay two stickers and two dark beers.”

I swiped my card and slid the sticker to Kat, grabbing the beers.

John came to the table, followed by Bash, Nate, and Taylor. John had a scrabble game tucked under his arm. Originally, we set up the game and played it properly for about two rounds. It quickly turned into a giggle fest of inappropriate words.

“Could we talk to you for a minute?” two women asked us, one held a cup for cash and other a picture of a small girl, no older than eight.

They took turns explaining the conditions and treatments the girl had to go through. She’d been diagnosed with brain cancer a little over a year and half ago. Her condition has significantly improved but she had medical bills that were astronomical. You could donate cash, or you could opt to buy a coffee mug that could be customized in any way you like. The profits went to her.

I passed ten dollars cash to Taylor for her to put it in the jar, along with her donation. We all blushed as they walked away, embarrassed by the scrabble board on the table.

June: Dallas, TX -> Decatur, TX -> Wichita Falls, TX

Carter, Ronnie, and Jamie came and found spots with us, Kurt stood behind Ronnie, His hands on her shoulders.

“Let me see!” I nearly crawled over Kat. Carter and Ronnie turned to show off their new nose rings. Their rings were quite a bit larger than ours.

“Does it hurt?” I prodded.

Carter reached and barely touched it clearly still sore.

“Yeah, but it’s okay,” he winced again.

June: Wichita Falls, TX -> Lawton, OK

Our time in Texas meandered a moment as we entered Oklahoma. The wind was at our backs the majority of the time, pushing Rye, Alice, and I down the plains faster than we'd anticipated. It whipped my braid, so it rested in front of my shoulder instead of down my back.

“We have another police escort today,” Natalie began, “To avoid any further incidents,” she held up her broken arm, “we need ride properly. The other leaders and I talked about how to do this last night. The best way is if you decide who your buddy is, the ride in pairs. They will be escorting us out of town, up the interstates, and to the Oklahoma state line. There we are going to stop for a quick picture, that means no individual shots, just one big team picture. Then we're going to get on the road. Van and trailer will be in front behind the first police car and the lunch van will be in front of the last police car. It's written on your cue where we're going to stop to regroup. Its only five miles in. We will wait for everyone, then go from there.”

...

The bubbles swirled round Danielle's smile, reflecting the color of the field of flowers near where we met to start the escort. Carli held her iced coffee as Rye leaned forward to grab a drink before we set off. We rolled onto the on ramp, pedaling up and onto the Interstate, taking both lanes, lights and sirens whirling, slicing the morning dew.

...

“Are we at host?” Emmy laughed as she pulled up to the Family Dollar we were all congregated. She smiled, laughing at her own joke, as she took off her sunglasses.

Inside was a sanctuary, we wandered around the shelves, looking at everything you could buy for only a dollar or two. I stood in front of the stand of bandanas for a long time. I wore a bandana around my neck every day. I used it to wipe the sweat, so it didn't drip into my eyes. The real question was, do I need another one? Kurt found me contemplating, and I decided against it. We walked to the coolers and stared in at a bottle of Fanta.

"Want to split it?" Kurt asked.

"You know it," I replied.

Outside we sat in the plastic chairs, greeting party for whomever wanted to drop in, but we seemed to be that morning's only customers.

"Let's play Thunderstruck," Rye held a gallon of purple liquid. It looked a bit more like windshield wiper fluid than a drink.

"Okay, we need to form a circle, then you start drinking at one thunder, then you don't stop until you hear the next thunder."

We all gathered in a circle, leaving the chairs forgotten. The gallon had a label along the side that read "Grape Drink", and it tasted like Kool-Aid's cousin. The gallon found its way to my hands. I took it from Luke, pressing it to my mouth. It had a short section and passed it off to Heather quickly. It wasn't too bad.

We had made it all the way through the opening portion, and we were now onto the chorus. Luke put the gallon back in my hands, quite a bit lighter this time. I pressed it to my mouth once more. "It was cold," shouted Brian Johnson through Rye's phone. Everyone started cheering. Laughter bubbled in my chest. I tried and tried to suppress it, but nothing worked. I coughed and lowered the gallon from my mouth. I held it out away from me as I coughed and coughed, struggling to regain my breath.

...

“We want to take y’all somewhere this afternoon. We have one of our vans we can use then if you guys,” he motioned to Rye, “could use one of yours, there’s a really cool area I think would be good for you to see.”

Forgetting the shower until later, we switched from our kits to our normal clothes, and clambered into the vans. I sat in the third row, with one leg stretched out into the aisle, halfway leaning on Krista next to me. Danielle sat in the front, snagged the aux cord and took care of the jams all the way there. We started with a bit of Beyoncé, but in true Danielle fashion, it only escalated from there.

Bells rang throughout the van, then a Mariah Carey made her appearance on the Bike and Build stage. Danielle joined her, flipping her hair back, with Kat by her side in the next row.

