

Sweet Freedom

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My best summer ever was the year I was 13. June, July and August 1980 seemed as big as infinity. Though June was swallowed mostly by school, before the year ended I was on my ten-speed and riding. Some days I rode six miles to school, catching a ride home with my dad, who taught there. When the school year was done I rode through the country, past the Tomhannock Reservoir, to my best friend's.

Riding my ten-speed on country roads that were poorly paved or not paved at all, I never once minded the heat. I had a Columbia Pepsi Spirit I bought at the bottling plant in Menands when I didn't win the contest. Another girl on my tiny street won, and I was so jealous of her luck. I thought it meant something giant, like I could wish and wish and always be disappointed. That the gods would smile near me but not on me.

My own soda-branded ten-speed felt like a consolation prize, a purchased consolation prize. I picked a boy's bike because I understood the frames were stronger. By the summer of 1980, I'd had the bike at least a year, maybe two. I was more attached to the freedom it gave me than the lingering sense of failure I felt when I saw the bike's brand.

That summer, I ditched my family in favor of teenaged wilding. I rode to my friend's house and met her everywhere in between—at the reservoir, at houses where parents weren't home. Everything was daytime but cloaked with the sense of escape, because I rarely went exactly where I said I went. If I went to her house we soon left, walking and riding in search of adventure.

What we did was dumb. Almost kissing, almost taking over-the-counter allergy medicine with diet soda—a combo promised to get us high. But none of it felt dumb. I felt strong and secret, all my own. This was what I wanted to do, I told myself as I braved the ride past farms where dogs chased me uphill.

I even loved the fights I had with my sister and my parents. My younger sister and I shared an attic; I had the front half and she had the back. That year I cut her off. She screamed at me once at the top of the stairs, accusing me of a litany of wrongs. "You stink like pot!" she bellowed, but I did not. I stank of independence.

Everything I did was beginning to be mine. Maybe it always had been, but the sense of ownership was new and huge. Eighteen months younger than me, she had always been my pal, but I didn't want her along anymore. I wanted to fly solo and I glued myself to my friend the way I used to be glued to my sister.

The folly of my choices started to become apparent only at the end of the summer. Labor Day weekend was the Schaghticoke Fair. My friend wanted to browse the men that came to town to run the rides. Think about pawing at them, being pawed, under the metal skeletons of the machines at the midway. I pretended to feel put out by my parents' limits—I couldn't stay at the fair after dark. But really, I was relieved. There's only so much freedom a body can take.