My Friend

There's a nice bike route between my home and work that runs along secondary streets, over a bridge, by a lake, through an arboretum, over a canal, and briefly on a path recovered from an abandoned rail line. Two traffic lights in all, over a dozen miles.

That bridge floats on the lake, a mile of anchored caissons with eastern and western "high rises" where the traffic climbs into tunnels at both ends. I divert at the top of the western rise to walk my bike down some steps to the lake, or climb back up again on the way home. Except by looking down at them from the bridge above, the steps are private and sheltered, with an eastward view of snow-crested mountains across the lake, and several landings to enjoy them from. I stop often with the view as an excuse to drink some water and take a breath. In winter drizzles it's a wind-sheltered place to add or subtract a slicker or sweater or gloves.

This year, since last November about, I've often had company. A guy sets up shop there, perpetually fixing his bike with a few tools scattered, a radio, and sometimes a small fire in a charcoal brazier fizzing quietly in the drizzle. He's there in the mornings while I'm on the way to work, and evenings when I return. I say "Hi", he mumbles, and neither of us really looks at the other, fully face to face.

His bike's a pretty good one, actually, the "Mountain" type, with heavy tires and a complicated suspension: over a thousand dollars, new. His clothing is eclectic Sally Army in many layers, notable by a clean white bike helmet that he seems to wear all day. Mostly he sits, sometimes with a newspaper, sometimes he fiddles with bike pieces, sometimes he stretches, warming up.

These glimpses, you understand, were assembled as pastiche, a few seconds at a time, over mostly winter days.

Also along that bike route and only a few hundred meters north, by the lakefront and among expensive houses, a yacht moorage, and a small park, "Brian" has been standing in evening commuter hours of this Iraqi winter, with a veteran's cap and a big flag. I .. a flaming liberal .. salute our flag as I pass, and he returns it. I know his name because I asked for it, twice stopping to invite him for coffee at a nearby Starbucks, twice politely declined.
Also nearby is a small grocery for ice-cream sandwiches and chocolate. In winter, mostly chocolate. I keep wrapped bits of it for fuel [about 15 grams/kilometer] and to share with friends if there’s any left: of friends or chocolate, that is. Brian shared with me once or twice, and my bike-mechanic friend, once only, on the stairs.

Today is spring with drizzle gone and Brian too: even wars get old. My route’s now lined with a second succession of later-flowering trees, and after missing him for a month I again passed my mechanic friend at his task on the stairs this morning. Again I said “Hi” and nodded at his mumbled reply, we both of us again not really looking at one another, both again intent on separate tasks. I regretted that my chocolate tank was empty, and resolved to fill it on the way home. Which I did.

That time, finally, I stopped and sat and we exchanged “How you doing?” over a 50:50-split Hershey's Dark Chocolate bar, the first he’d tasted of that flavor, he said. He asked if I biked every day and I replied that .. to be honest .. more often I drove. And that set him off for the next fifteen minutes of mostly monolog about his license suspension and three days in jail for tickets unpaid, and community service scooping goose poop from a golf course on first Saturdays of every month, two hours away by bus, and maybe he’d get his license back soon .. after four years .. and maybe he’d return to the east, and maybe not in the place that issued those tickets, still unpaid.

His voice was soft and demeanor gentle and sentences complete, or nearly, and his narrative pure Studs Terkel. After the first minute or two, he .. while still talking .. rose and removed the front tire of his bike, which had seemed OK to me, pulled out the tube and pumped it to explore for leaks, replaced one of several duct-tape patches, reassembled the tube and tire, and pumped it up again.

Hey! I didn't know you could do that with duct tape.

Cheers,
Halstead
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