“All I want for Christmas is yooooou, ohhh baby,” I joined in. The whole van was singing along.

We pulled to a stop at the top of a winding road, after we had slowed to admire the first buffalo sighting of the trip. I stepped out after Ronnie, bouncing against the concrete, happy to be out of the car. I looked around, the rocks were a sandy color and the wind whipped my hair everywhere. I quickly tried to tie it down with a hair tie, wearing it down was not the best idea.

“Oh, the wind goes whipping down the plains!” Nate sang as he walked past with his arms outreached, skipping towards the rocks. I laughed as I watched him continue, in his new “Witchita Falls Brewery” t-shirt, fish board shorts, patterned socks, and raptors hat that had a purple dinosaur on it. I followed him to the stones.

Hopping up and down and around, we climbed nearest the edge we dared. The wind truly whipped, and if you wanted to talk to someone you had to scream so they could hear you. I sat down at the edge of a rock and watched the landscape. Oklahoma laid as a green patchwork quilt with only a speck of a town near the road cut through the landscape. The huge lake shone blue in contrast to everything else. I couldn't open my eyes wide enough. The horizon seemed an eternity away, but I was okay that it held its secrets somewhere else.

"This, this is what it is all about," I said to Thomas as he took a seat next to me, never minding the greeting.

"What do you mean?"

"This is what everything boils down to. It is about this Earth that we live on, that we should cherish just as much, if not more, than ourselves. It's not about me. It's about us, and if we don't include this in all of that, we are going to be left behind," I recited in a dreamy, liberal arts major way. Thomas listened anyway.

...

That evening we had a presentation. When we visit hosts, they can request a presentation. We usually begin with a short video that give them an over cap of what Bike and Build is, how we manage to get across the country, what we stand for, and why what we are doing is important.

I sat in a stiff-backed chair, waiting for the introduction circle to make its way to me.

My neck craned as I watched everyone go around the room to introduce themselves, including an older gentleman who was wearing his cycling jersey with a pair of cargo shorts. A

few years ago, he had also participated in a cross-country cycling tour for heart health awareness. He was more than eager to help us out.

I stared forward, forgetting which teammate was introducing themselves, obsessing in the differences I observed in my team, my family before me. Harlow's hair was no longer a well-kept shoulder length brown curls, but instead relatively unruly curls that flirted with the idea of blonde. They had grown to rest on her chest and back, they twisted together, in and out of their gentle spirals. Her skin darkened, allowing the dragonfly tattoo on her forearm to be part of her skin tone.

Luke's hair had gone absolutely wild. Arriving on the first day, his hair was a groomed recent Penn State graduate. His face had been clean shaven without any stubble. Now, the ends of his hair, that seemed to stack on top of itself rather than grow longer and were blonde instead of red. you could grab an entire handful of his beard.

Brett had morphed from a well-mannered restaurant manager, with a clean, example-setting, haircut and clean face, to a younger version of himself. His hair flipped the way a teenager's would from under a flat-brimmed cap, his ears recently pierced, and moustache began to curl like a ring master at a circus.

"Oh, how we have aged," I thought. It had only been about a month; we hadn't even reached the halfway mark, but it was as if I had spent an entire life like this. The life we had created swallowed us whole and did not allow us to see anything else. Nothing was more important than ensuring we made it to the next day, to do what we had promised the world.

“Are you sure you’re good to go?” I asked Carli as we stood over our bikes, waiting to take off. It was our date ride and her first time back on a bike since her crash. We’d been talking about a date ride since the beginning, but never had a chance until this morning. I worried she wasn’t ready to ride yet.

She looked up, all ready to go in her 2018 kit and responded, “Absolutely.”

We pulled off at a gas station on the outskirts of Lawton, promising to continue into the nature reserve that laid ahead of us. Carli ran inside the convince store to buy a Cliff bar for a snack later on. As she was walking in two men came out, dressed for work in their cowboy boots and collared shirts and approached me.

“What are y’all doing?” He began.

I took the required inhale, then began to explain our cross-country trip.

“Man,” One hit the other with the back of his hand on his upper arm, teasing, “we saw this on the news last night. That’s why that girl looked so familiar.”

“Carli?! Yeah, she was interviewed by a local station last night! They came over to the church right before we started our dinner,” I danced in my seat, ecstatic someone watched.

...

The news crew had arrived in the afternoon, a woman briefed Luke and Carli as the camera man spun one of our tires, shooting between the spokes. Everyone was walking back and forth between the showers and their bags, taking turns under the hot water. Carli was the first to be interviewed. She stood in front of the camera, casual as ever with blue Patagonia shorts, her

hands in the pockets, a flat brit light blue floral hat, and a pencil stuck in it, hanging down along her jawline.

Clearly, not everyone knew the camera crew was coming. Kat boldly walked into the room wearing a t-shirt that was about six sizes too big for her, covering her shorts, no bra, and a towel with cartoon sharks wrapped around her wet hair. Once she realized she was in the shot, she quickly made a dash to her bag and began digging for more appropriate attire.

The camera man began to put his camera, microphone, and any other extra equipment he had into his case. Carli and Luke thanked them for coming and no sooner had the door closed behind them that Kate screamed.

“There’s a snake in my bag!” she strutted away, ditching the snake infested bag as everyone else began to gather around it.

“That’s it. That’s it. I’m quitting Bike and Build. This was it. I’m sorry guys love you all. I’m quitting Bike and Build,” she sauntered off, shark towel still on her head, only half joking.

Connie dove into the bag without a twitch of hesitation. She pulled her hands up towards her chest, and everyone backed up, then leaned in closer.

The snake was hardly bigger than a worm, definitely a snake though. It blindly curled and twisted in Christina’s hand, trying to escape her fingers. She took it outside to be free, as everyone arrived for dinner.

...

“Dude, Carli, those guys recognized you from the news last night!” I greeted her as she offered me a portion of her Chex Mix.

June: Lawton, OK -> Altus, OK -> Memphis, TX

“No way,” she sat next to me as a couple of butterflies played around us. We took a few shots of our ‘skater boy’ helmets. Since her old one cracked in the crash, she’d asked Max to buy the cheapest one at the bike shop they’d taken her bike to be repaired. He had come back with a bulbous, skater, red helmet, nearly identical to mine.

...

The road turned into a two lane with no shoulder. Carli led us as we continued to pull over to gawk at the wildlife as many buffalo roam the Wichita Mountain nature reserve. We leapfrogged Alex and Eli, on their usual date ride, as they stopped to take pictures of tarantula crossing the road.

“Do you want a picture of the tarantula?” I asked Carli as we passed.

“Nope,” she responded, clearly uninterested in any promises stopping for a tarantula held.

“Good me either,” I breathed as we began to climb.

Taking a break at the top of the hill, we watched a tractor crawl past.

“I’m just nervous,” Carli admitted.

“I can’t blame you,” I tried to comfort.

“It’s just, it’s like, I know I’m not going to fall, but I keep thinking that I will, and it get in my own head and it freaks me out,” she sat in the dry grass, not even taking off her helmet. I joined her.

“We’re going to stay here as long as we need,” I looked across the plains, golden in the June morning light. The lake in the distance glimmered and the hills that laid ahead of us rolled,

tempting a challenge. Carter, Bash, Corey, and Max rolled up, stopping to greet us, a bit unwelcome in our silence.

“Wait you take testosterone booster?” Bash said with a furrowed brow at Brett and Carter, who were talking about their regular work out routines. Each had arrived at Bike and Build with strategically built muscle, even though some had depleted in the month of cycling and not lifting.

“Could you imagine if we took estrogen booster?” Carli began as we sailed over the last hills, into lunch.

“Could I hop in with you guys?” Max requested at lunch, clearly done riding with the hammer squad, or the group of boys that liked to go fast.

“I don’t know,” I teased, “you’re going to have to ask Carli,” I added with a grin.

...

Lunch was positioned at a T in the road, that we turned left to continue on for the rest of the day, head first into screaming wind. Our paceline was tight, tighter than it should be, and we took turns switching lead. In taking turns I mean, I lead for about three miles then Max took over for the rest, leaving Carli in the middle. The middle is the best place to be as you do not have to break the head wind, and you don’t have to do lookbacks.

As we began to roll into town, I took over lead. Carli rode in back for a few miles, with Max in the middle. When I would turn to check, Max was so close I couldn’t see him, as his tire vend-diagramed mine on the right side of my bike. He was riding so close, but he would fall

back every time I turned around. He knew he was riding too close. Carli took over middle and Max fell back as we rolled into a tiny, town.

“Tracks,” I shouted back, forgetting to say how many tracks there were. Six set of railroad tracks cut across the road. Tracks are dangerous for cyclists as they are slippery, and if they are not crossed straight on, it is easy for a tire to slip into the four-inch space between the track and asphalt.

I heard a scream behind me as I rolled over the last set of tracks. I squeezed my breaks to a stop.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit,” Carli cried.

“I’m so sorry. I knew I was riding too close. I knew it. I didn’t fix it. I’m so sorry Carli,” Max apologized. Luckily, the van was just behind us, I waved them down, and they pulled over a few feet from the tracks.

“Are you okay to stand?” I asked Carli.

“Yeah”

“Okay, let’s get you off the tracks,” Max and I helped her off the tracks into a small patch of dirt.

She was sitting cross legged, and someone had brought the tarp out. I grabbed one corner, Max, Kurt, and I made a janky covering for her while Natalie went to fetch some orange juice from the coolers. Her scabs and been torn open, with added scratches on her elbow and knee, but was otherwise okay.

“Look, you are the princess of Oklahoma,” Kurt laughed, and Carli chuckled as she sipped the juice from under her tarp shade.

“Do you want to ride in?” I asked, she seemed to be doing fine.

“I think so,” she replied.

Folding the tarp and fetching the bike, we prepared to take off again.

“The only thing is, my shifter isn’t great. The guys at the shop said it was really sensitive and would need a proper fix once we got to Amarillo. That crash may have done it in.”

It had. Carli could not shift in her big ring at all and the gears were jumping all funny. The van waited at the end of the block, and we helped her load her bike and herself into the air-conditioned oasis.

...

The wind never quit, but my sanity nearly did. I absently minded continued to pedal into town, stare at the windmill, then the flag. How is it that I could see it, yet it was all still so far away? One time, I had let myself fall far behind Max, and when I had looked down at my computer it read four miles an hour. I tried to snap myself out of it. There was no hope. The wind ripped any hope from my fingertips and skin, leaving me exposed to the threat of my own thoughts. Max knew it too; we were bonking.

“I know we’re only a mile away, but let’s pull off,” Max directed us to a gas station. We flipped our bikes and Max went directly for the biggest purple Gatorade they had in the coolers.

“What flavor do you like Pidgeon?” he prompted me from where I sat at the attached Burger King’s tables.

“White’s good,” I acknowledged the majority purple cooler.

He brought it, set it down in front of me, and we each drank nearly half of our respective Gatorades.

“I can smell you guys from over here,” Natalie laughed as she stood in front of us, turning the sunglasses rack. Neither of us had noticed she’d come inside. She told us that sweep was only a few miles behind us and that they would be waiting for us at host. Tossing our bottles in the recycling, we persevered for the last two miles into Altus.

...

“Here, follow me I’ll show you where they are,” Father enthusiastically said as he led me through the back of the church. It was the first catholic church we had stayed at so far. He told me all about how excited he was for us to be there and that there was a huge spread for tonight’s dinner.

“Chris told me you had around eight vegetarians,” he cheerfully acknowledged, “so I bought like seven heads of lettuce to make salads. I have to cut them all later, so I am going to go do that after this,” he continued as he motioned to where the shower was.

It was so cute, seven heads of lettuce for the vegetarians. Only a handful of our vegetarians had remained strict vegetarians on the trip, usually gobbling whatever was fed to us, meat or not. I did have an admiration for Jamie as she diligently remained vegan for the entirety of the trip, extremely grateful when she had vegan foods prepared for her, but never insisting that she have any special food.

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June: Lawton, OK -> Altus, OK -> Memphis, TX

That afternoon we were scheduled to participate in our second movie screening and affordable housing discussion. After setting up the projector and starting the movie, nearly everyone passed out, including me. In my warm sleeping bag and on my mat, I couldn't keep my eyes open no matter how I tried. Unfortunately, most of us slept until dinner.

Cake later made the comment that we had our stuff everywhere when they walked in, something we wanted to avoid. We wanted to present Bike and Build as best we could, including ensuring our things were tidy when community members came to serve dinner or anything else.

Dinner that night was amazing and quite memorable. Authentic Mexican food lined the folding tables with the fixing for tacos, tamales, beans, every type of salsa, one that was labeled super spicy, somethings I wasn't sure what they were, cactus, and of course, salad. The food was amazing, and I am sure I ate at least three plates.

Between cleaning dinner and bedtime, we all found spots on the warm asphalt to watch the sun sink behind the horizon. I leaned against the trailer, talking to my mom on the phone, keeping her informed of the day's activities, and drank the beautiful colors as the sun winked good night.

As Kurt and Ronnie reorganized the van, ensuring all the treats from Sally made their way to the front, I snagged a relatively warm, but oddly satisfying Strawberry Crush. I had vowed off soda years ago, but through this, I had picked it back up again, enjoying its syrupy child-like goodness in the dark of the evening.

I laid down next to Claire who was chatting with John staring at the stars that refused to shine. The afternoon's sun reappeared in the warm asphalt of the parking lot. I was near nirvana with my Strawberry Crush with its thick syrup and the warmth creeping through my body. We laid there and talked about nothing until, finally, we found our beds inside.

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In an attempt to recreate the 'dream team' that road together coming into Texas, Bash, Carter, Jamie, and Harlow were going to ride into Texas together, again. In the morning, Harlow woke up with a fever and decided she needed a van day.

"Pidgeon," Carter invited me, "Wanna be the fourth on our dream team?"

"For sure!" I hopped in.

That day Harlow wasn't the only one who was sick, Eli had also come down with a cough and fever. Cake had taken on Eli's duties for sweep with Max, and we waited our turns to take off as the sun came back around, warming the morning with its orange rays.

"Let's trade bikes," Kat suggested as she walked up to me, holding hers by her handlebars. I willingly handed over mine and took hers. Kat is nearly eight inches shorter than me. Her crossbar hit me half way up my thigh, unlike the inch from the crouch that it should be. Without clipping in, I took a seat, and rode away with my knees out so they didn't hit the handlebars.

"I feel like a bear on a tricycle," I laughed as I circled the parking lot. Kat was stuck, teetering back and forth on her tiptoes, unable to even get going.

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Carter and Bash were leaving Jamie and I in the dust. The rolling hills were relentless, and we had been on a dirt road for hours. While the dirt road was nice because there was little to

no traffic, the hills were relentless and unforgiving as Jamie and I literally ate Carter and Bash's dust.

"Forget this hill," I muttered under my breathe.

"No kidding," Jamie agreed.

I looked around, there was no civilization for miles, fields turned to more fields. We hadn't seen a car in hours, and there was not as much as a street sign, much less a house, anywhere in sight, much less earshot.

I gripped my handlebars, mustered any extra energy I had, closed my eyes and shouted, "Fuck this hill!" playfully.

Jamie joined in, "Fuck this hill!"

"I biked here, and this hill is not going to win!"

"This isn't the hardest day and you're not going to win!"

"Because we are cyclist!"

"We are sexy!"

"And we are crazy!"

Jamie and I took turns shouting. Eventually, Jamie decided she should join Danielle and Carli. I considered it. I really did.

"You know what, I might join you later, but I will stay with the boys for a little longer," I decided as the four of us rejoined.

"Alright, well I can see them right up there taking a roadside nap, I'm going to hop off," Jamie pulled away.

"Want to lead Pidgeon?"

June: Lawton, OK -> Altus, OK -> Memphis, TX

I loved leading with the boys. I would do anything to prove that I should be there.

Everyone knew each other's capabilities, they knew me better than I knew myself from time to time. That afternoon was no exception to my pride though. I took my opportunity to take off, to prove that I could be fast and that no hill would slow me down. I cranked as hard as I could. The breeze whipped around my ears and through my helmet, and every time I did a look back Carter and Bash were right on my tail.

"Can we stop?" Carter shouted. We rolled to the side of the road, along with the prickly grass and insects of West Texas.

"Well, I knew it was low earlier today, but we didn't stop," he pumped it, hoping to limp the tire to second lunch.

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I sat at one of the dry rotting picnic tables outside a fair ground. The last few miles my right knee had begun to bother me, but I was scared to say anything. Whenever anyone asks me for advice about a knee, whether or not they should continue with a sore knee, I always respond, "I don't mess with knees".

I laid back, strategically sitting myself next to the food, trying to not walk on it until I got back on the bike. My water bottle bounced its empty sound back up to me when I set it down on the table. Faithfully, I grabbed my other one, hoping it would have something left. It did, about two drinks of summertime temperature Gatorade.

"Where's the water?" I turned to Kurt to ask.

"It's in the van."

I looked at the van parked on the other side of the baseball field.

“Here, I’ll go with ya,” Kurt said to reassure me in the trek to the water coolers. Ronnie joined as well.

“Guys I didn’t want to tell anyone, but I feel like I should. My knee is killing me but I’m going to try to ride to host today. I know it’s an 88-mile day and maybe I shouldn’t, but we have about 30 miles left. I think I can do it,” I admitted, then explained to them. I am not sure if I was trying to reassure myself more than them.

“If you’re hurt, you should van,” Ronnie wisely added.

“I know,” I replied with a whine.

“You know the number,” Kurt added, allowing me to keep my pride, but knowing I will probably need help.

The hills picked back up after lunch and the clouds rolled in. The afternoon’s sleepy warmth lay trapped between the earth and its new blanket. We pedaled through its thickness, tasting the hints of rain in the atmosphere.

“Do you have any Icy Hot or something?” I asked Carter. A bumblebee lazily floated between the now nervous three of us.

“Yeah, I have something in my hydro pack,” he responded as he pumped his tire. His flat had become perpetual, but we were all out of tubes, so we waited for his tube to click into place, then he searched through his pack.

“Here, what’s going on?” he handed me a tube of CVS brand muscle rub.

“Oh, my knee is just bothering me,” and that was the end of it.

June: Lawton, OK -> Altus, OK -> Memphis, TX

The hills were persistent. I couldn't keep up and panic rose in my throat. My knee wasn't feeling any better, but I didn't want to switch to a lower gear to power up the hills; it slowed me down. The tears grew hot in my eyes, but I wanted to keep up. I wanted to finish.

We finally reached an intersection, where the red stop sign hung like a blessing against the dark sky. Carter and Bash had stopped completely, waiting for me. I turned back, and Jamie and Danielle were gaining on us.

"I think I'm just going to join them," I told Carter and Bash and sent them on their way as Jamie and Danielle joined us at the intersection. I thought their slower pace would lessen the pain on my knee. I didn't dare put any weight on it and my mind raced with what could be wrong.

Riding with Danielle and Jamie didn't help. Any pace was too fast, and I fell to the back once more. The tears ran hot down my face and I tried pedaling with only my left leg. Bad idea.

"Can we stop?" I called, admitting defeat.

"What's wrong?" Danielle asked, too close for me to keep it together.

"My knee hurts," and all the tears fell, streaming from my eyes, leaving trails in my dirt stained cheeks.

"Oh honey, I'll call the van," she answered, pulling me into a hug.

Jamie took her turn to wrap me in a hug. I whimpered about all my fears, going from an off day, to an ACL tear. My biggest fear was not being able to ride. It was essential to me. I had never felt so free as I did on my bike.

"Will you come pick us up?" Danielle said to her phone and the lunch van, "Yeah, I've got two Carter and Bash rejects and we need picked up."

We laughed at her label for us and began to be happier about the pick up as the sky began to spit rain.

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“What happened Pidgeon?” Rye asked as I walked out of the van. As far as she knew I should’ve been happily riding the rest of the way to town. She grinned, the aroma of BBQ wafted out of the small gym we were living in for the evening. I couldn’t bring myself to even answer, only shake my head. Tears threatened to escape the lower rims of my eyes and the heat from the day seemed to pack itself inside the tears I would not let escape. As far as I knew I was at least out for a day, if not longer.

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Natalie sat between my knees, her hair wet from the shower, hitting her at her waist. It was my job to braid it into double braids. Any leftover water squeezed itself out from the twists I made in her hair, leaving water on my fingertips. A young journalist, in a red shirt with a camera was interviewed the leadership team, minus Bash. I had braided Cake’s and Rye’s hair already, along with my own.

“I’m sorry to ask,” Cake begun, “But how old are you? You seem pretty young.”

The journalist explained that she was nineteen and had recently graduate from a local community college with a journalism degree. That she was from Memphis and had moved back home to work before she figured out what else she wanted to do in life.

“Could I get a picture?” she requested.

I posed, along with the leaders, our arms stretched over one another for Memphis, TX local paper. I’d admitted to Rye, along with the rest of the team, that my knee was hurting, and I didn’t know what I was going to do about it. I sat with them at dinner and fretted in silence, knowing there wasn’t much I could do in the moment.

Harlow was staring forward. She was hardly blinking, allowing her light, curly hair to dance in curtains around her face.

“What’s going on?” Connie peaked forward; I listened.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she leaned backwards and to the right, allowing her hair to fully cover her face. Her fingers danced over the dragonfly tattoo on her forearm. She had a matching one with every member of her family. Each member of her family has a differently shaped ring of blue around where the wings met the body.

She took a breath and began, “I had to give the presentation earlier today, before dinner. They just sent dinner crew to do it. And they all had a small presentation and wanted to talk to us and all. So, we just sat in the audience until it was our turn. When I went to sit in a chair this old man behind me was like, ‘What is that?’ I just kind of laughed and said, ‘A dragonfly’. But when I went to sit down he grabbed my forearm and said, ‘This is not okay. This is not okay.’” Tears streamed down her cheeks at this point. Her voice had cracked to end the story.

“Oh, Harlow,” Krista started, and pulled her in for a hug.

“There wasn’t much I could do either,” Harlow began again, “They are our hosts and they are feeding us. I didn’t know what to do.”

“He shouldn’t have touched you regardless. And I am so sorry,” I started, but tried to remain minimal in the conversation. I didn’t know what to say or do.

June: Memphis, TX -> Claude, TX -> Amarillo, TX

“I can’t go fast today,” I admitted to John and Taylor.

“I don’t feel like going fast anyhow. I know my attitude is not in the best place today and I would rather tell you now, so you know,” she told me as she adjusted her lights.

We were committed to an easy day, and that is the day we had. Our pace was slow, and we laughed when John finally got a flat on his Armadillos, a brand of tires, that he prided himself on. Taylor had danced around, laughing, her bad mood suddenly dissolved with John’s misfortune. We took our time through the morning and afternoon, waiting to reach Claude.

“There’s a coffee shop giving food and drinks to us,” Taylor said, checking her phone. Nate was texting her; he was safety navigator for van one that day, and we were one of the last ones to join everyone else in the crowded shop.

“These guys are incredible, giving everyone a food and drink, and they offered the same for tomorrow morning. You should consider buying something from the store,” Cake whispered at us as we walked into the shop.

It smelled a bit like Hobby Lobby, baskets, candles, and fake flowers. There were wooden cutting boards, journals, children’s placemats, hats with “The Burrow” stitched into their front to match flannels with it printed on the back. My dirty fingers found a picture frame to hold, one with a wooden frame, back, and clip for the photo with “Family” painted in white along the side. It was the first of many things I picked up and checked the price on. I watched Taylor and Ronnie both choose a flannel for themselves and Thomas and Bash sporting ballcaps. I took my seat next to John after ordering a sandwich and a cold coffee.

“Do you think it’s okay that I didn’t buy anything?” I asked at John. We had crammed ourselves into the corner of a back table and the conversation filled in between the small spaces left between the twenty-eight of us crowded into the small coffee shop.

June: Memphis, TX -> Claude, TX -> Amarillo, TX

He seemed to make the same observation as I did.

“I think it’s alright,” he smiled, noticing how the volume significantly increases as Carter and Bash walked in from their date ride.

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The side walk patch leading into host that evening read “Santa Cruz Mayor” with a phone number scrawled beneath it. We were each required to interview a member of an affordable housing affiliate as well as a beneficiary in addition to ten hours volunteer time at a local affordable housing affiliate. Kat never quite finished her hours and had made an agreement with the program directors that she will create a presentation while we were on the road. She had been cranking on a borrowed laptop that afternoon in the coffee shop, under Nate’s hat that had a crocodile and the words snap on the front and a stained and cut “Bike Natchitoches” T-shirt. Turns out, the only mayor for all the towns to come who would even take her call was the mayor of Santa Cruz; she was trying to get information and discussion on municipal attempts to solve the affordable housing crisis throughout the nation. Now, her chalk message welcomed everyone who entered the church we were staying in that night.

When a host is confirmed, our leaders asks them if they want to provide dinner, if they would like a presentation and or a bike clinic. Most places provide dinner, some ask for a presentation, and this was one of the few bike clinics that were requested of us. The tin garage, attached to the church holding our bike and bags, echoed with children’s laughter and curiosity on the status of their bikes. Team members intermingled and served in an out as we stole cookies from the center table and anxiously waiting the taco bar. Before we officially began, the team

June: Memphis, TX -> Claude, TX -> Amarillo, TX

divided in half, half to help with the bikes, half for the presentation. I opted for the presentation portion.

“We’re going to start with a video,” Brett boomed to the room of round table with folding chairs finding homes around them. The Killers “All These Things I’ve Done” sang “Help me out, C’mon ya gotta help me out” along with the videos of trailer packing, biking riding, and of course house building.

I looked around the room. I saw our tired eyes and tanned skin, clean hair, and worn shirts. I stared into my audience and stared into myself. Everything was possible with my team it seemed, but the moment hit me. It would all come to an end. There would be no annoyance, laughter, slurpies, or flats. It all felt like it was slipping from my fingers faster than I could imagine.

“Well,” I began as I was supposed explain what a day in the life of a build day looked like, my eyes filled with tears and my throat grew tight. “I think I might cry after watching that video. It’s been a while since we watched that and it’s pretty emotional for me.” I composed myself, then laughed along with everyone else about the how when we had a day off we liked to build houses. Sometimes, even when we were living it, it all seemed so strange. As if it were not real, rather a wild dream we waited to wake up from.

The kids had rolled their bikes away, and I had eaten more than five cookies, but if any one asked, it was only three. We began gathering by the vans; the world’s second largest canyon lay a mere twenty minutes away and we had local guides. I clambered into the back with Brett and John for the trip. The sun was warm on the horizon, sinking like melting butter into the Texas soil, attempting to keep the dust from blowing away.

June: Memphis, TX -> Claude, TX -> Amarillo, TX

Land in the West is expansive and seems to overflow its own container. It refuses to be contained or stained, eradicated, or demolished. It holds the everything you ever promised yourself, if you can be daring enough to go get it. The red and green brush contrasts laid before us in the sea that is the Palo Duro canyon.

Palo Duro is unlike red dirt I've seen other places. Rather than the orange common to a desert scene, its hue sunk lower and made you ponder. Its red held secrets in its rich color and powdery dust. It mixed with the idea of rain to bring us closer together. It matched some of our shirts, skin tones, and hair. It is what we stared at all evening until the last rays of light escaped our grasp as we leaned against the chain link fence, mesmerized.

“I think everyone is downstairs,” Brett greeted us as we moseyed into the back of Amarillo’s Habitat for Humanity. He was enjoying the shade of the awning in the back, where the rest of the bikes lay flipped, waiting for the rest of their fellow bikes to join them.

Inside it smelled clean and new, as if the paint was still becoming familiar with the drywall. I found the stairs as we rounded the corner into the room attached to the kitchen that looked like a board room but seemed to be functioning as a dining room for the moment. I decided I would explore that later, for now I wanted to go downstairs to see why everyone was excited.

“Bunkbeds!” Ronnie squeaked as we found ourselves in large room. There wasn’t quite enough for us to each to have our own beds, but there were a few couches, and a mattress in the room with most the blankets, making enough room for all of us.

“Pidgeon! You can have this one!” Taylor pointed to the top bunk next to here. I preferred the top bunk anyhow, and I was glad there was one left.

“There’s sheets in that cabinet,” she pointed to the cabinet adjacent to her feet. I claimed a purple fitted sheet with coordinating geometric flat sheet and pillow case. I then unrolled my sleeping bag to go on top; I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep without it.

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I shook my hair with my towel, attempting to rid it our dribbling water droplets.

“Hungry?” Krista asked, followed by, “We’re going to get margaritas and Mexican food at a place downtown and I think there is one more spot in the Uber.”

“Count me in!” I said, combing my hair before it dried in the Texan heat.

We were the first to arrive, as half the team decided they too wanted to come. Moving as a group is difficult but trying to organize and move twenty-eight people to and from a place is nearly impossible. Even if only half the team wants to go, that's still fourteen people attempting to join at a coffee shop, restaurant, or store. We grabbed our table for six and warned the hostess that about fourteen or fifteen more would be joining in a few minutes.

After we'd ate enough chips to feed a small army, waiting for the various Mexican dishes, the rest of our team walked in and found their spot at the long table the waiters and waitresses had arranged. We took our time, sipping our horchata or margarita slowly and savoring our food, a rare treat.

"What do you think is going on?" I gestured to the other table, that seemed to have moved all its attention to a debate between John and Bash. There was a small group of four at one end that was paying no attention, but aside from that we everyone was watching them intently.

"Hard to tell," Taylor answered and turned back to our basket of chips and entrees that had arrived.

When Route 66 lost its popularity, so did Amarillo it seemed. Any car that came along the road rolled lazily through, passively examining whatever was left of the shops. We followed suit, allowing the afternoon's drowsy heat to soak into our pores and influence our levels of enthusiasm. After entering a few stores that had less than 100 items in stock, we found a costume store. As we walked in the woman flipped on the lights when we came in but was sitting in the dark until then. Decades of different costumes lined the walls, with masks, bunny ears, old dress, and vertically striped Uncle Sam pants completing the collection.

“What was going on at your table at lunch?” I probed Kurt as I ran across an old Hannah Montana costume, still in the package.

“Well,” he was tentative to begin, “Bash and John got into it about guns. You know how John is and Bash clearly doesn’t agree,” he paused to show me a gorilla suit, pulling it off the rack for us both to laugh, although it reeked of wet dog. “John wouldn’t drop it, but neither would Bash. Of course, John, he fully supports and doesn’t want anything to change. He talked a lot about self-defense and civil liberties. Bash, on the other hand, didn’t agree with that at all and thought everything was getting ridiculous. John pushed him a bit on it and that’s when it got more intense.”

“I can’t say I’m true surprised by that,” I responded as John approached, “he likes to discuss issues especially like that,” I finished without speaking loud enough for John to hear.

“You ready to get out of here?” I asked John over Kurt’s shoulder.

“Yeah, let’s go enjoy those beds we have,” John answered.

...

The Amarillo Habitat for Humanity is known for its diversity in their housing recipients; that evening the Habitat for Humanity held a barbeque and invited us to be a part of it. Admittedly, I wasn’t as social as I could have been with the families. Regardless, it was clear their Habitat was working to provides housing to an array of people was a background from around the world. Two of their highlighted families were refugees from Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, escaping religious persecution by seeking refuge in Amarillo. This is also a single mother with three children, working as a message therapist as well as a family seeking

refuge from Sudan due to government oppression. Each became a part of their community through the housing the Habitat had provided.

Beginning our build day at 7 a.m., thankful for the cushion of the mattresses and extra hours of sleep, we were ready to step to work on whatever they had lined up for us that day. The wind was as relentless that day as it was on our bikes, and I was assigned, along with Carli, Krista, Alex, Eli, and Emmy of painting siding. We were to paint them on saw horses, then stack them for them to be taken over to the home at the end of the block. The sheets were a little over an inch thick and were about four feet by ten feet. Since both sides needed to be painted, the pieces quickly turned into kites whenever we tried to transport or flip them.

“We could fly all the way to New Mexico!” Carli shouted over the wind while we flipped the sheet to paint the other side.

“Yeah! Forget the bike!” I responded.

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Everything really is bigger in Texas, including the potatoes in the potato bar for lunch. I reminded me of what my mom always suggested for us, a baked potato bar. It quickly fills you up, and its customizable, something different. Amarillo Habitat for Humanity came and presented on their projects, beneficiaries, and goals. Unfortunately, the potatoes had already begun working their magic, causing a handful of my teammates to take a post-lunch nap during the presentations. We shook those who had fallen into the drowsiness of the afternoon back awake and loaded into the vans for our next project.

“It’d been an underground gambling ring,” Kyler from the Habitat explained. “The city reclaimed it when they discovered its illegal activity. We were able to snatch it up at a lower price and will be using it for our ReStore. It needs some help. The front was made to look like an antique shop, and in the back, that is where we found the slot machines and other rooms. There’s also an upstairs; that’s where we’re keeping all the antique things they left behind. At the end we can all go up there and if there’s anything y’all want you can pick it up.”

Inside, the walls were red with black and white checked flooring. It smelled like the dust and age of an antique shop to hide the gambling ring, there was a small partial black wall.

“We need to rip up the flooring in this whole place, but first,” he let his hand land heavily on the partial wall, “we need to knock down this wall.”

Blinkingly, we all stood staring. We were pretty accustomed to building, instead of demolition.

“Who wants to go first?” Kyler prompted.

June: Amarillo, TX

June: Amarillo, TX